Sword of the Demon Kuin Josho Hunter Gentosho

BOOK 8

By Motoo Nakanishi

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Sword of the Demonsor The Demonsor Gentosho



written by Motoo Nakanishi



Seven Seas Entertainment



JINYA: A demon man who runs a soba

restaurant by day and hunts demons

by night. Currently gathering strength

to face the Demon God in Kadono in

170 years' time.

KANEOMI: The psyche of one of the four

Yatonomori Kaneomi demonic

swords. Used to serve the Nagumo,

a family of spirit hunters, but now

she acts as one of Jinya's swords.

AKITSU SOMEGOROU The fourth to inherit the name of

THE FOURTH master metalworker Akitsu Somegorou.

(UTSUGI HEIKICHI): An artifact spirit user. Married to

Nomari, Jinya's daughter.

HIMAWARI: A demon born from a fragment of

Magatsume's heart.

Suzune: Jinya's sister by birth. A demon, and the one who killed Shirayuki, the woman Jinya loved. Under the name Magatsume, she wishes for the world's

ruin and stands in Jinya's way.

Taísho Arc

1

FOR EVERY KIND of foreseeable problem, there was a corresponding profession meant to handle it. For disease there were doctors, for fire there were firefighters, and so on. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that the Land of the Rising Sun, having been so overrun with spirits since antiquity, had those who specialized in handling spirits. The people known as spirit hunters slew fiends of all kinds—demons, tengu, mountain witches, giant monstrous spiders, and many more. They brought peace to the world and were revered by the people as protectors from the unknown.

Or so it used to be.

With the arrival of the Taisho era, the great Empire of Japan began to see drastic change. Victory in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars raised the people's spirits high, and the nation as a whole began industrializing to stand shoulder to shoulder with the major powers of the West. A railroad system was put into place, and steamboats changed water transportation forever. Gradually, the infrastructure of the towns and cities began to develop. Audio recording and motion pictures were introduced, and mass-market publications and journals brought the diffusion of information to the modern age.

This was a process known as modernization, and by no means was it a bad thing. But not all could keep up with the growth of the world around them. As technology became common and widespread, certain things were lost. For instance, take twilight, the time after sunset when one could still see traces of red in the western sky. It was just dim enough for faces to be indistinguishable, and so the word for "twilight" in Japanese, tasogare, was originally derived from "Who goes there?" Once the trace red in the sky turned indigo, it was said that twilight was over and the witching hour had arrived.

The witching hour was the hour of the spirits, when wicked things came out to play and perform nefarious deeds. The dimness of twilight obscured faces, but the darkness of the witching hour made it impossible to tell whether passersby were even human. And so it was believed that spirits came out and mingled among humans at this late hour.

But on November 1st in year fifteen of the Meiji era (1882 AD), Japan's very first streetlamp was installed. The number of lights in the cities slowly rose, and not even twilight remained. The streetlamps lit up the night, and the people forgot their fear of the fiendish.

However, to fear was to revere. If one lost their fear of the unknown, then they would also lose their respect for the ones who fought in the darkness. If spirits were no longer a threat, then none would call upon those who hunted them. Not even the most powerful of fiend-felling spirit hunters could stand up to the passage of time.

But even if times have changed and their efforts were no longer recognized, the spirit hunters remained. Just what did they think of a world that had deemed their existence unnecessary?

It was now June in year eleven of the Taisho era (1922 AD).

In Shibuya, located in the imperial capital of Tokyo, there was a small motion picture theater called Koyomiza. This was the workplace of Toudou Yoshihiko. He worked as a ticket collector, but he also maintained the signboard outside the entrance, cleaned inside the building, changed the posters as needed, and did whatever other odd jobs you could imagine. The important tasks like handling the projector and managing the film reels were the work of the theater manager.

Yoshihiko turned fifteen this year. He had a baby face and was short of stature, so customers often treated him like a child, much to his chagrin. The job was a low-paying one, but it came with a roof over his head and

occasionally allowed him to watch a motion picture for free. All in all, he liked his job.

"There's nothing to do..." After collecting tickets for the first screening of the afternoon, Yoshihiko zoned out at the front desk. The building was dark since the lights were turned off during the screening. Standing by to help guide late customers to their seats was yet another part of his job.

Motion pictures, particularly foreign ones, were widely popular with the people of Japan in the Taisho era. Charlie Chaplin comedies were some of Yoshihiko's personal favorites. Motion pictures were still silent at this time, so it was common for theaters to have a live narrator and musicians. Koyomiza was a small family business, so the second son handled narration while the theater manager and his first son operated the film projector. They had no theater musicians on hand and instead hired some acquaintances to play. It wasn't perfect, but their business did well enough to attract a fair number of customers every day.

"Ya seem bored, ticket boy. Why not have a chat with me if you're so free?"

Yoshihiko was just about to yawn when an elderly man with a Kansai twang came to the front desk. The man wore a suit and was surprisingly well built. A skeleton prayer bead bracelet peeked out slightly from the cuff of his left sleeve. He leaned on the desk and grinned.

"Oh, welcome, Akitsu-san," Yoshihiko said, recognizing the man.

"You remember me? What a surprise. I'm pretty sure we only met once, about three years ago."

The bold, smiling man was Akitsu Somegorou, an old acquaintance of the theater manager. He lived in Kyoto, so visiting the theater was unusual for him. Yoshihiko only remembered the man's name because the theater manager talked about him every now and then. He was apparently the fourth in a line of ornament craftsmen, and a deeply embarrassing man who was apparently head over heels in love with his wife even at his old age.

"So, workin' hard or hardly workin?" Somegorou asked.

"Ah ha ha. Not much work to do, as you can see."

Yoshihiko graduated primary schooling at twelve years old and had worked at Koyomiza ever since. He chose the job because it was a live-in one and he wanted to burden his parents as little as possible. His father had been willing to stretch their finances thin to send him to further his education, but Yoshihiko couldn't bring himself to impose. He didn't particularly regret turning down the opportunity for more education, though. His job at the motion picture theater was fun, and the theater manager was encouraging him to learn the ropes of live narration. Being a live narrator was a highly respected position, as motion picture films were often called the king of entertainment. The thought of becoming one someday filled Yoshihiko with motivation.

"That so? Here, have some Nomari red bean bread anyway. It's a popular treat back in Kyoto."

"Oh. Thank you."

Despite having "red bean bread" in the name, the sweet was actually just castella stuffed with sweet beans. Somegorou had brought some three years ago as well. Perhaps it was a favorite of his.

"Are you here to see the theater manager?" Yoshihiko asked.

"Oh, no. I was just passin' by and thought I'd drop in. As for why I'm in Tokyo, well, my grandchild got invited to a party bein' held in two days hosted by the Nagumo...er, this rather *problematic* noble family. I got invited as well, so figured I might as well go."

As someone born to the commoner class, Yoshihiko could only imagine what noble parties might be like. "Wow, how nice. I wish I could go. I bet you'll get to eat all kinds of great things."

"I'm sure I will. After all, if there's one thing those damned nobles know how to do, it's enrichin' their bellies, right? Ha!" Somegorou made no effort to hide his displeasure. He probably didn't even want to go to the party if he could help it.

"I'm not sure you should say those kinds of things..." Yoshihiko couldn't help but smile at the elderly man's childishness. "Are those nobles perhaps distant relatives of yours?"

"No way. I only know 'em on account of my work."

"Ah, I see. I'll bet those well-to-do ladies are always clamoring for your combs and hairpins."

"Mm, yeah, somethin' like that."

It was hard to imagine from his unsophisticated manner, but if Somegorou was receiving invitations from nobility, then he must have been quite the skilled craftsman.

"Welp, I should take off. Pass those along to the theater manager for me, and feel free to have a few of 'em yourself."

"Will do. Thank you."

Somegorou departed just around the time the screening was about to end, with a lazy wave back to Yoshihiko as he left. Yoshihiko returned to work, getting ready to see off the customers. This was just another part of his job.

"Thank you for your patronage!"

Yoshihiko made an exaggerated bow as he saw off the last of the customers. With them gone, he had the important task of cleaning before the next screening time. He entered and looked around the small theater, which fit about twenty, and found a patron still lingering there. She seemed to bask in the afterglow of the film, staring at the blank screen in a daze, as she often did.

"I need to clean up, Kimiko-san, so please be on your way," Yoshihiko called out. Seeing her linger like this wasn't much of a surprise anymore. The two were on friendly enough terms to talk informally to one another by now.

With grace, she turned to look at him. "Oh, Yoshihiko-san. I'm sorry to trouble you again. But these motion pictures truly are wonderful. I too wish to experience a romance with a gentleman like that someday."

She wore a light-purple women's hakama with a glass bead sash strap, common attire for young women attending school. She had lovely black hair evenly cut to about shoulder length that was clearly well cared for. She was Akase Kimiko, a well-to-do girl who lived on the outskirts of Kojimachi in a Western-style house, a dwelling known to many as the Hydrangea Mansion.

"Did you sneak out again?" Yoshihiko asked.

"With Jiiya's help, yes. He did have a few stern words for me, though." She puffed her cheeks out grumpily. She could act rather childish, even though she was a year older than Yoshihiko.

Kimiko was fascinated by foreign culture and modern technology. She loved not just motion pictures but also radio, monthly magazines, and imported foreign clothes. She often slipped out of her home to indulge in such things.

"Really? He doesn't sound like the type to grumble about motion pictures being lowbrow entertainment and such."

"Oh, he's not. He sympathizes with my desire to enjoy films, theater, and the like. He simply didn't take kindly to me wanting to slip out when my home tutor was on their way."

"...Yeah, I'm pretty sure you're in the wrong there."

From what he grasped, the Jiiya she mentioned was an old manservant who worked for the Akase family, but she was so fond of him that she treated him as though he were her personal attendant.

"Of course, I listened and finished my studies before coming."

"Well, that's good."

Kimiko talked as though she behaved self-indulgently, but she hardly ever actually did—more because of her position than her personality. Yoshihiko

couldn't help but notice that a servant was always with her, even when she slipped out. She appeared to live a rather constrained life.

She sighed suddenly and hung her head, even though she'd been in such high spirits up until then. "I have to attend a rather dull party tomorrow, so I figured I at least deserved to stretch my wings today."

"A party, huh?"

"Indeed. We Akase are a branch of a noble family known as the Nagumo. I have a responsibility to attend and greet the current Nagumo family head, who is not somebody I'm terribly fond of."

No good words of comfort came to Yoshihiko's mind. His only image of the noble class was that they were rich and important, but it seemed the rich had their own problems to worry about.

"I apologize, Yoshihiko-san. I didn't mean to bother you with my grumblings."

"Not at all. You're one of our regulars; hearing you out this much is nothing."

The two shared a smile. Finally, she stood up and gave him a small bow.

"I've overstayed my welcome long enough. Until next time."

"Will you be all right getting home?"

"Yes. I have someone waiting out front for me."

With elegant steps, Kimiko made her way out of Koyomiza. She certainly carried herself with the class befitting a young noble lady.

"Hm? Wait..." Yoshihiko realized belatedly that Somegorou had mentioned he would be going to the same party as Kimiko. However, he thought nothing deeper of it as he stared in the direction she had gone.

The theater manager's second son came by then. "Let me help you clean up, Yoshihiko."

"Oh, thanks."

The next screening was approaching, so Yoshihiko hastily started cleaning.

Two demons stood on the roof of a building overlooking the town. Their gazes were locked on Kimiko as she hurried back to the Hydrangea Mansion.

"Tomorrow's the day, Uncle." Himawari, the demon with soft and wavy chestnut-brown hair, smiled gleefully.

"Right." Replying to her was a demon in Western attire. He stood nearly six feet in height and carried two swords at his hip.

The mismatched pair of demons stared sharply at Kimiko.

"Their deeds will not go unpunished." Gently, he stroked his pointer finger against the handle of one of his swords.

2

希 — Ki

Meaning:

- 1. Rare; seldom
- 2. To wish; entreat
- 3. Low density

美 — Mi

Meaning:

- 1. Beauty
- 2. To praisel
- 3. Good; excellent

Meaning:

- 1. Child; children
- 2. Girl

The kanji character for "beauty" (美) is derived from the character for "sheep" (羊). Because full-grown sheep were considered to be beautiful, people combined the character for "sheep" (羊) with the character for "adult" (大) to make "beauty" (美).

In ancient times, sheep were sacrificed to the gods. The best sacrifices, those with good shape and no flaws, were labeled "美." In that vein, knowingly naming someone with the character "美" could be akin to labeling them "the perfect sacrifice."

THE NAGUMO WERE a family of spirit hunters whose history spanned all the way back to the Heian period (794–1185 AD). Far before the Tokugawa clan rose to prominence, the Chichibu clan of the Musashi Province came to develop the land of Edo back when it was no more than marshland and wild thicket. For security, they enlisted the aid of many strong young men—one of whom was the ancestor of the Nagumo. Only he, out of all the men enlisted, would be granted the right to bear a family name that would persist for generations. The reason was simple: He slew the fiends that roamed the wild lands of Edo.

A tiger with the head of a demon and a hideous giant spider were both slain by his hand. He was not versed in the ways of the diviners, nor did he have any training in fighting spirits. Truth be told, it was only through sheer luck that he encountered and defeated any spirits at all. But the only qualification one needed to be a spirit hunter was to slay spirits, and so, regardless of how strong he may really have been, he was recognized as a spirit hunter.

His achievements earned him the right to bear a family name. He chose to be

"Nagumo," a play off his claim to fame of having slain a spider spirit with nothing but a sword. His descendants, determined to live up to the family name, hunted spirits as well, and somewhere along the many generations a demonic blade like the ones in legends came into their possession. From that point onward, they became known as the Nagumo of the Demonic Blade.

With sword in hand, the Nagumo made a name for themselves as some of the most prominent spirit hunters in all the land. Perhaps it should come as little surprise, then, that the end of the era of warriors—that is, the end of the era of the sword—would see them gradually fall from grace.

Confined in a cell underneath the Nagumo home was a young girl. Her black hair was about as long as she was tall, her skin ghostly pale, and her eyes lifeless. Restrained and gagged, she was unable to move freely or speak.

"Finally, the time has come..." An old man—Nagumo Eizen—looked down at the unfortunate girl, undisturbed by her state. He was of large build for his age but had clearly seen better days. He stood before the girl's cage with a crazed sneer. The current head of the family was nothing but a puppet; this old man was the true ruler of the Nagumo family.

"Mgh..." The restraints were to prevent the girl from killing herself more than to prevent her escape. She was forced to exercise occasionally to prevent muscle atrophy and fed to prevent starvation, all for the sake of tomorrow's event.

She had been abducted shortly after birth. Her body was then molded for seven years, followed by seven more years of preparation. Finally, she was ready.

"I've waited for so long, but finally my *Kodoku no Kago* has taken shape." The old man stifled laughter in eager anticipation for the coming day. He could easily have been mistaken for one of the fiendish spirits the Nagumo had once been known to slay.

"Say, Kimiko-san, why do you wear a hakama even though you don't go to a girls' school?"

The day after Akitsu Somegorou visited Koyomiza, Kimiko came to watch another motion picture, and Yoshihiko took the opportunity to ask a question that had been on his mind for a while now. A normal girl—especially a *noble* girl—of Kimiko's age would be attending a girls' school, but instead she was taught by the home tutors her father selected.

"I wear this *because* I don't go to school. I want to savor at least some part of what it might be like." She replied in a joking tone, but a trace of sadness could be seen on her face. Her family was wealthy enough for schooling to be no issue, so what kept her out must have involved their high status or some sort of family policy.

Hesitant to pry any deeper into the topic, Yoshihiko forced the conversation in a different direction. "Oh, uh, I almost forgot. You said you were going to that noble party held by the Nagumo tomorrow, right?"

His attempt to change the topic was so clumsy that she couldn't help but smile. At least he'd cheered her up, though.

"I did. But it's really more of a small, informal gathering than a party, to tell the truth."

"Is that so? Well, actually, an acquaintance of the theater manager will be going as well. A man called Akitsu Somegorou."

"I'll be sure to say hello when I meet him, then." She laughed softly. "Looks like I have at least something to look forward to now. Still, I'd rather not go if I could..." She frankly expressed her distaste, which was unusual for her.

"You really don't want to go, huh?"

"No, I do not. How should I put it... I'm not fond of the way the Nagumo people stare at me. I've visited them before, and I always seem to catch them

looking my way. That said, Eizen-sama—that is, the current head's father—is a good man. He visits our home from time to time and was apparently even the one who gave me my name. He's nothing at all like his vulgar son."

There didn't seem to be a feud between the Nagumo and the Akase branch family. Kimiko simply didn't take kindly to some of them, to the point a well-mannered lady like her was openly insulting the current Nagumo head.

"Vulgar, huh? You must really have it out for him," Yoshihiko commented.

"What can I say? It's the truth. He's a vulgar thing, really."

He seemed to have stumbled upon something of a sore spot for her. He had to listen to her complain for a while.

Once evening came, Yoshihiko was asked by the theater manager to run an errand near Tokyo Station. The theater manager had once been saved by Akitsu Somegorou, so he felt terribly indebted to the man. He had offered to let him stay at his home, but Somegorou declined. Wanting to at least do something for the man, he asked Yoshihiko to bring Somegorou a boxed meal his wife made.

"Sorry for the trouble. Go ahead and rest a bit while yer here."

"O-okay. Th-thank you very much!"

"No need to be so stiff. Relax a bit, will ya?"

The hotel where Somegorou was staying was famous even among hotels in Tokyo, the Imperial Capital, built to welcome important guests both foreign and domestic. The furniture was quite exotic, and there was even a nightstand with its own light. Feeling as though he was in another world, Yoshihiko gawked curiously around the luxurious room. Enjoying his reaction, Somegorou let out a roar of laughter, then stepped out into the hallway to ask something of a hotel employee. The man seemed so used to the luxury that Yoshihiko couldn't help but wonder if he had somehow walked into one of the motion pictures played at Koyomiza. The hotel employee returned shortly with black tea. Though

bewildered, Yoshihiko drank together with Somegorou, and the two chatted as they enjoyed the rare foreign import.

"...And that's why Kimiko-san's always coming by Koyomiza to watch films."

"Heh, what an amusing girl. The young lady of the Akase, huh..."

"Oh? You know her?"

"No, no. At least, not directly. But the Akase are a branch family of my hosts at tomorrow's party, so I've at least heard about them."

Kimiko had touched only slightly on the relationship between the Nagumo and Akase families, so Yoshihiko didn't know much. He asked, "How'd they become a branch family?"

"Well, y'know how the Nagumo are an old family that's been around since Heian times? At some point long ago, someone who got passed over for headship decided to strike out and begin their own family line, the Akase. That's why they're a branch family. They didn't continue the Nagumo's trade, though, and were just an ordinary samurai household. But get this: After all the reforms, the Akase came out bigger and wealthier than the Nagumo. Time can be a cruel mistress, eh?" Somegorou paused. "But I guess it's to be expected. The Akase are just ordinary nobles now, while the Nagumo haven't been able to leave their trade behind..." He had taken on a slightly sad look. He noticed Yoshihiko staring and said, "Hm? What's up? Somethin' on my face?"

"O-oh, uh, I was just wondering how you and the theater manager happened to know each other," Yoshihiko hurriedly stammered. Though he didn't say it, he couldn't help but wonder why the old man knew so much about Nagumo-Akase affairs.

Somegorou gave him a look. "Why?"

"Well, there's quite an age difference between you two, so I thought it was a bit unusual."

"Ah, I guess there is, huh?" Somegorou flashed a smile before answering. "I'd

say I first met him about twenty years ago. He was being attacked by these witches of sorts. Seven of them, in fact. Posed quite the challenge. I drove them off, and he's felt indebted to me ever since."

So the theater manager's secret affairs had imploded on him somehow, and Somegorou had shown up to save his hide. Yoshihiko let out an exasperated sigh. His boss had made things out to be so much more serious than this. "I see. So that's why he wouldn't go into details about what happened with me."

"Hm? Is that right? I guess ya better keep quiet about this for his pride's sake, then."

"My lips are sealed." Yoshihiko would tell none of this—not to the theater manager's sons, and especially not to his wife. He regretted even asking at all.

Somegorou laughed at the look on Yoshihiko's face.

"Anyway, I should get going. I've intruded long enough," Yoshihiko said.

"Sure. Tell 'em I enjoyed the meal."

After a few parting words, Yoshihiko left the hotel behind. He stepped out to find the Imperial Capital dyed orange by sunset. The sun would soon dip below the horizon, but the streetlamps made walking this late no issue. Still, he had chatted long enough that he was running a tad late, so he walked briskly on his way back to Koyomiza.

"What an interesting guy," he said to himself out loud. This had been his first real conversation with Somegorou. The man hadn't acted all self-important toward the much-younger Yoshihiko and had shared many interesting stories.

Yoshihiko smiled. To think *that* theater manager, of all people, used to have a womanizing streak. It was comforting to know that even adults could be quite foolish at times.

Yoshihiko continued to think back on his chat with Somegorou as he walked. Distracted, he bumped into a passerby.

"S-sorry!" He apologized and bowed deeply before even seeing who he'd

bumped into, then peered cautiously up at them.

"Oh, it's fine. I wasn't looking where I was going either." The person he'd bumped into had eyes with a striking red tint. They wore a school cap, were dressed in a black school uniform, and had short hair. Based on those three things alone, they seemed like a high-school-age boy, but their slender figure and soft features gave the impression of a young girl. They were tall but had no visible Adam's apple, and even their voice was androgynous. "You should be careful, though. I may not particularly mind, but you might not be so lucky next time."

They gently patted Yoshihiko's head and continued on their way. Yoshihiko stood there in a daze for a while, but then he noticed the sky was darkening and resumed walking. The person he'd encountered might have been mysterious, but getting home was a far more pressing matter.

"Yo, Yonabari," a voice called out as the person in the school uniform stepped into a back alley. Waiting for them there was a well-built man with a height of six feet and then some. He was unshaven, his hair messy, and he wore his classic Japanese attire sloppily. He appeared unkempt and looked all the rougher in contrast with the skinny Yonabari.

"Heeey, Izuchi," Yonabari said a bit sadly. "You won't believe what just happened."

"Huh? What's that, then?" Izuchi scowled exaggeratedly.

Yonabari sighed without dropping their smile. "I bumped into a boy just now. And he apologized to me, of all things."

"...Okay? So?"

"Don't you get it? He apologized. To a demon he met at twilight. I'm hurt, Izuchi."

They both had red eyes. Yonabari had walked the streets without hiding their

identity, but Yoshihiko hadn't reacted in the slightest.

According to the writings of Ono Touen in *Thoughts of the Iron-Master*, beings that looked different from ordinary people were collectively called "spiritkind" in olden times. This included beings with red eyes, blue eyes, far-too-pale skin, abnormal height, impossible strength, otherworldly beauty, and so on. The characteristics that made them different were called "marks of oddities," and anyone who possessed them was believed to be inhuman up until the early Meiji years.

But with modernization, knowledge grew. People learned that pale skin and blue eyes were normal for some foreigners. Advancement in medicine made it clear that ruptured eye vessels could sometimes turn eyes red. No longer did these things prove someone was a spirit. The days when one would see red eyes and immediately scream in terror were long gone.

"The brat was probably just clueless. Most are these days," Izuchi scoffed.

"I suppose so, but the thought that more and more children like him won't be scared of us is a little...depressing."

"That's just the way things are now. Of course, that's *exactly* what we're trying to change."

Yonabari smiled brilliantly and beautifully. "Right, although I'd rather not kill anyone if possible."

"Hey, should a demon like you be saying that? Heh, let's grab a drink to get some courage in ya."

"Jeez. Don't you think you've adapted to the times a little too well?"

"Whaddya mean? Good liquor is good liquor, whether you're a human or a demon!"

Izuchi roared with laughter, and Yonabari sighed in exasperation. Bantering amiably, the two demons disappeared into the night.

With Yoshihiko gone, Somegorou's affable air was replaced by a grim, serious look. As an old man now, he'd greatly enjoyed talking to the still-naive youth, but their conversation had given him a sense of foreboding.

"...So the Akase will be at the Nagumo's party, huh?"

Somegorou had assumed he'd been invited because they needed help with some powerful demon that had shown up. But if that were the case, they would have no business with ordinary folk like the Akase.

"Hmph. This whole thing reeks of somethin' foul. Good grief. Looks like I'll have to put these old bones to work."

He contacted his grandchild and told them not to come for the time being. It would be good if nothing came of this, but life always had a tendency of going south.

3

WAS IN DARKNESS, locked up and unable to move. Like a bird in a cage, I was kept alive without truly knowing what it meant to live. I only knew that a lonely death awaited my empty life.

From time to time, the old man would come and tell me: "You will be my Kodoku no Kago."

The noble class was a new social rank, created as part of the Meiji Restoration, given to the families of feudal lords, court nobles, and other families of high standing in the Edo era. But as time went on, the stipulation that nobility had to serve the nation in some way grew broader in definition, allowing those of low standing to become nobility through distinguished service to the country or the government. To differentiate these newfangled nobles from the older ones, they were called the new nobility.

The Akase—a low-standing, poor samurai family offshoot of the Nagumo—were among this new nobility. They were loyal to the emperor in the Bakumatsu period—the waning years of the old shogunate government—and unified a feudal domain in support of him, thus earning the rank of baron.

Though they were ostensibly nobles, the new nobility were considered to be nothing but upstarts. Many of the older nobility who were former feudal lords or court nobles had it out for the new nobility. The Akase didn't particularly care, though. They had already once washed their hands of the Nagumo spirithunting trade to become regular, impoverished samurai. A samurai's stipend wasn't enough to live on back in Edo times, so they ran a money-exchange business to make ends meet, as dishonorable as that was. They had no pride they clung tightly to. In fact, they were able to discard their swords with no reservations in the new era and lived lives more comparable to those of commoners. That was how they found success.

Starting in the Meiji era, Japan rushed to modernize in order to catch up to the Western world. In the process, much of life changed. The Akase used their experience as money exchangers to enter financing and stock trading. They found success in their ventures and became a considerably wealthy family, even among nobility. With the arrival of the Taisho era, the economy boomed thanks to Japan's military victories, and the Akase made even more colossal profits.

The Nagumo, meanwhile, were made viscounts in early Meiji due to their preexisting standing. However, they were hit hard by the Sword Abolishment Edict, and modernization led to people no longer fearing the night. The demons that had once stalked the streets of Edo at twilight disappeared, and the Nagumo who hunted those demons entered decline. There was something ironic to be found in it all. The Nagumo lived by the sword to protect the weak but were met with hardship, while the Akase gave up the trade and were met with roaring success.

All this happened before Kimiko was born, so she knew little of the history behind the Nagumo and the Akase. The Akase no longer even passed down

their spirit-hunting techniques. Her father married into the family and didn't know much of the families' backgrounds, and her mother never told Kimiko of the Nagumo's hidden side. That was why Kimiko only knew the Nagumo to be terribly ordinary nobles in decline and thought of the evening party as nothing but a bother.

"Ugh..." Kimiko was relaxing in her room, drinking black tea. She flicked the cup on the table with a finger, and a high-pitched ring sounded in the silence of the room.

The Akase estate in Kojimachi included a charming Western-style home with white walls. It had a large garden that was filled with hydrangeas at her mother's request. When the season came, the light-purple hydrangeas all bloomed brilliantly, and so people called their home the Hydrangea Mansion.

Kimiko was generally forced to stay within the grounds of her home. Her grandfather didn't allow her to leave, not even for school. She was practically a caged bird. Her parents and the usual manservant took her out when her grandfather wasn't around, but even then her activities were limited. She lived a constrained life. Even the party tonight was something she had been forced to attend.

"You seem rather dejected, Lady Kimiko," a voice gently said. It came from the manservant who had looked after her since she was young. He had served the Akase home since before Kimiko was born. He'd also looked after her mother in the past and was rather close to her father, putting him in a peculiar position for a servant. He was stern and could be quite the nag at times, but overall he was sweet on Kimiko. The only reason she had any freedom at all was because she took advantage of his help so much. She quite appreciated her much-older servant and affectionately called him "Jiiya," meaning "elderly manservant."

"Of course I'm dejected. Goodness... Just why do I have to go to the Nagumo's party anyway?"

"Because Seiichirou-sama ordered you to, I am told."

"I'm aware! It was a rhetorical question," she huffed.

Seiichirou was Kimiko's grandfather. He was the one who'd made the Akase family what it was, which was why her parents couldn't go against his wishes. He didn't let her leave the house much at all, except to occasionally visit the Nagumo home. Kimiko hated her grandfather's willfulness.

"Say, Jiiya... Maybe I could fit in another small visit to Koyomiza?"

"Absolutely not, Lady Kimiko. Shino-sama made it very clear you weren't to slip off anywhere." Jiiya typically allowed her excursions, but not tonight.

She'd known her request couldn't be granted even before she asked for it, but she still puffed out her cheeks and complained anyway. "You really don't let me do anything, do you?"

"Pardon? I do believe I'm quite fair."

"You're not. You always put my mother's wishes over mine."

"But of course. Shino-sama is my employer; her wishes must come first."

Since he used to serve her mother, her mother was more important or something unfair like that. Kimiko gave him a reproachful glare for a few moments, then recalled something and said, "You know, people gossip you're my mother's lover because you say that kind of stuff."

She saw his brow twitch and smiled victoriously. Jiiya wasn't originally hired to be someone who served the house so intimately like a butler; he had actually been taken on as the gardener. But Kimiko's mother took a liking to him and had him work as something akin to a manservant, even after she got married. He did things for her that would typically be left to a housemaid, causing quite a lot of rumors as to the true nature of their relationship at the time.

"I do believe we're too far apart in age to be lovers," he said. "Just where did you hear these rumors, might I ask?"

"Everyone's talking about it, I'm sure. But I specifically heard it from my

father." As far as Kimiko could tell, there didn't seem to be anything romantic going on between her mother and Jiiya. Her father had looked quite amused when he told her about the rumor, so it was likely just that—a rumor. "Heh. Maybe the rumor's changed to you being *my* lover now."

"That's even more impossible considering our ages. I'll have you know I used to change your diapers."

"...That's imagery I could do without. Did you really need to go that far?" She grimaced, partly out of embarrassment.

"At any rate, I'm asking you to give up on going anywhere tonight."

"I get it. You'll at least come with... Ah. Right."

"I'm sorry, Lady Kimiko. Because you were the only one invited, I will not be joining you. It seems they will arrange to pick you up."

"I see..." Feeling a little worried about not having Jiiya with her, she sadly cast her gaze down.

He gently comforted her, saying, "But I will be the one to come pick you up, so please do your best to hold out until then."

"...I understand."

From his phrasing, he clearly understood how she felt about the whole event. A bit relieved that someone else at least recognized her feelings, she looked out her window. It was twilight now. The dim light of stars could be seen, and night would soon arrive.

The Nagumo home was located in the town of Sendagi, once considered the outskirts of old Edo. The town had changed gradually with the arrival of the Taisho era, but many ancient buildings reminiscent of Edo times still lingered. The Nagumo home was one such building; it used purely Japanese architecture and was made entirely of wood, its aged brownness showing much history and grace.

Kimiko reached the place in a horse-drawn carriage. Jiiya would usually accompany her as far as the front gate for these social events, but this would be her first time coming entirely alone.

"Thank you for coming all this way, Kimiko-sama."

The building was old, but it was bigger than the Akase's own home. She passed under the slightly scarred gate and was greeted by the same maidservant as last time. The servants of the Nagumo home seemed to have it out for Kimiko a bit, often staring at her rudely, but she had to put up with it. Though the Nagumo may have fallen from their former grace, they were still the main family while the Akase were a mere branch one. She hid her misgivings and bowed politely to the servant.

"The other guests are already gathered in the garden. Please follow me," the maidservant said.

"Thank you."

The two exchanged minor pleasantries as Kimiko followed the maidservant to the garden. Immediately, she smelled something sweet. A number of incense burners were placed here and there around the garden.

"What a nice smell," she remarked. The calming scent resembled that of summer flowers. She looked around the garden once more and was captivated by its beauty this time. An orderly spread of verdure was divided by a small stream, the sound of flowing water like music to the ears.

The maidservant had called this a garden, but strictly speaking, that wasn't correct. A garden was a space where plants were planted. This was a courtyard, a place for work and functions—and in olden times, rituals and political affairs. Given the history behind the Nagumo of the Demonic Blade, calling this a courtyard was far more apt.

Of course, Kimiko knew little of the Nagumo's history and simply enjoyed the sight for what it was. The gentle scent of incense and the light of garden lanterns gave the place elegance. Though it was antiquated, the well-

maintained courtyard carried an otherworldly beauty.

She let out a sign of admiration, then looked around in sudden confusion. There were about twelve, maybe thirteen men and women around the courtyard sitting on prepared mats. Even though this was an evening party, there wasn't much eating being done, only drinking. All the guests looked acutely confused too, as though they had been made to wait for a while already.

"Um..."

"Please enjoy your stay."

Without so much as a single glance, the maidservant returned inside. Kimiko was still taking in the situation when an oddly cheerful old man in a suit called out to her.

"Hey, you there! You the Akase's girl?"

"U-um, yes?" she stammered.

The old man's face lit up. "No need to be so nervous. Yoshihiko-kun told me 'bout ya, so I just figured I'd say hello."

"Oh? He did?" She recalled then that Yoshihiko had mentioned something about the theater manager of Koyomiza having an acquaintance who would be there. This old man must be him. "Might I have your name?"

"Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth. And you?"

"Akase Kimiko."

"Kimiko-chan, huh? Nice to meetcha."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Akitsu-sama."

It was a godsend to find someone she could at least talk with in this situation. The two broke the ice quickly and started chatting, largely thanks to Somegorou's friendly manner.

"Just how long are they plannin' to make us wait? And without even servin'

their guests food or drink," he grumbled.

"It looks like they have liquor prepared."

"Ah. I don't drink that kinda stuff." Then he smiled nostalgically. "Though my master and his friend sure did."

Kimiko could tell the two people he brought up were important to him. Given his age, she could guess his master and the other one had already left this world, so she tactfully changed the topic. "Have you been waiting long already?"

"Sure have. 'Bout thirty minutes, I'd say? This sweet smell's makin' me godawfully hungry." His grumbling and the look on his face seemed to indicate some distaste for the Nagumo themselves.

The head of the household was still nowhere to be seen. In his stead a tall maidservant, a different one from earlier, exited the home and approached them.

"Um, are you Kimiko-san?"

The maidservant's voice was soft and clear, like that of a young boy who still hadn't reached puberty. They had a tomboyish look but could just as well have been a slender, feminine boy. However, given that they were wearing women's clothes, it was safe to assume they were a woman. Their androgynous nature stood out to Kimiko.

"I am. Can I help you?"

"Oh, good. Eizen-san—er, Eizen-sama wants to see you. He's waiting for you in one of the inner rooms. Would you come with me?"

Though Eizen was officially retired, he was still the true head of the Nagumo family. To Kimiko, he was something of a godparent, being the one who chose her name.

"Eizen-sama wants to see me? What for?" Kimiko asked.

"There's someone he wants to introduce you to."

"Is that so? Please show me the way, then."

"Sure thing."

Eizen's personal servant talked a bit too informally; perhaps they were new to the job. They gave off a very different impression from the other servants.

"Hey, hey. Nothin' for me?" Somegorou complained jokingly.

"I'm sorry, Akitsu Somegorou-san," the maidservant said with a smile. "Please wait a little longer."

"As if I haven't waited long enough already..."

The maidservant ignored him and walked away. Kimiko gave him a quick bow and followed the maidservant into the Nagumo home.

The old wooden floorboards creaked with each step. With no lights in the hallway, the path ahead was too dim to fully make out. The ancient home suddenly felt much too eerie.

Kimiko fought to keep her fright from showing on her face, but of course it remained. She spoke up to try and get rid of her nervousness, and the maidservant replied without turning around to look at her.

"Um, could I ask what your name is?"

"Hm? Me?"

"Yes. I don't recall seeing you when I came here before."

"Ah..." The maidservant stopped and crossed their arms, falling deep into thought. They nodded to themselves a few times, then turned around and faced Kimiko with a brimming smile. "The name's Yonabari. I get the feeling we'll be seeing a lot more of each other from now on."

This maidservant seemed a lot easier to talk to than the last one. But something about their smile felt a bit off, somehow.

"Oh! It looks like we're here."

The two walked in silence until they reached a room at the end of the hallway that Kimiko had visited a number of times now. The maidservant crudely flung the sliding door open and bade Kimiko to enter with a wave of the hand. Kimiko did so and was greeted by an elderly man.

"Ah, my little Kimi. Thank you for coming."

Though a bit emaciated, Eizen was a large man for his age. His face was full of wrinkles as he welcomed Kimiko.

"It has been a while since we last met, Eizen-sama."

"Mm, indeed it has. Have you been in good health? Keeping yourself safe?"

"Yes, I've been well." She couldn't help but smile wryly at his overprotective comments. He always checked up on her health like this when they met. It was a bit much, but she was used to it and appreciated his concern. "Thank you for inviting me to your party this evening."

"But of course we'd invite you. I'm sorry we're so underprepared, though."

"Not at all." The truth was they did seem rather disorganized. But that wasn't a tactful thing to point out, so she just smiled. "Incidentally, this evening's party was on rather short notice, wasn't it?"

"Ah, well... Hm, I suppose it's okay for you to know. The truth is, that worthless son of mine died just the other day."

"...Takafumi-sama did?" Kimiko just barely managed to keep herself from scowling. Takafumi, the head of the Nagumo family, was a deeply unpleasant man who treated the Akase like upstarts. The news that he had passed away was so unexpected that she didn't know how to respond. "Um, may I ask how?"

"Well, you know how he was. He wasn't fit to be head of the Nagumo. We were actually making arrangements for a new head to be selected soon, but to think he would pass away at a time like this..."

She read between the lines and remained silent. There was no knowing what the recently deceased Takafumi had thought of the decision that he would be

replaced, but it was clearly what Eizen desired. And if Eizen wished it...

"Sorry to bring up something so unpleasant," he said. "Tonight's party is actually to introduce the new head of the family to everyone."

"Oh, I see."

"This will be an important event, so I've spared no expense on preparations. That seems to have delayed us slightly, but it looks as though everything's finally set now. Now, let us begin tonight's banquet. Oh, but first there's someone I need to introduce you to, isn't there? I'm sorry to do this when you've only just arrived, but I'm afraid the person I want you to meet is waiting for you elsewhere."

Was it really appropriate to announce a new head when the previous one had only just passed away? Kimiko wasn't sure, but some girl from a branch family had no right to speak on such matters. She hid her doubts and said, "That's fine."

He nodded and said, "Yonabari, could you take her there?"

"Yes, sir!" the maidservant cheerfully said.

There was a dull thud, and Kimiko felt pain course through her body seconds later. "Huh...?"

She was bewildered. She had never been struck badly enough to lose consciousness before, nor did she believe Eizen would ever have her harmed. She blacked out without resistance, not even understanding what had happened.

Eizen looked at Kimiko on the floor without a hint of worry. His kind facade vanished, and a maddened smile appeared in its place. "Be careful with her. Don't let her be harmed any more than she already has been."

"I know, I know. I just need to carry her underground, right? What'll you be doing?"

"I figure it's about time for me to go greet our guests. Izuchi?"

In response to Eizen's call, a large man wearing a monk's working clothes lumbered forth. The man was not only tall and wide but well built. His muscles bulged against the fabric of his clothes.

"Perfect. I was gettin' tired of waiting," the man responded in a hoarse voice that suited his appearance. His eyes, like the maidservant's, were red.

Not a soul present thought it strange that a spirit hunter would join hands with demons. They would stoop that far to achieve their shared goal.

After a full two hours of being neglected back in the courtyard, something notable finally happened. Unfortunately, it was a turn for the worse.

Akitsu Somegorou grimaced as he looked down at his hand, which was slightly trembling. He made and relaxed a fist a few times to confirm he could still move, though not with much strength.

"...Why is my body numb?"

He looked around and saw that the dozen or so other guests were similarly affected. Some were worse off than him, unable to even talk.

"Hey, are you guys all right?" He neared a few people who couldn't stand and checked on them, but they could only reply in groans and whimpers. Their eyes focused on him, however, and they managed to either nod or shake their heads in response. Their consciousness didn't seem affected; they simply couldn't move properly, as though they had been hit by muscle relaxants.

Somegorou continued to go around checking on everyone. A young pair caught his eyes, a man and a woman. The man was clearly trained in something, given his bearing and physique. Considering he had ties to the Nagumo and didn't appear too bewildered by the situation, he was probably a fellow spirit hunter. Looking around, Somegorou could identify a few others who were likely also in the same trade. The Nagumo seemed to have invited a mix of spirit

hunters and ordinary civilians to the party.

"How ya holdin' up, young man?" Somegorou asked.

"Well enough. Can't move much, though."

"Same here. Ya think this is the work of a demon?" He clicked his tongue and tried to figure out the situation. Some of the people now collapsed on the ground had drunk liquor, but Somegorou himself hadn't touched a drop, so it couldn't be that. With a sniff, he muttered, "Maybe the incense..."

Since they were outdoors, the sweet-smelling incense should have had a limited effect, but maybe it was simply that strong. But then how had Kimiko smelled it earlier with no ill effects? Perhaps it worked over an extended time by building up in the body. The liquor only exacerbated the effects, leaving those who drank entirely incapacitated.

The ones who set this all up had to be the Nagumo. It was a good thing Somegorou had told his grandchild not to come.

"I'll be gettin' outta here. You two should flee as soon as you can as well. Those Nagumo bastards are up to more than I expected."

His body heavy, Somegorou began to trudge out of the courtyard, but then Kimiko's face flashed through his mind, making him grit his teeth. Nagumo Eizen had called for her before the incense could take effect. In other words, the Nagumo needed her for something different than the other guests.

Somegorou couldn't guess what the Nagumo might be planning, but they'd dared to do this much. Whatever they had in the works would likely be something unpleasant. Someone needed to put a stop to them. What's more, he couldn't leave Kimiko hanging out to dry—both as a man who'd inherited the name Akitsu Somegorou and as the son-in-law of a certain foolish but admirable man.

"Well, shoot. Let's go find that girl, then."

He made up his mind, stepped up onto the veranda, and opened one of the

sliding screen doors. Immediately, he came face-to-face with two people.

The courtyard had likely been used for rites and rituals in the past. The veranda was a full step higher than normal, as though made to be a stage. Perhaps the ones Somegorou was facing now were the leading actors of this show. He glared, and Nagumo Eizen grinned eerily back.

"Oh, what a treat this is. To think the fourth Akitsu himself would honor my invitation. I don't see your grandchild around, though." The man's gaze seemed to size Somegorou up.

Somegorou scoffed, hiding none of his displeasure. "I told 'em to hang back. You were clearly plottin' somethin' nasty."

"How astute. I should've expected as much from such a legendary spirit hunter. You remain sharp, despite your years." There was no praise in Eizen's voice; his tone dripped with ridicule. "Ah, but I'm sure your best years remain behind you. Am I wrong, disciple of Somegorou?"

Eizen addressed him in a rather roundabout manner, but Somegorou had no time to linger on it. The other figure stepped forward, an ordinary man wearing a monk's working clothes. His body began to change—his skin turned red, he grew sharp fangs, and his body became more muscular than any human's possibly could. He took the form of a red demon, like the ones spoken of in old folk tales.

"I see. So you've lost all pride as a spirit hunter," Somegorou said. He didn't see anything wrong in someone who hunted demons teaming up with a demon. It was Somegorou's creed not to slay demons that meant no harm. What's more, he knew himself that man and demon could understand and find common ground with one another. But what Eizen was doing was different. He meant to bring harm to people, and that alone made him an enemy of man.

"Kill him, Izuchi." Eizen ignored Somegorou's words and gave the order.

The demon nonchalantly expressed some surprise at that. "You sure? This guy seems like the best of the lot. I thought stronger feed was better?"

"It's fine. He's the disciple of a weak man, and I doubt he's any better. The only thing of value he possesses is his title."

"If you say so."

Eizen's words set Somegorou's head ablaze. Up until then, he had been focused on finding Kimiko and figuring out the purpose of this party, but that all fell by the wayside now. He clenched his teeth and glared viciously at Eizen. "What did you just say?"

Somegorou's master had been his savior and a second father. He'd taught him many things and was still someone he respected dearly.

"Hmph. I said your master was weak. Incompetent," Eizen said.

"Then you must not value your life!" Somegorou knew it was just a cheap provocation, but he grew enraged all the same. He'd made a name for himself as the fourth Akitsu Somegorou, but to him, the greatest Somegorou there was and ever would be was the third. He would not stand to hear his beloved master ridiculed.

The effects of the incense still remained, making his movements duller than usual. Still, he should have been able to deal with the old man in front of him easily. He forced his sluggish body to life and sprinted. He was over sixty now, far past his prime, but he was still faster than your average man.

He beelined directly toward Eizen, but a massive figure stepped in his way.

"Not so fast. Your opponent is me." The demon, Izuchi, pointed its weapon toward Somegorou.

"Wha—" Somegorou's hot head cooled in an instant when he saw what Izuchi held.

When it came to weapons used by demons, the most famous was probably the iron club. A demon Somegorou knew well in the past had made dexterous use of two swords, and some of the demons possessing reason that he'd fought had used axes, spears, bludgeons, and other blunt weapons. The weapon Izuchi

held was none of these. It was one that Somegorou had never seen before in a demon's hands. He knew *what* the weapon was, but never had he thought that a demon might use one.

"Try not to die too quick on me now."

In Izuchi's hands was a massive hunk of metal whose multiple long barrels formed a dense ring with a locked-breech bullet-feeding system that used a cartridge belt. It would normally take four humans to carry such a thing, but Izuchi easily held it alone using his demon strength. The weapon operated by spinning its multiple barrels and quickly prepping, loading, and firing bullets, then ejecting the cartridges to achieve rapid fire. To put it another way—he carried a Gatling gun.

"Oh, you've *gotta* be kiddin' me!" Somegorou kicked off the floor and dove to the side, but Izuchi only needed to shift slightly to redirect the muzzle his way again.

A thunderous roar sounded, and gunpowder smoke spewed out as lead bullets rained down like hail. Gatling guns were meant for warfare, to be used against many people at once. Now, all of its force was completely directed solely at Somegorou.

Even as a plume of smoke filled the area, Izuchi continued to fire. After precisely ten seconds, the Gatling gun came to a stop.

"Not bad..." A murmur of admiration came from Izuchi. He'd killed experienced spirit hunters before with the Gatling gun. Technique and training amounted to nothing before such an onslaught, and he knew it. That was why he was filled with nothing but respect for Somegorou, who'd guarded against his hail of bullets.

"Skulls...Mad Skeleton."

A wall of bones folded in on themselves appeared in front of Somegorou. This was an advanced version of the skull artifact spirit he'd made much use of in his youth. The bones shattered on impact from the bullets, but more Mad

Skeletons appeared one after another to block the way.

"I've killed demons and spirit hunters alike with this thing, but this is a first."

Somegorou had already passed down his name to his grandchild, but he still continued to use the Somegorou name for himself as well without provoking any questions. The reason was simple: He was still stronger than his successor. In fact, not even the Nagumo of the Demonic Blade nor the Kukami of the Magatama could rival him. He had come to be known as a legendary spirit hunter, enough for others to still call him Akitsu Somegorou even after he had passed on the name. Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth was in a class of his own.

"You really are somethin." Izuchi gave Somegorou honest praise for standing equal against modern weaponry using nothing but techniques of the old world. But then he observed how battered the Mad Skeletons had been left and made a saddened expression. "What sad times we live in. You've probably spent half your life polishin' your craft, only to go toe to toe with somethin' money can buy."

He was right. Somegorou's Mad Skeletons had been able to block the Gatling gun, but that was it. The advance of science was frighteningly fast. Many spirit hunters had likely died before such an onslaught of bullets without managing a single response, and a human could easily slay a demon without any training whatsoever if they had such a weapon in hand.

"But that's exactly why I chose to work with the Nagumo, even using this damned thing. All to achieve my purpose. You understand, don't you?"

Man and demon. Though they were two different beings, they both understood and felt the mutability of their lives. With weapons that could take life so easily now in existence, what place in the world did spirit hunters and demons have?

"Hmph. I suppose I might..." Somegorou said.

"That's enough chatter, Izuchi. Hurry up and finish him," Eizen coldly spat.

"But how?"

"Just fire wildly. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to catch the bullets himself."

The reason Somegorou dove out of the way earlier hadn't been to dodge the bullets but to prevent stray shots from hitting the incapacitated people in the courtyard.

So much anger flared up in Somegorou that his blood vessels bulged. Though human, Eizen was a fiend. Someone willing to hurt bystanders to achieve his purpose was more wicked than any spirit.

"Well, all right." Izuchi seemed willing to obey.

Somegorou could defend himself from the Gatling gun, but fighting and protecting others at the same time would be close to impossible. He had thought Eizen needed his guests alive to fulfill some purpose, but his crazed smile told Somegorou that he'd been wrong.

"Don't you da—"

Eizen was mad enough to slaughter everyone. Fearing the worst, Somegorou began to make his move, but he was beaten to the punch. His shout was cut short by a voice as cold and stiff as steel.

"Blood Blade."

A wet crimson line shot across the darkness and struck Eizen square in the forehead.

Izuchi froze to look at the sudden intruder. Standing there was a man clad in black clothes.

"Don't give my son-in-law too much trouble now." His voice was nostalgically familiar.

"A-ah..." Somegorou trembled, not out of fear or surprise, but from an indescribable emotion welling up inside him.

Leisurely, the man stepped through the courtyard and approached them. Somegorou recognized his face. Many decades had passed, but of course he wouldn't have forgotten him.

"Who the hell are you?" With his boss killed, Izuchi bared naked rage at the intruder.

The man paid him little mind and calmly said, "I see you've aligned yourself with the Nagumo of the Demonic Blade, Demon. But I'm sorry to say you chose the wrong side, for I've come to erase this family that has existed since the Heian period from history." With a gaze as sharp as a blade, he, Kadono Jinya, glared at Eizen's corpse. "Was that too hard for you to understand? I said I've come to crush the Nagumo."

4

Y ONABARI, THE TALL MAIDSERVANT, carried the unconscious Kimiko to the underground cell. Inside was the young girl known as the *Kodoku no Kago*, her legs and arms completely restrained.

"Heya, Ryuuna-chan. How's it going?" Yonabari cheerfully greeted the girl.

Gagged, the girl didn't reply—not that Yonabari had expected her to.

"Look, I've brought you a friend." With a thud, they dropped Kimiko onto the ground. Though they'd been told to handle her carefully, Yonabari did no such thing. There was some commotion going on up above, but they made no effort to go help out and indifferently sat down on the ground instead. "The Demon-Eating Demon I told you about's probably shown up. I wonder who'll come out on top."

They giggled with a joyful expression. Their smile was one of genuine blithe glee, and that was what made it so twisted.

Nagumo Eizen had been struck in the brow by the flying red blade and died immediately. Somegorou and Izuchi both froze, bewildered by the sudden development.

A warm wind blew through the night. Jinya calmly made his way through the courtyard, walking past the incapacitated guests. Keeping his eyes on the deceased Eizen, he said, "Himawari."

"I'm here, Uncle."

Three demons appeared. Standing in the middle was a young girl who wore a hakama and had a large red ribbon tying her hair.

Somegorou finally returned to his senses and questioned Jinya incredulously. "Whoa, whoa, wait... What are ya doin' here?"

His voice was hoarser than he'd expected it would be. Though the scene seemed to be temporarily paused, he was still in the middle of a fight. By no means should he be acting this flustered before an opponent, but he simply couldn't pull himself together.

Back when he was still only an apprentice to Somegorou the Third, he and his master would frequently visit a soba restaurant known as Demon Soba, run by Kadono Jinya. Jinya and his master were close friends and drank together practically every night even though one was a demon and the other a spirit hunter. Somegorou the Fourth admired their strange bond, and he respected Jinya as well for being a demon who could live among humans.

"This is one hell of a reunion we're havin' after all these years... Just why would yabe targetin' spirit hunters like the Nagumo? And..." Clenching his teeth, Somegorou glared at Jinya and the young girl close to him. Though the girl was a demon, she and Jinya looked like a father-daughter pair standing together, and that pissed Somegorou off. "Who's the short one? A superior demon?"

"Come to think of it, we haven't met in person yet, have we?" The young girl stepped forward before Jinya could reply. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Akitsu

Somegorou-sama. Your predecessor was good to me."

She didn't seem malicious at all. Though she was a demon, Somegorou didn't sense any danger from her.

"...You knew my master?"

"I did. Didn't he tell you about me?" Despite his wariness, she continued to act childishly innocent, even smiling happily. "I am Himawari. Perhaps you might recall me better if I tell you I'm a daughter of Magatsume?"

His heart began to race. "... Magatsume."

He had indeed heard about Himawari from his master. Magatsume was Jinya's sworn enemy and the leader of many demons, and Himawari was her oldest daughter. Somegorou had been concerned about the Nagumo's plots, but Magatsume was a far greater threat. She'd killed his master, erased Nomari's memories, and would one day become Demon God and bring ruin to all of mankind. And Himawari was the daughter of that very woman.

So why was Jinya working with her now?

"Why... Why are you with...her?!" Though Somegorou fought to keep himself from shouting, his voice got louder against his will. His eyes were filled with fury, but Jinya remained calm no matter how fiercely he glared.

"I have my reasons, but now's not the time. The fight isn't over."

Somegorou felt irritated that Jinya wouldn't answer him, but his words calmed him down. The fight wasn't over yet.

The air began to shift. Somegorou looked down at Eizen's corpse and saw it slowly right itself.

"Hmph. Quite the violent introduction you've made."

Neither Somegorou nor Jinya were so inexperienced as to waste time being surprised. They braced themselves for a fight, taking up stances and watching Eizen's movements closely.

Eizen rose fully to his feet, pulled out the red blade lodged in his head, and shattered it. The blade had presumably been made by Jinya's ability *Blood Blade*. It scattered into mist after being destroyed.

"Good grief. I only have so many lives stocked up. I'd rather not have to waste them."

His brain, skull, flesh, and skin began to seal up. He then wiped his blood off with his sleeve, revealing that he had not been so much as scarred. He had unmistakably been dead, and now he was fine. This went beyond mere regeneration and was more like a total resurrection.

He sighed as if it all meant nothing. He didn't boast, even after overcoming what should have been a lethal attack. It was as though he saw his assailant, Jinya, as nothing more than a fly.

"... What's this about havin' lives stocked up?" Somegorou asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Eizen answered. "Takafumi may have been useless as the head of the family, but he at least serves some purpose now."

Somegorou's brow twitched. He wasn't so ignorant that he couldn't connect the dots between the head of the family's absence and this talk of stocked-up lives.

"So you ate another one, *Cannibal*?" spat Jinya, who had been watching indifferently until then. Hearing that, Somegorou became sure his assumption was right. Nagumo Eizen ate humans and revived himself with their lifeforce. He had a peculiar ability not unlike that of a demon.

"Don't make me out to be some sort of lowlife," Eizen said. "We're not all that different, given that we both consume our own kind."

"Fair point."

The two seemed to know one another, talking familiarly even while facing each other as enemies. But any cordiality to be had only went skin deep. The air was tense and cold. Nothing but pure animosity existed between the two.

"Tell me, what brings you here today?" Eizen asked.

"Do I even need to say it? I've come to take that demonic blade of yours, as well as the *Kodoku no Kago*."

Jinya's bloodlust was reminiscent of a sharpened blade. In contrast, Eizen's sinister aura felt murky like mud.

"Hmph. If anything, you're the one who needs to hand something over. That Yatonomori Kaneomi originally belonged to us."

Eizen held a sword in his hand, similar in appearance to Jinya's Yatonomori Kaneomi. Jinya's Kaneomi had a soft, wavy temper pattern along the blade with small flakes, while Eizen's sword had a temper pattern that resembled small beads in a row. Beyond that, the lengths and makes of their handles and scabbards were roughly the same. Both of them may well have been Yatonomori Kaneomi blades; there were supposed to be four such swords in existence, forged in the late Warring States period by the swordsmith Kaneomi. In other words, Eizen's sword likely contained a demon ability of its own.

Jinya drew his left leg back and slightly lowered his stance. With his weight on his back leg, he left himself free to move whenever he wanted. He kept his focus on his enemy and called out to Himawari. "Himawari, take care of the collapsed folks behind me."

"I see no reason we're obligated to help them, but I shall if you wish it, Uncle." With a nod, Himawari and the two demons with her began moving the incapacitated guests. It didn't seem like she would harm them. In fact, she and the demons appeared to be moving them with care.

"Utsugi, the incense still hasn't left your system. You should take your leave as well."

"Like hell I'd run here. I doubt even you can fight while avoidin' a Gatling gun. I'll keep the one called Izuchi busy."

Eizen spoke up then, in a voice heavy with mockery. "Hmph. How odd. You,

the great Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth, are going to side with a demon who's come to end a line of spirit hunters? Shouldn't your enemy be that demon there?"

Somegorou scoffed and looked at the cannibal with all the disdain he could muster. "Oh, stuff it. Ignorin' the Magatsume issue, allyin' with him is the clear choice between the two of you."

It had been decades since Somegorou had last seen Jinya, but he still believed he could trust him. He had no reason to hesitate.

"I may have no idea what the hell he's up to, but I'm sure whatever yer doin' is worse, Eizen."

Jinya's steely expression faltered slightly. "Utsugi..."

"I'll hear ya out later. You better not run away this time."

"...I won't."

After that short exchange, the two turned to face their respective enemies.

Izuchi smiled admiringly at Somegorou's courage, and Eizen looked at Jinya with cold eyes. He clearly considered their whole exchange to be no more than a charade. "Enough nonsense," he said in an icy voice. "You're nothing more than an incompetent man's disciple... Izuchi."

"I'm ready. It's a shame, though. I feel like these two and I would've gotten along swell." Izuchi pointed the Gatling gun's muzzle at Somegorou.

Eizen's eyes didn't leave Jinya once.

The air turned tense as a silence followed, but it did not last long. No words were needed to announce the start of the fight. A cacophonous roar sounded and the smell of gunpowder filled the night as they all made their move at once.

Reuniting with a familiar face breathed life into Jinya.

Himawari made her demons carry the incapacitated guests and the still-

conscious man and woman away. The latter two took issue with being helped by demons, but their bodies were too numb for them to resist.

Somegorou's body was still dull from the effects of the incense, so he focused on defending himself. Izuchi seemed fine with that and aimed for him alone. It would have been logical for him to ignore the immobile Somegorou and target Jinya instead, but he chose not to out of respect for the guts Somegorou had shown when he insisted on backing up Jinya. Though he used modern weaponry, Izuchi was an old-fashioned demon who respected courage in others.

That left Jinya and Eizen to fight one-on-one.

Though he was a well-known spirit hunter, Nagumo Eizen was far past his prime. However, he had the ability to revive himself by consuming the lives of others. Jinya already knew that wasn't the ability of Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade, which meant he had to deal with the man's revival ability *and* another currently unknown one. He could not afford to let his guard down, but that didn't compel him to take things slow.

With *Dart*, Jinya closed the distance in a single motion, bringing Yarai up to and through the man's neck as he passed by him—that made one kill.

He put strength into his feet and immediately spun around into a horizontal sweep. That made two kills. Eizen's reaction time was slow, perhaps because of his age. Jinya pierced his heart for a third kill.

"You're as ruthless a demon as ever. You've gone and made me waste three lives already." Even after all that, the old man sneered.

As far as Jinya knew, Eizen's ability was automatic revival using stored lives. Naturally, that meant there was a limit to the number of times he could revive himself. The problem was that Jinya didn't know where that limit lay. Jinya had killed Eizen fourteen times before in a previous encounter. He had been superior in terms of raw fighting power then, but he hadn't managed to finish the fight. Eizen might very possibly have more lives than Jinya could ever hope

to exhaust.

"If you're not going to use your Kaneomi, then you might as well return it to me now." Eizen gritted his teeth bitterly as he grabbed his airborne head with his right hand and reattached it to its neck. He seemed offended that Jinya hadn't drawn his Yatonomori Kaneomi blade.

"I'm told the Nagumo pride themselves in knowing when to and when not to kill," Jinya said. "If you can still say the same, then I'll gladly return her to you."

Long ago, the former head of the Nagumo family gave a demonic sword to his daughter. He expected her to lead the family one day, but her skill with the sword was lacking, so he left her in the care of a sword with a will of its own.

"Those who do not hesitate to kill are the ones truly unfit to wield demonic blades. You may have a will of your own, but you cannot choose what you cut. Hence, your wielder must be someone who can choose."

The Nagumo were a famous line of spirit hunters tracing back to the Heian period, and their family head had once been a gentle soul. His daughter Kazusa respected his way of life and strove to become a woman worthy of leading the family after him.

But it wasn't meant to be. Nagumo Kazusa was killed by Jishibari, daughter of the demon known as Magatsume. The Yatonomori Kaneomi blade that Eizen had given to Kazusa wandered the world alone to avenge her master, before ultimately ending up in the hands of a master swordsman who was said to slay demons in a single strike.

None of that mattered, though. It was all in the distant past now.

"You know nothing of the Nagumo, lowly demon." Eizen scowled.

"Hmph. It seems I can't return her to you after all."

Perhaps the loss of his daughter was what had twisted Eizen. The possibility lingered in Jinya's mind, but it changed nothing. The past remained in the past. He had to kill Eizen in the present to stop him, so he did. For a fourth, a fifth,

and then a sixth time, Jinya took the man's life.

But not even that was enough. While reviving with life taken from others, Eizen counterattacked with his blade. His strike was a bit swifter than most, but he was still an old man. To the eyes of a demon, his movements were sluggish, yet even then he remained a threat.

"Then I'll simply take it from your corpse. Savor this taste of my wailing blade's power."

A black miasma began to rise as a sinister power emerged from the demonic blade.

5

 $oldsymbol{J}$ INYA THOUGHT BACK to an event more than twenty years earlier.

They'd encountered each other through sheer coincidence, really. One night, a young man was being attacked by a cannibal. Jinya happened to be around, so he took it upon himself to fight. That was all there was to it.

Eizen hadn't had his Yatonomori Kaneomi blade then, so Jinya was fine with just fending him off. He had no reason to go as far as killing him, and Eizen shouldn't have had a reason to keep pursuing the young man he targeted.

But pursue he did. He pursued *Jinya*—perhaps because he held the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade meant for his daughter. In the end, Eizen used up fourteen of his lives fighting Jinya before realizing it was hopeless and fleeing.

In other words, their previous fight hadn't amounted to much of a fight at all. They had essentially tested each other's waters and no more. Jinya only knew Eizen as a troublesome human with many lives, and Eizen only knew Jinya as a troublesome demon with many abilities. This was each one's first time seeing the other's true potential.

Eizen slashed his sword diagonally downward. Though he had aged, his skill

with the blade was formidable—the family's usage of demonic swords was famous for a reason. The basics of swordplay were all there, as were the more beautiful, advanced nuances only achievable through training and real combat. But that wasn't what made Jinya's breath catch in his throat—it was the sinister aura emitted by Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade. A black miasma came from and surrounded the sword, making it twice, maybe three times as wide. Jinya had a sinking feeling he couldn't let it make contact.

"Jishibari."

He chose to stop it indirectly. Chains appeared out of thin air and wove across one another, forming a shield to block the enlarged sword.

"How pointless."

But the blade didn't stop. With a *clink*, the chains were crushed and scattered in an instant. Jinya had expected as much, though. With the speed of the strike reduced, he stepped in diagonally right and then pushed off his right foot to power a thrust into Eizen's throat.

That made seven kills. But with his sword caught in his opponent's flesh, Jinya was momentarily stuck. Taking advantage of the opening presented, the miasma began to shift shape. The next strike came before Jinya could retreat.

The black miasma became a number of long, narrow rods that attacked as though each possessed a will of its own. They resembled spears, or perhaps tentacles. There were far too many for Jinya to defend himself with one blade, so he instead froze in his tracks.

"Indomitable."

Jinya activated the ability he took from Tsuchiura, a wish for an invulnerable body made manifest. In exchange for being unable to move, it defended the user from all attacks. Jinya used it with complete confidence that he would come out unscathed, but a few thrusts from the miasma hit his body and pierced him straight through.

The pain that spread across his body felt more like burns than stab wounds. It felt as though a hot iron rod had been thrust into him. The agony and discomfort made it impossible to maintain *Indomitable*.

He found it strange that not even his ultimate defense could stop the strike, but he quickly realized where he had gone wrong. The strike hadn't penetrated *Indomitable*. It hadn't even penetrated his clothes. No wound had been made, and there was no blood. Only a searing pain had reached his body.

Jinya didn't yet understand the inner workings, but Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi, or rather what was inside it, apparently had the ability to do such a thing. It was troublesome, but pain alone wouldn't prevent him from moving. He closed the distance and attacked once more.

Eizen cackled with delight. "I can only draw out a mere fraction of this power, but even that alone amounts to this much. How truly wonderful..."

From up close, the miasma solidified into a tentacle shape and reached out for Jinya. He knew now that the strike was impossible to block, so his only option was to dodge. He made the minimal movement needed to avoid the miasma and lopped Eizen's right arm off with an upward slice.

Killing Eizen wasn't Jinya's goal. He was here to take his Yatonomori Kaneomi and the *Kodoku no Kago*. Depriving Eizen of the sword was more important than shaving off one of his lives.

Eizen's right arm and the demonic blade danced through the air. Jinya reached out to grab the sword.

"Not so fast!"

A rain of bullets suddenly appeared. Even for a demon like Jinya, such heavy weaponry would be lethal. With the demonic sword almost in reach, he was forced to retreat far back.

Jinya could attack from long range with *Flying Blade* or *Blood Blade*, but he couldn't produce rapid fire like a Gatling gun could. It would be difficult to

overcome a continuous barrage of bullets—impossible while fighting Eizen as well.

Izuchi aimed the muzzle at Jinya once more and prepared to fire, but a clump of bones blocked the way.

"I am your opponent."

The Mad Skeleton pack charged at Izuchi. Since Izuchi had been distracted by Jinya, he was late to react and the skeletons gouged his flesh. He grimaced and turned to face Somegorou once more.

"Good, good. You don't have time to waste on others, do ya?" Somegorou grinned.

In lieu of thanks, Jinya provided the service of bringing his sword down on Eizen's cranium for the eighth kill. The man still had lives to spare, but Jinya would take his sword before he could regenerate.

"This sword is *mine*." Even with his skull caved in and his brains exposed, Eizen pointed his sword at Jinya. The black miasma grew in intensity and closed in on Jinya like an avalanche. He couldn't block the substance, and it was too wide to dodge.

"You've made things easy for me. I should thank you." If he couldn't block or dodge, then he could only advance. What needed to be done was clear. He couldn't help but express his gratitude, for now he could be reckless without any hesitation.

As though it were the obvious thing to do, Jinya stepped toward the root of the miasma, not showing a trace of fear.

Some time earlier, Himawari let her underling demons carry the guests to safety and sneaked off on her own to find the underground cell. This was why Jinya had acted so openly, even making a big show of killing Eizen. He was nothing more than a distraction. Meanwhile, Himawari pretended to leave the

Nagumo estate but actually went to steal away the Kodoku no Kago.

The two of them were only working together because they shared the Nagumo as a common enemy. Jinya wasn't without misgivings, of course. He saw Magatsume as nothing but his sworn enemy, no longer his younger sister. But his strong hatred for Magatsume didn't extend down to Himawari, partly because she was willing to provide information on her mother and her secret activities. But in the end, what really brought them together was their shared goal.

There was a slight difference in their motives, however. That was why Himawari had told him she might possibly betray him down the line when they agreed to team up. To that, Jinya replied without the slightest shift in expression:

"It's fine. Even if it came to that, I doubt a betrayal from you would be much of a betrayal at all."

The daughters of Magatsume were born from discarded fragments of her heart. Himawari was formed from the love Suzune had once possessed, and so Jinya believed she wouldn't betray him. The two were only working together because it just so happened to be in their interests, but he trusted her regardless. And she wanted to live up to his trust.

"This must be it."

With Eizen and Izuchi stuck near the courtyard, Himawari had her chance. She looked through the metal bars of the cell and saw a young girl gagged and restrained on the ground. In front of the cell, an androgynous-looking maidservant with red eyes blocked the way.

"Welcome, welcome," the maidservant greeted with a smile. By their feet was another unmoving young woman on the ground. From the soft sound of breathing, Himawari guessed she was only unconscious.

Himawari had to wonder if the maidservant was really supposed to be guarding the cell. She stared at their face, sizing them up carefully. They were

tall, but their shoulders were narrow. Though they were undoubtedly a demon, they didn't seem accustomed to combat.

"Who are you?" Himawari questioned sharply.

"Mm, a collaborator of Eizen-san's, I suppose."

If that cunning old man was working with this demon, then there had to be a reason. Himawari glared, but the maidservant didn't lose their unfrazzled air.

"What a surprise, though. To think the Demon-Eating Demon is working with Magatsume of all people. Doesn't bode well for us, not one bit."

Jinya was working with Himawari, not Magatsume. Himawari's ability, which was named after herself, allowed her to remotely observe set targets. That was how Magatsume obtained information on Jinya, which, conversely, meant she had no way of knowing his present actions. In fact, she couldn't even move at the moment. Magatsume had no involvement whatsoever with what was going on here.

Of course, Himawari had no reason to enlighten the maidservant with such knowledge. She simply regarded them warily and said, "You know of us?"

"Well, yeah. The man who consumes demons despite being a demon himself is *infamous*, understandably. And so are Magatsume and her daughters, aaaalways up to something. You're practically celebrities among us demons."

"Can't say I enjoy being known by strangers..."

"Ah ha ha, then why don't we get acquainted?" The maidservant narrowed their eyes with a cold yet bewitching smile. "The name's Yonabari. I have a feeling you won't be forgetting it anytime soon."

Their shapely face made them look picturesque, but there was something eerie about them that made unease flare up in Himawari.

"Now that we've got that out of the way..." Yonabari took a deep breath, then raised their hands and yelled in a deadpan voice. "Oh nooo. I'm being attacked by a demon. Heeeelp. I don't wanna die. Run awaaaaay."

There wasn't a hint of urgency in their voice; they kept a half smile on their face throughout. Himawari felt she was being mocked.

"M'kay, guess I'd better go report the bad news to Eizen-san." Yonabari stepped away from the cell and briskly made their way past Himawari and toward the exit. They showed no intent whatsoever to harm or stop Himawari. It was strange they were so fine with her taking the *Kodoku no Kago* Eizen needed for his plans. Weren't they working with him?

Confused, Himawari called out. "Wait, weren't you here to defend the Kodoku no Kago?"

"Nooope. Eizen-san needs it, but not me. Just because we're working together doesn't mean we agree about everything."

"I...see. But why is a demon like you working with a human? What reason could you possibly have?"

Yonabari stopped in their tracks and thoughtfully put a finger to their lips. Then they spun around and said with a carefree smile, "Well, if I really had to give a reason... I guess it's because I like tea?"

Himawari balked, taken aback by the nonsensical answer. Yonabari paid her little mind and continued.

"But apparently getting coffee at a café is the way to go these days. Kimono are out of fashion now too; no trendy girl would be caught dead in one. And the cities are full of those streetlamps now. Being able to see at night is convenient, but it's tough for us demons to lose our witching hour. This country is flourishing thanks to modern technology, but there's waaaay too much being tossed aside at the same time." They spread their arms wide in an exaggerated motion, as though they were making a grand speech. "Take the Nagumo, for instance. They've fought awfully hard for the sake of the people all these years, but now the swords they used have been outlawed. There are fewer people afraid of demons too, so, naturally, there aren't as many who respect spirit hunters anymore. That's just the way it goes, of course. The world changes. But

the Nagumo don't quite like having their place in the world taken from them, and neither do we demons."

Himawari felt overwhelmed by Yonabari's sudden intensity. Their tone was nonchalant, but she wasn't fooled. Every single word they spoke was rich with a certain something that Himawari also heard in her own mother's voice.

"You asked me why a demon would work with a human, but really, the time for fussing over such things has passed. We're all being denied by this new age, so modern times are the only enemy we need. Rather than fight humans, it's better to oppose this Taisho era that's trampling over the past. Or something like that. I wouldn't really say I hate this world or anything. I'm just venting. Y'know what I mean?"

In their eyes lurked something close to blind zeal. This, too, was a form a demon could take. Yonabari was a demon of the old world, unable to part from what they knew.

"But there's only so much I can do on my own, so I partnered up with a spirit hunter in a similar situation. Our goals are a little different, though. That's why I'd rather have Ryuuna-chan...the *Kodoku no Kago*, out of here. So, you better hop to it! Go save her with that Demon-Eating Demon of yours. Oh, and take little Kimiko-chan here with you while you're at it."

Without letting Himawari get a word in, Yonabari brought the discussion to a close, smiled, and began to leave. Himawari didn't try to stop them this time. After they were gone, she murmured, "Uncle...our greatest enemy might not be Nagumo Eizen after all."

Jinya looked calmly at the approaching wave of miasma. He ignored the slight pangs of pain he was feeling and stepped forward, intent on taking Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade.

"Eizen-san, we've got a problem!"

But before Jinya could move, a shout suddenly resounded through the building.

"Hm?" It seemed to surprise Eizen as well.

The maidservant who had been in the courtyard earlier arrived, out of breath. They were covered in dirt and wounded, with a small amount of blood on their clothes.

"What is it, Yonabari?" Eizen questioned.

"A subordinate of Magatsume showed up and took Ryuuna-chan!"

"What?!" The old man grimaced and glared at Jinya. "This is your doing, isn't it?"

It seemed all had gone well on Himawari's side of things. Eizen's face twisted with fury, making him look inhuman as he began to rebuke Yonabari.

"And what about Kimi?!"

"Oh, yeah, Kimiko-chan got taken too."

"You fool! How could you be so incompetent?!"

Overwhelmed with rage, Eizen focused too much on Yonabari. Jinya didn't let the opportunity slip. He used *Dart* to close the distance between him and Eizen, pulling his sword behind him as he stepped forward with his right and then wrenched both feet into the floor. He spun his hips, sending force from his shoulders to his arms, his hands, and lastly his sword as he aimed for Eizen's torso. His plan was to slice through Eizen with a single stroke, then steal the demonic sword away before he could regenerate.

"Hmh?!" Eizen noticed, but it was too late. Jinya's blade dug into his flesh. It sliced through bone and guts before passing all the way through, cutting the old man in half.

Jinya reached out with his left hand to take the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade, but he was stopped once again. This time it was the maidservant who had neared. Just as he started to wonder what they might be doing, he spotted the

handgun they held.

This gun wasn't of the modern variety—it was a type of concealed weapon known as a grip gun that had been around since the Edo period. It was a cylindrical instrument about the size of one's palm that fired a round when the grip and the barrel were squeezed together. For a gun, its accuracy and range were low, but that didn't matter as its purpose was simply to be easily hidden in the palm of the hand for surprise attacks. Up close, it could effortlessly be lethal.

The maidservant pointed the muzzle at Jinya's eyes and fired at close range. A low crack sounded and Jinya's left arm was hit. He had instantly reacted and moved his arm to block his face. Or rather, he was forced to do so.

"Izuchi!"

"On it!"

Clever. Jinya couldn't help but admire the maidservant's move. They had forced him on the defensive by making sure he saw the grip gun and where it was being aimed. He could endure being shot in the body, but having his vision taken away would be problematic, so he reflexively defended his eyes with his arm, blocking his own line of sight and leaving himself unable to act. In that opening, Izuchi separated from Somegorou, took Eizen, and fled. With only a single shot, the maidservant had gotten them out of what should have been a predicament.

"Foul demon... I will not forget this humiliation you've caused me. I will take back the *Kodoku no Kago* and make you my sacrifice!" Eizen shouted as he was carted away with his body still sliced in half, the pieces held by Izuchi and the maidservant.

"What he said, I guess."

"Sorry, Demon Eater! I still need this guy around, so maybe next time!"

Jumping onto Izuchi's back as they spoke, the maidservant took the Gatling gun
and sprayed it wildly behind them. Jinya and Somegorou had no choice but to

defend with *Indomitable* and Mad Skeleton respectively and were unable to give chase.

And so, Eizen and the demons escaped.

The demons had skillfully maneuvered the incident. It was almost like they'd known beforehand how things would pan out.

Jinya looked beside him at Somegorou and confirmed he was uninjured. They could apparently breathe easy for the time being.

"Strange bunch, huh? Well, we better scram as well. I'm not too keen on bein' arrested for breakin' and enterin'."

In this day and age, claiming to be fighting demons wouldn't get you off the hook for anything. Just as Somegorou said, they would be arrested as burglars if the police came now. But there was something Jinya had to do before they left.

"Go ahead and leave first. I still have business here."

"While I'd very much like to go home already, I've got some unfinished business myself. A lady friend of an acquaintance should be further inside, and I can't leave without her."

"No need. Kimiko's actually part of the business I meant. I'm here to pick her up."

"You're what?" Somegorou froze and stared blankly at Jinya.

Jinya ignored him and began heading off. On the estate grounds were two storehouses. Behind one of them was a secret entrance that led underground, beyond which was a path to a cell.

There was no telling when the police would arrive. Jinya moved briskly to bring things to a quick close.

"Over here, Uncle." Himawari gave him a light wave.

The path fed into a wider space that was terribly humid. The air clung grossly to his skin. The sight of the metal bars and the restrained young girl made him

feel even more revolted.

Akase Kimiko was nearby as well—unconscious, but otherwise fine.

Considering Eizen's plans, she was unlikely to be in danger, but Jinya still breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her safe and sound. All that remained was to check on the girl inside the cell.

"This is the Kodoku no Kago, then?" he asked.

Himawari answered, "Yes, without a doubt. Her name was Ryuuna, I believe."

The girl was conscious but didn't seem to understand what was happening. She stared blankly at Jinya with no emotion at all in her eyes. No spark of hope for her would-be saviors, no fear of strangers, not even the strength to endure her situation. She was too used to her reality to even feel despair and held no interest in the outer world whatsoever. She took for granted that she would live and die in this cell.

"A life of only being used by another, huh..."

She looked to be around fourteen or fifteen. Jinya had once had a daughter. That was why he couldn't help but sympathize a little; a girl this age should be given the love of a parent, not look so empty.

He used his ability *Superhuman Strength*. Not to the point of changing his body shape, but enough to give himself strength while retaining his human form. The sturdy metal bars bent like putty in his hands as he made a hole wide enough for a person to pass through.

"Uncle...?"

Himawari looked at him strangely, but he ignored her and stepped into the cell. He neared the girl and tore away her restraints, then took the gag out of her mouth. Despite being imprisoned for so long, her muscles hadn't atrophied much, and her complexion was passable. While it was far from a hospitable stay, she seemed to have been given some care.

Expressionless, Jinya extended a hand to the girl. "Choose. You can die here,

or you can come with me."

The girl was a part of Eizen's schemes. It had always been Jinya's intention to take her away from here, but he wanted her to follow her own desires. If she didn't have the will to live, then he would kill her here and now. That would make upcoming events slightly more difficult, but it would still throw a wrench in Eizen's plans. Her choosing death was acceptable, but if she had even the slightest will to live, then he would help her. He intended to finish Eizen off regardless and also to take back Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade. The girl's presence wouldn't change that. Sure, he would have to look after her, but he was hardly a stranger to taking on excess burdens.

"... Aaah..." The girl groaned weakly, followed by a long, oppressive silence.

He didn't think the girl would take his hand. He didn't even think she was capable of making a choice, given how empty she was. He told himself that if the silence continued for much longer, he would prepare to do the worst. But to his surprise, the girl began to shakily stand.

She reached out hesitantly, as though touching a foreign object she had never seen before. This all could very well be foreign to her. It was likely nobody had ever offered her any help. His kindness stirred her heart. Despite her emptiness, something had remained in her.

Gingerly, she took his hand. The important choices in life always came suddenly. For her, this was one such critical junction.

"It's settled, then. Let's go." Jinya let loose a smile. The nostalgia brought on by holding her hand saddened him ever so slightly.

"Ow..." Akase Kimiko began to wake up just then. "Where am I...?" She seemed unaware of both the situation and the reason she was unconscious. She looked around and was terribly confused by the sight of the bent metal bars. Belatedly, she noticed the presence of Jinya and the others and said, "Um, what are you doing here, Jiiya?"

After Jinya left Kyoto, a series of ups and downs had led him to work for the

Akase family as a servant. At present, he was something like a caretaker for Kimiko. The nickname "Jiiya," which could mean "elderly manservant," was something Kimiko's mother Shino used to call him. When she was young, her pronunciation of "Jinya" came out as "Jiiya," and at some point it stuck.

"I've come to pick you up as promised, Lady Kimiko."

He couldn't help but smile. By no means did he hate this nickname of his that had been passed down from mother to daughter.

6

溜 — Ryuu

Meaning:

- 1. To store; to settle; to stagnate
- 2. To drip; to trickle
- 3. To cool a steamed liquid and make it settle
- 4. A place for storage, especially manure; a cesspool
- 5. To concentrate energy into something

THE DAY AFTER the evening party, Kimiko had breakfast as usual in the great hall on the first floor. The decor of the spacious room was modern, using candlesticks and the like, and warm sunlight shone in through the tall glass windows facing the courtyard. Normally, a morning like this would feel brisk and refreshing, but Kimiko had hardly gotten any sleep because it was already three o'clock by the time she was able to return home. The warm rays of sunlight only served to make her drowsier. She ate her breakfast while half nodding off.

"Well, we're glad you were able to get back home safely, Kimiko."

"Huh?!" Hearing her name, she jolted awake. Her father, Michitomo, smiled at her reaction.

Michitomo married into the family, being adopted in the process so he would take the Akase name. He had already received the position of family head from Seiichirou, Kimiko's grandfather, but Seiichirou's influence was still stronger as he was the one who made the family what it had become. Michitomo's standing in the family was weaker than his position let on: he couldn't make big decisions without first going through Seiichirou. To be honest, he was a bit of a pushover.

But even though Michitomo couldn't go against Seiichirou's orders, he did occasionally sneak Kimiko out when the old man wasn't around. He prioritized his daughter over the household as much as he possibly could. Kimiko knew he was a good father.

"Isn't that right, Shino?"

"Oh, absolutely." Shino, Kimiko's mother, smiled gracefully.

Kimiko's parents were overjoyed to see her come home, but she herself had been unconscious for most of the events, so she didn't quite understand what they were so happy about.

"Um, did something happen at the Nagumo estate, Father?"

"Hm? Well, the place was burgled, wasn't it? Your mother and I were on pins and needles wondering if you were okay. Really, we were so glad to see you come back safe and sound." Michitomo replied, speaking a mile a minute.

Yesterday, the Nagumo estate was robbed, and the guests got dragged into the situation. Or at least, that was what Kimiko's parents were apparently told. It made sense for them to worry about her so much, but they had no idea about the strange events that had truly taken place the previous night.

Kimiko let loose a sigh of relief, then thought back on yesterday's events.

With Nagumo Eizen and the demons making their getaway, the evening party came to an uneventful end. Not that there was ever much of a party going on to begin with. The whole thing was only a setup to gather people together. At any rate, nobody had any reason to linger around the Nagumo home any longer. Staying for too long might even get them mistaken for burglars, so everyone left in a hurry.

After some walking, they came across a horse-drawn carriage parked by the side of the street. Jinya walked toward it without hesitating, so it was probably something he'd prepared in advance. Waiting there was a girl named Himawari along with a man and a woman, the only two other invitees who'd managed to remain conscious until the end.

"Thank you so very much!"

"We cannot thank you enough, Akitsu-sama!"

The two had apparently come back just to say their thanks. Though young, they were spirit hunters themselves. They already knew of Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth and respected him greatly as a legendary spirit hunter, and now they saw him as a hero of sorts after he saved their lives. The woman seemed particularly awestruck and went as far as to attach *sama* to his name.

"Bah, don't worry 'bout it. I didn't do anythin' special."

Kimiko hadn't been around to see what happened, but from the way the old man underplayed his achievement, she could tell he was probably quite a remarkable person.

"Wow, that's a legend for you. Humble and dignified," the man said emotionally.

"Right? Ack, I apologize for not introducing myself! I-I'm Saegusa Sahiro!"

"Sheesh, calm down a bit. I'm Motoki Soushi. The two of us are still novices, but we're in the same trade. Feel free to say hello if you ever see us around. Anyway, that's all from us."

The excitable young pair left after that. The old man smiled at their youthfulness.

"Utsugi," Jinya said.

"I know. Let's go."

The small girl named Himawari exchanged a few words with Jinya, then left. Everyone else who remained headed for Kojimachi in the carriage.

"So, what exactly happened?" Kimiko spoke up in the carriage, unable to make sense of all the things that had gone on.

The events of the night were beyond most people's understanding, but Kimiko was even more in the dark since she'd been unconscious. From her perspective, she had been talking with Eizen when she suddenly felt pain and lost consciousness, then woke up to find Jinya holding two swords of all things. None of it made much sense.

"Honestly, I haven't got much of a clue what was going on myself." The old man Kimiko had just met that very day, Akitsu Somegorou, scratched his head and frowned. He seemed equally perplexed by tonight's events.

She looked out at the coachman's seat, saw Jinya and Ryuuna next to him, and sighed. Jinya's meager explanation hadn't shed much light on anything yet.

"Do you feel unwell anywhere?" he asked.

"...Mm-mm..." Ryuuna made a soft grunt and shook her head. She didn't speak, but she seemed to have accepted Jinya into her heart.

The question of what exactly was going on with Ryuuna perplexed Kimiko as well. Jinya had abducted the unknown girl from the Nagumo home—or maybe it was more appropriate to say he saved her, since she had been kept in an underground cell. Regardless, he had clearly taken her away by force. Kimiko had asked for an explanation multiple times along the way, but he just said he would tell her later, and the strange girl never replied to Kimiko.

[&]quot;Just who is that girl?"

"Dunno. Only Jinya seems to know, but he's got his lips shut tight," Somegorou replied.

They'd found Ryuuna in the Nagumo's underground cell, so it was safe to say she was being kept there against her will, but it was hard for Kimiko to believe the Eizen she had respected could do such a thing. Dejected, she hung her head and said nothing further.

A heavy silence followed for a long while. Eventually, the carriage cabin shook once as the horse came to an abrupt stop.

"What's wrong?" Somegorou asked.

They looked outside to see they were in Kojimachi, but they were still some distance away from the Hydrangea Mansion. Curious, Kimiko poked her head out of the carriage and saw Jinya had already stepped down from the coachman's seat with Ryuuna in his arms. He held her carefully as though she were his own child.

"Sorry, Utsugi, but could you take Lady Kimiko back home for me? Tell them there was trouble at the Nagumo home so you helped Kimiko and brought her back."

"Huh? What about you?"

"I'll erase my presence and come back separately. I doubt old Akase is going so far as to monitor the movements of a servant, but better safe than sorry."

The one who sent Kimiko over to the Nagumo home in the first place was her grandfather, Seiichirou. It would make sense to think he had some connection with Eizen.

"I don't really get it, but sure. And what'll you do with that girl there?"

"I'll hide her in my room. Luckily, Eizen seemed to want to keep her a secret. Not many people should know she exists, certainly not the Akase geezer. I could probably make some excuse or other even if she gets found."

"Well, all right. But ya better explain everythin' later, ya hear?"

"Tomorrow, I promise." He turned to Kimiko and said, "I bid you good night, Lady Kimiko."

Kimiko couldn't get a single word in. Even when Jinya finally spoke to her, she stumbled over her words, and before she knew it, he had abruptly vanished with Ryuuna in his arms.

"Wha-huh?!"

"Oh, that's his ability to turn invisible... Though I don't remember him bein' able to make others invisible too. Guess he's been practicin' over the years."

"Uh-huh..." Kimiko cocked her head. Somegorou's explanation explained nothing.

At any rate, it sounded like Jinya planned to hide Ryuuna. Toward the back of the Akase estate were separate quarters the servants used. Since Jinya was the gardener of the Akase, that included him.

"Welp, shall we then, Miss? I may be old, but I can at least escort you home safely."

There was still a short distance to go. Kimiko nodded and began walking.

And so, the night drew to a close. The streetlamps kept the path bright all the way back. Such a thing should have seemed normal to Kimiko, and yet something about it felt strange.

"Kimiko! Kimiko!"

Her father's voice brought her back to reality. She had apparently zoned out for quite some time; her parents were giving her worried looks.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Oh dear... You should rest up today. I'll tell your tutors you're taking the day off," Shino softly said.

Kimiko breathed a sigh of relief. She truly was exhausted. She didn't feel like

she could get a single thing to stick in her mind even if she did study.

Jinya had promised to tell Somegorou everything today, but she didn't think he would explain anything to her. Even if whatever was going on involved her, he would keep her in the dark if it meant she would be safer that way. She knew he was acting out of kindness, but it still saddened her regardless.

Perhaps because she was so tired, she didn't have much of an appetite for breakfast.

"What the heck are ya doing?"

Somegorou visited the Akase home that afternoon. News of last night seemed to have already made the rounds, as he was showered with praise and given a warm welcome by the servants. At their urging, he headed for the courtyard, where he found Jinya holding a spray bottle and having a staring match with some hydrangea flowers. With a deadly serious look on his face, he sprayed the contents of the bottle once, then carefully checked a stem.

"Getting rid of pests. I'm working as the gardener here now. It's quite fun."

"...I hate how well that suits ya."

Jinya had always been rather knowledgeable about flower names and anecdotes involving flowers. It seemed he'd gone on to try his hand at cultivating and pruning, which made sense for him, but the thought of him of all people being a gardener was still strange. To Somegorou, he was still the man who ran the soba restaurant.

"You're good at everything ya put yer mind to, eh?"

"Not at all. I tried learning smithing and iron making before and had no talent for it whatsoever. I remember even being envious of those who were good at it."

"Smithing? Iron making? Really now."

"It was a long time ago," Jinya said dryly. He continued his staring match with

the hydrangeas for a little longer, then straightened up and faced Somegorou. "Now then, sorry for making you wait. As promised, I'll tell you everything. I'd like to work on disposing of our *other* pests as well…"

His expression shifted from that of a gentle gardener to that of a demon.

Jinya led Somegorou to his room in the servants' quarters. Ryuuna and Himawari were already there.

"Sorry for making you wait."

"It's all right. It was nice being able to look around your room."

Himawari seemed to have enjoyed the time she spent waiting for him.

Ryuuna shook her head to show she didn't mind waiting either. She hadn't talked at all yet; it wasn't clear whether she couldn't or she simply chose not to.

Somegorou plopped himself down on a chair. He was in a bit of a mood because of Himawari's presence. It was the Akitsu way not to make an enemy out of demons without good reason, but her being the daughter of Magatsume still put him in an unpleasant spot.

"That's quite the conflicted face you're making there," Himawari said.

"Hmph. That's nothin' to be surprised about. The only wonder 'ere is how Jinya can keep a straight face 'round a daughter of Magatsume."

Somegorou had nothing personal against Himawari, but her mother Magatsume was the one who killed his master.

He had once known another daughter of Magatsume—Azumagiku, a slightly gluttonous, stubborn, and kindhearted girl. But she ended up being nothing more than a pawn to erase Nomari's memory. Somegorou didn't hate Azumagiku for what happened, but he did regret how ignorant he had been to spend time with her and not realize a thing. Regrets only accumulate as one ages, and Azumagiku's memory remained with him still, like a painful barb in his heart.

"But, fine. You're workin' together with Jinya for now, right? I'll put up with ya till this is all over."

"Thank you," Himawari said with a smile.

Somegorou knitted his brow. It felt strange to see such a blithe, human smile on the face of a demon.

They had already confirmed that nobody else was in the building at the moment. The other servants were all busy working in the home.

"Ya sure it's safe to keep Ryuuna-chan here?"

"It should be fine," Jinya answered. "Eizen can't do anything extreme while I have Ryuuna. Of course, I can't do anything extreme either."

His phrasing seemed to suggest there was more going on, but Somegorou let it go so they could get to the point.

"If ya say so. All right, no more beatin' 'round the bush. What's going on?" Somegorou leaned forward and narrowed his gaze.

Jinya's expression changed as well. The air in the room grew tense. In his usual calm voice, he said, "As I mentioned last night, I'm planning on crushing the Nagumo, and by that I mean killing Nagumo Eizen for good. To explain why, I need to talk about what he's planning first." He paused and looked at everyone's faces. "To make a long story short, Eizen plans on reviving the Nagumo family."

Since the Nagumo were a family of sword-wielding spirit hunters, the Meiji Restoration had left them spiraling into decline. They stood opposed to the Taisho era and were trying to take back their former authority. That was why Jinya had to crush them.

"With the modernization of the Taisho era, the number of spirits that pose a meaningful threat has gone down. There are many reasons for that, but some big ones are the installation of streetlamps, the general decline in fear of spirits, and the development of firearms."

Firearms were a hallmark of the Meiji and Taisho eras. The technology for automatic firearms that were cheap and easy to use, handguns with little recoil, and so on and so forth came from overseas and greatly advanced Japan's weaponry. Today's firearms were far above and beyond the ones available in Edo times. Meanwhile, the Sword Abolishment Edict passed in the Meiji era caused the demand for swords to dwindle; many swordsmiths transitioned to other metalwork or gave up the profession entirely. Naturally, it was impossible to expect any developments in swordsmithing to be made in such a climate, and so swords became obsolete.

"You experienced it yourself, Utsugi. A Gatling gun is a bit of an extreme example, but nowadays it's easy for an ordinary person to buy something that can even kill demons."

"Yeah. I see your point."

Spirit hunters like the Nagumo and the Akitsu all had to undergo intensive training to master their techniques. To be able to slay a demon, one needed both talent and training.

But now, anybody could buy a firearm and inflict lethal damage on a demon. Of course, some level of training was needed to hit a target—and superior demons had abilities beyond human understanding, so bullets might not be universally effective—but for all inferior demons, a well-aimed gunshot was a legitimate concern. That was why so many demons had stopped acting in the open.

"It's a real shame, it is. Somethin' money can buy can now go toe-to-toe with my Mad Skeleton."

"You still have it better than most. Forget demons; even most spirit hunters are easily defeated by firearms. Things are especially difficult for the Nagumo because they only used swords."

The Sword Abolishment Edict outlawed swords, and the advancement of firearms made technique and training worthless. The demons that once stalked

the night became scarce as well. It was no wonder the Nagumo began to decline. But even as the times changed, they did not try to adapt like the Akase did. They clung to their pride as a family of spirit hunters that had persisted since the Heian era.

"I guess they couldn't really bring themselves to give up the trade, huh? Not with how famous they used to be." Somegorou said.

"No, they couldn't. In fact, they're trying to make a name for themselves as spirit hunters again."

The Nagumo chose to remain who they were, clinging to their pride even as the world denied their self-image. That much made sense, but something else bothered Somegorou.

"But if that's all, then aren't ya totally the bad guy here? Joinin' hands with Magatsume to fight against a human and all."

The Nagumo planning to return to their former glory was fine, but the one in charge of them was Eizen, a cannibal. Though he quite possibly intended to achieve their comeback through unsavory means, there was no mistaking the fact that Jinya was trying to oppose a human. Somegorou needed to get things straight before he decided where he stood on this issue.

"Why ya workin' with Magatsume? Isn't she s'posed to be yer sworn enemy?"

Before Jinya could answer, Himawari cut in with a smile. "That would be because the Nagumo are a problem for us both. An enemy of an enemy is a friend, as they say." Her expression carried no malice, but Somegorou wasn't swayed. Her eyes were ruby red, and she was the daughter of the one meant to become a calamity to man one day.

"Is that right? I guess I could see why the Nagumo and Magatsume would be enemies, given they're spirit hunters and she's a demon," Somegorou said.

"Oh, that's not quite it. We don't oppose the Nagumo because we're demons. Our enemy is Nagumo Eizen alone," she clarified. Eizen was certainly the type of man the world was better off without, but that couldn't be why they were working together. And if it was Eizen they were really after, then some things didn't make complete sense.

"Strange. I could understand Jinya takin' issue with Eizen 'cause he's a fiend who eats human flesh, but Magatsume? I'd figure she'd be more on Eizen's side of things morality-wise, as odd as it feels to say. They're kind of alike, don't ya think?"

Himawari puffed her cheeks out in protest. "How rude. Please don't go grouping us together with that inhuman old man."

"Inhuman, you say..." Somegorou wanted to continue with "That's rich comin' from a demon," but he held back. He believed his master would've been mature enough to let the girl vent.

"My mother isn't involved in any of this, anyway. I am acting in her best interest, but it was my own independent decision to work with Uncle."

Himawari was working with Jinya of her own volition, not on Magatsume's orders. Whatever Eizen was plotting was serious enough that they saw a need to work together. It was reasonable to assume, then, that Eizen's plan involved not just his family's return to glory but something more sinister as well.

"All right then, explain everything to me in detail. Just what's goin' on that made you two—no, left you two no choice but to work together?" Somegorou corrected himself because he had seen Eizen's unnaturalness firsthand. Him being a cannibal was one thing, but his blatant disregard for life was what really made Somegorou think the man was a monster. Eizen consumed the lives of others as though it was his right to do so. He saw people as nothing more than pebbles under his feet. He was the type of man who would only cause problems if they left him alive.

"Eizen's goal is ultimately just the revival of his family, but it's the method he picked that's the problem." Jinya grimaced. He snuck a glance at Ryuuna, after which Himawari continued where he left off.

"Eizen plans to use the *Kodoku no Kago*—that is, Ryuuna-san—to bring the Nagumo back to glory."

Even after her name was suddenly mentioned, the Ryuuna in question still didn't say a word. Her gaze simply wandered emptily.

"Kodoku can mean many things..." Somegorou said, "but I believe there was a ritual by that name involving poison."

Kodoku was the process of filling a jar with many insects and sealing it shut so they would cannibalize one another. The final surviving insect could be used as a catalyst for curses.

"Gather a hundred species of insects on the fifth of May and put them all, large snakes and tiny lice alike, into a jar so they may cannibalize one another and make their essence settle into one. If a snake lives, you'll have snake poison; a louse will provide louse poison. With it, you can kill."

The end result of all the insects cannibalizing one another was pure, distilled grudge.

"The *Kodoku* in *Kodoku no Kago* definitely refers to the kodoku ritual," Jinya said, "but at the same time, it also means kodoku fox poison."

"Kodoku fox poison... As in the Killing Stone?"

In the past, a high priest by the name of Genno was passing through the plains of Nasuno in the Shimotsuke province when he saw a bird flying over a stone suddenly fall to the ground dead. Mystified, he was walking toward it when a woman appeared and spoke to him.

"This stone is known as the Killing Stone. Stay away, for any being who comes near shall have their life taken from them."

She went on to explain its origins.

Long ago, in the reign of the then-emperor Toba, there was a court lady known as Tamamo-no-Mae. Her beauty and intelligence earned her the favor of the emperor, but she was revealed as a nine-tailed fox by the diviner Abe no

Yasunari and chased to the plains of Nasuno where she was finally caught and slain. As she died, her soul possessed a giant stone which became the Killing Stone.

There were many stories involving animals, but the tale of the nine-tailed fox was perhaps the most famous depiction of foxes. The Killing Stone, a manifestation of the nine-tailed fox's resentment, was also one of the better-known stories among those involving poisonous objects.

"Yeah, that's the one," Jinya answered.

"I see. So where's this girl fit in with all that?" Somegorou asked.

Jinya hesitated to answer. He cast his gaze down with an indecisive expression. After a long while, he eventually said, "Eizen intends to restore the Nagumo family to its former demon-hunting glory. I only got involved because I couldn't stand his methods." He fought to keep himself calm on the surface, but the deep disgust in him could be felt. "He realized that the fastest possible method for earning respect as spirit hunters was to slay spirits that harm people. The stronger those spirits were and the more damage they caused, the better."

"I guess that's logical enough. Doesn't sound too strange to me."

"This is where things take a turn." Jinya's eyes held unmistakable scorn. His voice dropped low as he abandoned any effort to hide his displeasure. "To carry out his goals with this method, Eizen needs certain conditions to be met. He needs demons too strong to be defeated by firearms but still weak enough for the Nagumo to beat, and there needs to be a good amount of them. They need to rampage without caring if they're seen, and they need to actively go out of their way to harm humans. All while showing up consistently for the foreseeable future."

"Well, that's not going to happen. That's asking for too much."

"Of course. Eizen thought the same thing, so he decided to prepare all the demons himself."

Jinya said those words so naturally that they didn't register right away with Somegorou. After a moment, he stiffened and said, "Wait. No... What?"

"Do you know what the kodoku ritual involves?" Jinya asked.

"Isn't it that curse thing where ya cram bugs together and make 'em eat each other? And, hey, don't try to change the subject on me."

"I'm not. If anything, I'm getting to the point."

His master might've rebuked Jinya more strongly, but Somegorou couldn't. He felt intimidated by the demonic glint in Jinya's eyes.

"Your understanding of the kodoku ritual is correct, but there's another side to it. The art of the kodoku ritual is passed down through practicing families, and many of the practitioners are women. Because households that practice the art often have trouble wedding off their brides, they also practiced the art of 'marital medicine.' That is to say, the kodoku ritual has direct ties to aphrodisiacs."

Eizen needed a large number of demons, and a young girl called the *Kodoku* no *Kago* was kept locked up in his cage. Somegorou couldn't help but scoff. "I'm not sure I like where this is going..."

He looked over at Ryuuna. Her skin was abnormally pale, likely because she had been kept away from sunlight for so long. Her hair came down to her calves, but it looked cared for. She was only fourteen or so, but her legs and arms were slender, and her body was well curved. Her face still had some youth, but most would consider her *mature*. The pieces fell into place all too well.

"Kodoku no Kago can mean many things," Jinya began. "The Blessing of Kodoku is one, with 'kodoku' referring to aphrodisiacs here. In other words, she is 'blessed' to tempt and be violated by men."

Jinya's words confirmed Somegorou's fears.

"Her womb has already been altered. If she's violated by a man or spirit, she'll

give birth to a demon with hatred for the world. I suspect Eizen probably intended to alter her mind as well so she would proactively make demons herself."

"Just...stop. I feel sick." Somegorou clicked his tongue in disgust.

Ryuuna didn't react much to anything they said. She might not have even understood.

"Ryuuna was raised to be a convenient tool for birthing demons," Jinya continued. "Hence, Kodoku no Kago—the Fox-Poison Cradle. Like the bewitching nine-tailed fox, she is meant to tempt men and spread 'poison,' acting as a cradle that raises demons."

Jinya gravely brought the topic to a close.

"Nagumo Eizen is trying to recreate the infamous Tamamo-no-Mae herself."

7

THE KODOKU NO KAGO, or the Fox-Poison Cradle, was meant as a man-made spirit created to be violated and birth demons. Eizen called Ryuuna a cradle instead of a mother for the simple reason that he saw her as nothing more than an object.

"Sickening..." Somegorou said.

"It is," Jinya replied. "But if there's any silver lining, it's that things haven't gotten that far yet. The plan would've been completed yesterday if we hadn't intervened."

Kimiko and the other guests had been gathered for the purpose of completing the *Kodoku no Kago*. What exactly that process involved was unclear, but one could guess it was something unpleasant.

"I doubt Eizen planned to have the guests kill one another like in the kodoku ritual. The people gathered there were probably meant to be fodder for Ryuuna

to consume, so she could store their life like Eizen does. He planned to force her to eat human flesh, then complete her with his Yatonomori Kaneomi blade, turning her into something halfway between a human and a spirit. A monster that births demons...a demon god of sorts."

Everyone's gazes turned to Ryuuna. Oblivious to what was going on, she cocked her head to the side.

If a demon god was defined as something that brought ruin to the world of man, then such a word aptly described her. But unlike Magatsume, Ryuuna would be a demon god created to be defeated from the onset. She would be violated by men, give birth to demons, earn the hatred of humans, and then be slain by the Nagumo of the Demonic Sword. That was why her name was Ryuuna. She was meant as a vessel to carry life, hatred, and demons. A human cesspit.

Even after all this discussion, Ryuuna didn't say a word, actually looking rather bored. Nothing seemed to be preventing her from communicating; she was simply not inclined to talk. An indifferent look was stuck on her face.

"So that's what this girl's been through, huh?" Somegorou said. "And you stepped in to stop all that?"

"Partially. I had three reasons in all. I also wanted to secure Kimiko because her father entrusted her safety to me, and besides that, I wanted to take Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade for myself."

Somegorou smiled happily. "Ah, so you did it out of a very *human* obligation, eh? Thank goodness. You're not an enemy of mankind after all."

Some things still felt off; Jinya had probably intentionally concealed some facts in his explanation. Somegorou wasn't green enough to trust the man unconditionally, but at least it seemed clear that the two of them wouldn't be enemies.

"Now, whaddya mean earlier 'bout Eizen usin' his Yatonomori Kaneomi blade? I'm guessin' it has a power of its own?"

Jinya hesitated briefly before answering. "His Kaneomi blade has *Demon Wail*, a demon-sealing ability of the highest order that can seal demons with only a single scratch."

Items that could seal demons were surprisingly common. They appeared in various stories, be they jars or mirrors, boxes or swords. But there had been something sinister about the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade Jinya saw last night.

"Huh. I thought its power had somethin' to do with controllin' black miasma."

"It does, in a sense. That's the ability of one of the demons it has sealed. I don't know the full picture, but it seems Eizen can use a fraction of any sealed demon's power."

Though they had fallen from glory, the Nagumo were still masters of demonic blades and knew the best ways to draw out their power. Jinya seemed uncharacteristically wary of the sword.

"The Kodoku no Kago is to be completed by having a powerful demon sealed in Eizen's blade take over Ryuuna's body. If things get that far, she'll become the Fox-Poison Cradle in earnest and bring ruin to the country like Tamamo-no-Mae did."

"Ya think he has somethin' that crazy sealed in that blade of his?"

"I do. That's why I need to take that blade back from him... I failed yesterday, though." Jinya's voice carried a sad, tired tone.

Somegorou was giving him a perplexed look when suddenly Himawari cut in.

"We wish to put a stop to Nagumo Eizen as well. That's why I'm working together with Uncle." Her youthful face held no warmth. There was no doubting her true nature.

"Oh? Is that right?" Somegorou said. Her sudden comment would probably draw attention away from Jinya, but that was fine by him. He felt he could afford to listen to what she had to say.

"I have no moralistic interest in putting a stop to Eizen, of course. My only

goal is to protect my mother."

"And by that you mean ...?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. You saw Eizen yourself last night, did you not? The ability to store the lifeforce of those he eats is something he gained in the process of making the *Kodoku no Kago*. It's a mere side product of his goal, and yet it's that powerful. Just think what the *Kodoku no Kago* might be able to do if it's finished. It could even pose a threat to my mother. What's more, the Nagumo being proper spirit hunters would make them a danger to us."

"Not sure I'd call them proper myself..."

"I agree that their means are wicked, but there is a certain logic to their actions. They've even targeted my mother already."

Somegorou didn't take everything he heard at face value. Himawari just had to be plotting something, and that something might prove even more of a problem than the Nagumo. In fact, ignoring the Nagumo's actions might actually be ideal if it meant Magatsume could be kept in check.

Somegorou glanced at Jinya, who shook his head as though seeing right through Somegorou. He seemed to understand the risks involved and still prioritized stopping the Nagumo.

"All right. There's still a lot I don't quite get, but I think I grasp the general idea here," Somegorou said.

In the end, their task was simple: They needed to kill Eizen and protect Ryuuna. Eizen would come for them for as long as they had the girl, but that might actually make things easier.

"Say, d'ya want me to get you a temporary place to live? The Akase geezer's got ties to Eizen, right?"

The more Somegorou heard, the less there seemed to be any merit in staying at the Akase estate. Jinya wasn't the type to let bystanders come into harm's way, so it made sense to think he'd rather hide somewhere else with Ryuuna.

"I think this place will be fine for the time being. Eizen can't get too reckless."

"Why's that?"

"The worst turn of events for him would be Ryuuna dying."

Jinya said it like it were nothing. This new Jinya seemed more composed than the demon-slaying swordmaster Somegorou remembered.

"Ryuuna is fourteen, the minimum age needed for him to finish the *Kodoku no Kago*." If she hadn't at least reached the age of menstruation, then there would be no point. Everything would be meaningless if she couldn't bear children. "In other words, he needed to wait fourteen years for his plans to succeed. He could create another vessel now that we've stolen Ryuuna away, but that would mean another fourteen years of waiting—that's why he can't be too rash. There's a chance I could get desperate and simply kill Ryuuna."

Suppose Eizen succeeded in putting Jinya on death's door. Having failed in both stealing the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade and protecting Ryuuna, Jinya might possibly commit one last desperate act in his final moments.

"I may die here, but at the very least, I won't let you finish the Kodoku no Kago."

Just before his life was completely snuffed out, Jinya might use the last of his willpower to kill Ryuuna. Then Eizen would have to start from scratch.

"He'll wait until he has a chance to guarantee my death and Ryuuna's safety in one go. Until then, I'm sure he won't make a move."

A disturbing thought crossed Somegorou's mind. If what Jinya said was all true, then basically all their problems could be solved with Ryuuna's death. He did not think Jinya was a wicked man, but Somegorou had no doubt Jinya would kill her if left with no other choice. Jinya was someone willing to hurt things dear to him if he must, as he had seen when he killed Azumagiku to help Nomari.

"...Mm?" Ryuuna cocked her head because Somegorou had been unwittingly

staring at her. His aching conscience had turned his expression grim.

"It's okay." Sensing his worries, Himawari gave him a smile far too mature for her appearance. "If we killed her, Eizen would lose his reason to pursue us. If he just creates a new *Kodoku no Kago* somewhere, this will all be for nothing."

"...That's true."

Eizen had two options: create a new vessel or take Ryuuna back from Jinya. The latter would be overwhelmingly easier, so he would almost certainly choose to do that. Killing Ryuuna would only force Eizen to go into hiding and make a new vessel. He would lose all reason to risk fighting Jinya and the others. Also, he would definitely hide himself carefully and take precautions against any potential attacks.

Jinya was already unlikely to kill Ryuuna, and now there was good reason for him not to. So long as things stayed the same, Somegorou didn't have to worry about anything extreme happening.

"At least for the time being, it's in the interest of both sides to keep things peaceful," Himawari said. "I believe it will stay like this for a while, at least until one side can make a decisive move."

Somegorou's body slackened with relief.

"There you have it," Jinya said. "Thanks for the help last night, but we should be good now. You don't need to stick around. I've still got a trump card or two up my sleeve." Though not complacent, he sounded confident things would turn out fine.

"Well, that's good to hear. I'm technically retired, so I'd rather take it easy. But I doubt ya can keep Ryuuna in yer room here forever, y'know?"

Despite her unusual circumstances, she was still a girl of age. Living with someone else in a cramped room like this would be tough on her. Jinya couldn't keep an eye on the girl around the clock either since he had his work to do. It would be no laughing matter if she were kidnapped while he was on duty.

"I'm covered there. I know someone who should be willing to lend a hand."

Jinya smiled slightly. "I recently met an old acquaintance from back when I lived in an area of Edo called Fukagawa. I'll ask them to look after Ryuuna when I can't."

"Ah, a demon?"

Jinya nodded. Somegorou already knew it, of course, but it was a strange feeling to be reminded that Jinya was much older than he looked.

"As for a room for her, I'll ask Michitomo to do something."

"That's Kimiko-chan's father, right? I'm guessing ya don't plan to leave the Akase house anytime soon?"

"Not for the time being. That's the promise I made."

Jinya's expression softened, but Somegorou didn't pry. He was just happy to know Jinya had found some warmth in his life after parting from Nomari.

"All right, one last question." Somegorou's relaxed expression turned serious once more. "You haven't forgotten about Magatsume, have you?"

Jinya's fierce glare was all the answer he needed. "As if I could forget."

"Got it. Sorry for askin' such a thing."

Those few words were enough to understand. Hatred still clouded Jinya's eyes, and his cooperation with Himawari didn't mean a single thing had changed there.

With the discussion at its end, the room fell silent.

"Welp, I think that's my cue." Somegorou sluggishly stood up from his chair. He was still in the dark about a lot of things, such as why Kimiko was given special treatment and some finer points about Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade, but he had heard enough to be satisfied. "Thanks for takin' the time to more or less fill me in. I'll be in Tokyo for the time being, so just give me a shout if ya need a hand."

"Thanks. Will do," Jinya replied.

Somegorou had a feeling he wouldn't come asking for help, though. The last time Jinya had sought a Somegorou's help was against Magatsume. It was hard to think he would do so again after how that went. Somegorou understood Jinya was holding back for his sake, but it hurt a bit to think he might not be able to help when the time came.

"Farewell then, Akitsu-san," Himawari said.

"Yeah. Farewell, daughter of Magatsume."

"I do have a name, you know. So rude. Honestly, the last Akitsu-san was much kinder."

Somegorou let out a roar of laughter at Himawari's childish response. Then he looked at Ryuuna and softly said, "If anything happens, feel free to rely on that young-looking geezer there. He knows how to look after people. He may have a sour look 'bout him, but he's surprisingly kind."

Who knows, Somegorou thought with a chuckle. Maybe he'll end up doting on this girl as badly as he doted on his daughter.

"...Mm. Jiiya, kind," Ryuuna said with a smile.

Somegorou froze. He hadn't expected a reply at all. Her voice, which he heard for the first time, was soft and clear like a bell.

"I guess Kimiko rubbed off on her a bit," Jinya murmured with a troubled look. Somegorou burst into laughter.

With the room quiet after Somegorou departed, Jinya let out a small sigh. Ryuuna sat without making a peep as usual. Just listening to them talk seemed to have made her tired; she began nodding off and eventually moved to collapse onto the bed. The way she shut her eyes and jammed her face into the pillow made her seem much younger than her age.

"Are you fine leaving things like that with Akitsu-san?" Himawari slowly turned to look from Ryuuna to Jinya. "It seemed like he would help if you asked, and I'm sure his help would be useful. He's skilled enough to be known as a legendary spirit hunter, after all."

"It's fine. I don't intend to get him involved. I only explained things because it'd be a hassle if he butted in on his own."

Somegorou—that was to say, Utsugi Heikichi—was already living a happy life on his own. Jinya couldn't interfere with that.

"Besides, I have you helping me."

"Hee hee. You flatter me." She smiled gleefully. Even though Jinya loathed her mother so much, he felt none of that same hatred well up inside him for Himawari.

The two of them kept many things secret from one another, and they both understood their goals were not quite the same. Even so, he had no intention of ending their cooperation. There was no denying they only worked together out of mutual self-interest, however. He smiled wryly.

"Don't forget about me, my 'husband.""

The sword on the desk spoke up. Jinya's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade had the ability *Spirit*, giving it a will and voice of its own.

"Of course. I'll admit I'm a bit hesitant to use you, though."

"Please don't be. Eizen-sama has changed... Although I might be partially to blame there."

Kaneomi's former master was Nagumo Kazusa. Having to turn against the Nagumo family she'd once served had been somewhat conflicting for her.

"But that only increases my responsibility. Please make use of me. Eizen-sama—no, Eizen—is not the man he once was. The world is better off without him, and I should be the one to send him off."

There was no hesitation in her voice. As her master, there was only one

answer Jinya could give. "Kaneomi, will you lend me your strength?"

"I am but your blade. If you will it, I shall aid you at any time."

Kaneomi had been with Jinya ever since he left Kyoto in the Meiji era. Having spent decades with her, he no longer found it strange that she teasingly addressed him as "husband" from time to time.

With her decision to oppose Eizen now made resolute, the mood in the room relaxed. Only Himawari, for some reason, looked perplexed.

"Actually, I have to share something about Eizen. I met and talked to one of his underlings last night, a demon wearing maidservant clothes."

Jinya recalled the cunning maidservant from last night. He was wary of their fighting prowess but not much else beyond that.

"Eizen's demon underlings seem to be working with him because they want a similar return to glory for themselves. I thought it strange that demons would work together with a human, but the two of us are working together, so perhaps I have no right to judge." Her tone turned uncertain as she continued. "But that particular demon I met, Yonabari, weighs on my mind. I fear they might prove to be an even greater threat than Eizen."

Around the same time, Toudou Yoshihiko was hard at work at his job as a ticket collector. Koyomiza was as busy as ever despite its small size. Motion pictures really were the reigning king of entertainment, and Yoshihiko couldn't help but feel motivated to be part of it all.

"Welcome ...! Oh?"

After passing a few dozen customers through, he saw a familiar face at the end of the line. They weren't an acquaintance, however; just someone he'd quite literally bumped into some days earlier.

"Heya. Looks like we meet again." The androgynous-looking person seemed to recognize him as well. They walked up with a smile after all the customers in

front passed through.

"Sorry about bumping into you and all last time," Yoshihiko apologized.

"Oh, it's fine. I didn't mind at all."

He breathed a sigh of relief, then began thinking about other things. They wore a student uniform but were watching a motion picture during school hours. Perhaps they were skipping? He didn't ask, of course. It was rude to pry into a customer's affairs.

"Here's my ticket."

"Oh. Right." He clipped the ticket's edge and allowed them through.

"Thanks. This'll actually be my first time watching a motion picture."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I haven't had much interest. Still don't, really. I'm just here to scope things out."

Watching a film at a motion picture theater and then grabbing coffee at a café was a must for young lovers. Yoshihiko figured they were checking the place out before a date.

They smiled and said, "Ah, not for a date or anything. Sorry to disappoint. I'm scoping the place out for criminal reasons. Bossman said not to make any waves, but where's the fun in that?"

"Huh?"

"Mm, what should I do? Maybe I should kidnap this cute boy in front of me?"

They gave Yoshihiko a flirtatious look. Not used to such teasing, he blushed and laughed awkwardly.

With an impish grin, they said, "See you later. Oh, I can't wait..."

Unable to keep up with their rapid shift in tone, Yoshihiko silently watched them go. Their steps were light; it seemed they were looking forward to their first-ever motion picture. Seeing them in such high spirits made Yoshihiko

happy as well. He didn't know the person's name or even their gender, but he found them to be quite the amusing type.

1

T WAS A NIGHT illuminated by moonlight's soft glow. In the study of the Hydrangea Mansion, an old man—Kimiko's grandfather, Akase Seiichirou—groaned.

"Why...?"

Seiichirou was awed by Nagumo Eizen, even though he didn't care for the heroics of spirit hunters. His interest resided solely in Eizen's ability—that was to say, his inexhaustible lifeforce.

Seiichirou had made more money than he knew what to do with and had already left the household in the hands of his son-in-law, Michitomo. All that he had left to do was enjoy a life of luxury, but his remaining time was far too short. Like many old men, he was afraid of death and wished he could live even longer. For better or worse, he knew someone who could grant him that wish. He'd known Eizen for a good long while and learned about his ability to store life quite some time ago.

"Do you covet this power for yourself?" Eizen had said as he revived before Seiichirou's eyes. Many powerful figures throughout history had sought eternal life, and needless to say, Seiichirou leaped at the opportunity. "Then prepare me a sacrifice. Mm, yes. If a girl is born to the Akase, then raise her well and offer her to me. I shall share my power with you then."

That had been twenty-one years ago. Shino and Michitomo had married each other the previous year and still had no children. Kimiko was born five years after Eizen made his request.

Shino had been eleven when she was betrothed. Her marriage to Michitomo was purely for the sake of stabilizing the Akase family and nothing else.

Seiichirou had picked out a decently wealthy and capable nouveau riche man to

be his son-in-law. As luck would have it, the couple liked one another well enough to produce a child before he needed to pester them about it—and a girl at that.

Things were lining up perfectly for Seiichirou. He began to believe it was the very will of the heavens that he be granted eternal life.

He left naming his granddaughter to Eizen, who chose to call her Kimiko. The meaning behind the name was clear: a rare sacrifice. She was a girl born to be offered away.

As Eizen had requested, Seiichirou raised Kimiko well. He kept her out of school to reduce any potential risk, raising her within the family home. He turned a blind eye to her slipping out of the house every now and then, so long as she had someone keeping watch over her. He treated her dearly, not as a person but as an object to eventually be given away. She was not meant to return from the Nagumo's evening party.

"Why ...?"

And yet return she did. Meanwhile, Eizen had been out of contact for six whole days. Seiichirou grimaced nervously.

"Pardon me."

The door flew open as Kimiko's father, Michitomo, entered the study.

Seiichirou wasn't the type to care much about status and had given Michitomo headship over the family as soon as he married in. The only thing Seiichirou cared about was knowing that he was the one who had brought the Akase to their current glory. It filled him with pride to know that he had brought the Akase to the top while all the nobles withered away. That was why he had no issue with being out of the limelight; it'd be a problem if he hurt the Akase's reputation with rumors of an undying family head. He could just manipulate the current family head from the shadows, like Eizen did.

But Michitomo was bright and capable, and he proved difficult to manipulate.

If Seiichirou had only received Eizen's offer sooner, then he would have chosen a less impressive man instead.

"Haven't I told you to stay out of here?" Seiichirou's voice was icy.

Undaunted, Michitomo smiled and replied, "Oh, you have. But I couldn't help wanting to check in on you."

"I'm fine. Now get out."

"Don't be like that, Father. I'm worried, really. You've been so irate lately. Ever since, oh, I don't know... Maybe since Kimiko came back from that party." The forced kindness in Michitomo's voice made Seiichirou narrow his eyes. "It's almost as if her coming back was a problem for you."

Michitomo smiled scornfully. His words were clearly a provocation—he had come to pick a fight.

"You..." Seiichirou growled.

"That's quite the face you're making. Is something the matter?"

Intuitively, Seiichirou understood that this man was somehow the cause of his trouble. He had given him status and his own daughter Shino, and yet he still dared to stand in his way. Seiichirou didn't even try to hide his anger toward the insolent man. "Leave! At once!"

"Leave the study? Or leave the Akase household? Both are fine by me."

Having finished his business, Michitomo turned to go.

"But I do think you will be the first to leave."

His parting words carried unmistakable hostility.

Compared to the combat between the cannibal and the demon who devoured his own kind, what happened here was insignificant. Nonetheless, a battle had still been fought.

[&]quot;Hey, thanks for waiting."

Michitomo returned to his room, where Jinya was waiting for him.

Michitomo's room contained Western-style furniture and was currently dimly lit by shaky lamplight. The room had electrical lighting as well, but it was turned off. Michitomo had insisted this would set a better mood for a clandestine discussion.

Jinya was close enough to Shino for there to be rumors about the two of them, but Michitomo had never once scolded him for that. In fact, Jinya had actually known Michitomo longer than he'd known Shino. He had Michitomo's trust.

"I take it things went well?"

"Not at all. I failed to kill Eizen."

"'Kill,' huh? Scary stuff."

The two of them lived in different worlds. Michitomo's world was one without such violence, but he seemed amused regardless.

"I'm not without misgivings over Kimiko being used as a decoy, but I guess she's safe, so that's that. Now, who's this girl here?"

"This would be Ryuuna."

A week had passed since the evening party. Jinya had kept Ryuuna lying low in his room, but he figured he should at least introduce her to Michitomo, so he brought her along. Michitomo looked a bit bewildered by her. She did not seem at all like she would become the *Kodoku no Kago*, the poisonous temptress that birthed demons.

"I'm Akase Michitomo, the master of this house...though my standing isn't actually that great."

"...Mm." As always, Ryuuna didn't speak. She nodded her head slightly and grunted, which seemed to be the most she would do.

Michitomo hid his discomfort and quickly turned to talk to Jinya. "Well, that's half our objectives complete. How about the other one?"

Jinya shook his head. Putting a stop to Eizen's plan was their main goal, but recovering Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade was another objective. Jinya had to admit that part was for more selfish reasons, though.

"There's always next time. So, what do you think the nasty, crafty geezer will do with our own senile geezer here?"

Michitomo quickly changed the subject, even trying to lighten the mood. He didn't hesitate to mock the old men, not after what they tried to do to his daughter.

"Seiichirou lost his usefulness the moment he was done raising Kimiko. He's nothing but small fry tempted by the promise of eternal life. He'll be killed or made a meal of by Eizen at best."

"I figured, but not knowing when that'll happen is a problem. There are a lot of servants, not to mention business partners, who still put him before me. Him suddenly vanishing would cause some trouble for the family."

Michitomo already assumed that Seiichirou would be silenced by Eizen, but if that ended up happening, the power balance in the household, as well as their relationship with business partners, might change. They had problems beyond just fighting Eizen.

"I've got Kimiko's future to think about. Have to expect the worst," Michitomo said.

"Why not take her and Shino and hide somewhere, then?"

"That would be nice, but I doubt it'd go over so well."

Even though it was his suggestion, Jinya didn't think it'd work out either. Eizen wanted Kimiko for something, and he'd very likely seek her out if they fled. As odd as it was, having their enemy know their exact location was the safest option.

"Why don't I go kill Seiichirou now, then?" Jinya offered.

"No, no, no. That'd just make trouble for me."

The sudden murder of the previous head would draw suspicion to the current one, especially if it ever got out that Jinya was involved. It certainly didn't help that Michitomo was a noble, not a commoner. The newspapers would have a field day.

"I'd get arrested on public opinion alone. I may be a noble, but most people think I'm an upstart. I'll be declared guilty without any real investigation whatsoever, and then Shino and Kimiko will be left on their own. Things aren't like they were back in Edo times. You can't just kill someone and leave it at that."

Even if Jinya left no evidence behind, suspicion alone would make the Akase lose face, and it would only be downhill from there.

Jinya sighed. Appearances were important for a family like the Akase. It was honestly a bit annoying having to worry about this kind of stuff while fighting life-or-death battles at the same time.

"What a complicated place the world has become."

"Hey, it's better than a world where people can kill without fear of punishment."

"Now hold on. Things never used to be that lax."

Michitomo chuckled, then turned serious and looked at Jinya. His jocular manner was gone; all that remained was a man who cared for those dear to him as a father and husband. "Please protect Kimiko. I'll do my best to keep the old man distracted."

"Don't worry. I'll uphold my promise."

The two bumped fists. Jinya still remembered their old promise. He met Michitomo's gaze, full of determination, as the room's lamplight flickered gently.

short film released in year three of the Taisho era (1914 AD)—was among the most popular. The film featured a song of the same name that went on to become a hit through much of the early Taisho period. The song's lyrics were written by Honda Fuugetsu, and the composition was handled by Nitta Shinpei. It was sung by veteran singer Kinjyou Saori and went on sale in year four of the Taisho era, selling over sixteen thousand records, an incredible amount.

Eight years had passed since then, but there were still many who remained fond of the film. The manager of Koyomiza was one such person. He screened *Song of Summer Clouds* whenever the fancy struck him.

Though the film had been a big hit, it was already eight years old by this point. Many of the techniques it used felt outdated, and its plot—a bittersweet romance between a boy and a girl—was far from original. But even so, the film remained a beloved favorite to many people for its orthodox plot, wonderful background music, and, of course, its main song of the same name.

"Kimiko-san, the film's already over."

The day after Michitomo's secret discussion with Jinya, Kimiko paid a visit to Koyomiza. Jinya accompanied her there like always, but she had him wait outside. She typically did this so she could focus on the film, but today it was because she felt too awkward to be with him now.

She had finally been able to watch *Song of Summer Clouds* like she had been wanting to, but she could hardly focus on any of it. She lingered afterward, not basking in the afterglow of the film but simply spacing out. She wore a white blouse and a long skirt, trying Western-style attire for a change of mood. It did not work.

"Is something the matter? It's your first visit in a while, but you don't seem all too thrilled," Yoshihiko spoke up once more when she didn't reply.

"Yoshihiko-san..." Finally, she noticed and turned to face him.

The other customers had already cleared out, and she hadn't even noticed.

"What's bothering you?"

"Oh... Where should I even begin?" She hemmed and hawed, not sure how to answer. She didn't even really understand herself what had happened to her. "Some rather strange developments have befallen me, almost like a film..."

"Huh? You mean like something romantic?"

Oh, if only... she thought. She cast her gaze down and said, "No, not in the least. What happened is more like what one sees in those adventure films for boys... Or maybe nothing important has really happened at all?"

"Um...?" He made a confused face. Kimiko herself was just as lost, to tell the truth. "What do you mean?"

"I really don't know myself. Jiiya won't tell me a single thing."

A whole week had passed since the evening party, and not much of anything had changed. Perhaps her grandfather looked a little more stern than usual, but that was really it. Kimiko spent most of her time confined to her home like before, and things were calm even though something had clearly happened. Perhaps it was ungrateful of her, but the peace they had now only felt suffocating to her.

"I'm certain he knows what's going on better than anyone, though..." she said.

"Is that so? Have you tried asking him directly what happened?" Yoshihiko's advice was sound. It was better to ask than waste time agonizing over something. That much was common sense for anyone, but such a thing was difficult for Kimiko.

"...No, I haven't." She tried to smile back but didn't quite succeed. "I'm sure it'd be pointless, though. I just know he wouldn't tell me anything even if I did ask."

"Why's that?"

"Because he's always hiding things from me, saying it's for my own sake."

Jinya had decided she was better off not knowing. She knew there was probably a reason for that, but it still bothered her. He had told Akitsu Somegorou and the girl named Ryuuna what happened without a second thought, but he wouldn't tell her—whom he'd known much longer—a single thing, and that made her feel small.

"Then just ask him to tell you the bits that are okay for you to hear," Yoshihiko said nonchalantly.

Though there was nothing particularly odd about what he said, Kimiko found herself stunned. Almost reflexively, she asked, "Why?"

"Why? What do you mean why? He'd at least tell you something, wouldn't he? Based on what I've heard from your own mouth, he seems to care about you a lot."

Of course, Yoshihiko could only say that because he didn't have a clue what was going on. If he'd known anything about the commotion that happened at the evening party, he would absolutely have answered differently. But his blithe response was exactly what she needed now.

"You...really think so?"

"Yeah? I mean, it's not like he's hiding things from you because he hates you or anything, right?"

"No... No, he'd never."

Jinya was always stony faced, but he could show her a very kind expression from time to time. She might have been something like a troublesome granddaughter to him, but she had never once felt as though he disliked her.

"Right. So even if he doesn't tell you anything, it won't be because he hates you," Yoshihiko said.

With all the unnecessary details cast aside, it became painfully clear that there had never even been anything for her to worry about. She felt as though she had been pulled out of the bog she was in.

"Thank you, Yoshihiko-san. I should get going now."

Her body was energized again, as though her earlier gloom had never been there to begin with.

"Sure. Come again any time."

"I will. Maybe I'll even invite you to my home next time too."

"Ha ha. I'm pretty sure that wouldn't go over well."

He was right; a family as strict as hers wouldn't allow it. There was nothing he would even get out of visiting her home, anyway. She was surprised to find herself disappointed, but she quickly forgot about it and left the theater. Waiting outside was Jinya, who always accompanied her when she left the house. Now that she thought about it, that was probably so he could protect her. Even when he did leave her side, it was usually only after he knew exactly where she would be.

"Jiiya, there's something I'd like to talk about once we return."

"Very well, Lady Kimiko."

His calmness made him impossible to read, but perhaps it was better for her to express her own feelings before trying to read someone else's.

When they returned, he brought her to his room. She was a bit nervous, given she didn't often visit the servant quarters. She didn't see Ryuuna around, so she asked where the girl was. Jinya said he left her with an acquaintance. Honestly, not having the girl around made things easier.

"I want you to tell me what happened that night. What is going on with the Nagumo?" She chose a random chair and sat face-to-face with Jinya. Now that she thought about it, they hadn't had many opportunities to talk directly like this before. "I believe I have a right to hear. You can leave out the things you don't want me knowing; I trust you to decide what is best for me."

She was willing to back down if Jinya said no to her here. She did feel jealousy toward Somegorou and Ryuuna, but if Jinya didn't want to tell her, then that

was that. With a stiff expression, she promised herself she would keep her composure no matter how he replied. His instant answer made her tension release all at once.

"All right."

"Huh? Really?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course. I really should have told you sooner myself. There's no denying that you're involved in this, and it'd be more convenient for me if you knew at least a little about the situation."

It appeared he'd never had any intention of hiding anything from her at all. The only reason why he hadn't called her over as well when he explained things to Somegorou was out of concern for her and Ryuuna.

"There's some information about Ryuuna I couldn't talk about with you around. Since I couldn't fully explain Eizen's schemes without covering it, I held back my explanation to you until later. I apologize."

"I-It's fine! If anything, it's my fault for not asking what was going on sooner." Kimiko felt embarrassed to realize she had agonized so much over a simple misunderstanding. She tried to keep her expression as composed as possible, but her agitation showed. To force things along, she said, "S-so you'll tell me what's going on?"

Jinya fixed his posture in his seat, leading her to focus as well.

"I will. But first, there's something you need to know."

"Yes?"

He took a deep breath and soberly said, "I turned a hundred this year."

Such a thing could only be interpreted as a joke. Needless to say, Kimiko was taken aback.

demon. He could not lie, and he lived selfishly. He loved to drink, used violence to solve his problems, and respected the strong. He was your stereotypical demon in just about every way. He had a taste for martial arts and was blessed with a strong body as well; if he had been born in the Heian era, he might've become infamous enough to become one of those legendary demons depicted in picture scrolls. Sadly, he was born around the middle of Meiji, when police officers already carried firearms and modernization had long diminished people's fear of spirits.

Minamoto no Raikou, Tada Mitsuyori, Watanabe no Tsuna—many great warriors who slew demons have had their story told throughout history. The demons of antiquity were simply that powerful. But very few humans have made their name known by slaying demons since the onset of the Meiji era. As firearms became common, swords were forgotten and demons were no longer a real threat. The end of the era of the sword was an end for demons as well.

Born in such times, Izuchi couldn't see any purpose to his existence. He may have been stronger than any human, but he was no match for guns. He was less than a hundred years old as well, so he had no demon ability that defied human understanding. He was inconsequential to the world, and his demonic nature meant he couldn't stand that.

So he decided he would crush the world as it was.

His desire was simple, really. He wasn't seeking to bring an end to civilization or anything dramatic. Modernization brought new amusements and many improvements to the standard of living, and he liked those things. The country's prosperity was a good thing. He simply wanted demons to still remain the menace they were.

He didn't care if demons lost their lives to spirit hunters. Those humans risked their lives to fight demons, so it was only fair. But the thought of losing to an ordinary human simply because they had a gun made him sick. He felt like he

was being mocked by those who should have been beneath him. How could he live proudly as a demon if just about anyone could do him in?

He searched for a way for demons to retain their identity, found Nagumo Eizen, and decided to take his chances with him. The old man's *Kodoku no Kago*—a calamity that could bring ruin to the world of man—was close to Izuchi's ideal of what a demon should be.

So he swallowed his pride and teamed up with the spirit hunter, even using the very firearms that he hated. He looked the other way when a young child was kidnapped and molded to be a poisonous temptress, and he bowed his head to an old man who sickened him—all in the hopes that mankind would come to fear demons like they had in antiquity.

"But things have sure taken a damn weird turn..."

After abandoning the main Nagumo house, Izuchi and the rest moved to Eizen's private residence on the outskirts of Tokyo. The new place was smaller than the main house, but it was still a fairly large Japanese-style home. Izuchi sat out on the veranda, drinking liquor and grumbling about the current situation.

"Why the long face, Izuchi?"

"Hmph. I was just thinkin' that things have turned into a real mess."

Yonabari, the demon whose gender still remained a mystery, appeared out of nowhere. They sat down next to Izuchi without even asking if he minded, then poured themselves a drink out of his bottle and drank alongside him, all of their own accord. Izuchi was getting tired of drinking alone anyway, so he let it slide. Yonabari's audacity did exasperate him, though.

"Is it really that complicated? Eizen-san and the Demon Eater are butting heads, we're working with Eizen-san, and a daughter of Magatsume is working with the Demon Eater. That's it, right? Not complicated at all."

"That's not what I mean. I'm talkin' more 'bout how everyone involved won't

say what they really mean. They're actin' all damn sly."

Though Izuchi was young, his sensibilities were close to those of an old-fashioned demon. That was why he surprisingly accepted the way Eizen was.

Eizen was a lowlife, but he was true to himself. He cannibalized and killed others for the sake of his goal. He was willing to sacrifice anything to return the Nagumo to their former glory. Though unscrupulous, he was dedicated.

Izuchi had a high opinion of the Demon-Eating Demon as well. He was a demon from the old world who used technique and power to get his way. Izuchi felt something akin to admiration for the man.

However, there was something Izuchi didn't accept about them both. Eizen claimed his intent was to revitalize the Nagumo, and the Demon Eater claimed his intent was to crush the Nagumo. Neither of them was lying, but Izuchi felt the real truth lay elsewhere.

"...Not that I'm much better than them."

Izuchi knit his brow. His use of Eizen to bring about change made him no different from them. Izuchi was sly as well.

What a terrible thing it was to be weak. He wouldn't have to rely on the help of others if he were strong enough to change the world himself, nor would he need to rely on a Gatling gun to fight.

He looked at his hands and clicked his tongue. His hands were big, and yet they were so damn useless.

"Mm, I don't really get it, but Eizen and the Demon Eater both have their own goals, so it makes sense they'd use their heads and try to keep them secret. I don't think it's sly of them at all. Maybe you're just dumb?"

Yonabari cackled, but something about their laughter felt empty. They and Izuchi were often together, but the two hadn't known each other long as they'd only met after coming to serve Eizen. They were not friends by any definition; they were allies with the same goal of completing the *Kodoku no Kago*, but

there was much about Yonabari that remained a mystery to Izuchi.

"Bein' dumb is fine by me. Why should a demon be smart? If there's somethin' a demon doesn't like, they smash it, and if they're not strong enough to do that, they die. That's the way a demon should be."

"Ah ha ha. You're reaaal simple, huh?"

"...You want a piece of me?"

Izuchi gave them a sharp glare, but Yonabari downed their cup indifferently. Despite their slender and androgynous appearance, Yonabari was as fearless as they came. They let out a satisfied sigh after emptying their cup, then glanced at the man approaching them from the side.

"Oh, Ikyuu," Izuchi greeted.

The approaching man was another associate of theirs. Eizen had a total of four demons working for him: Izuchi, Yonabari, Ikyuu, and one other. Ikyuu was a superior demon with many, many more years under his belt than Izuchi had.

"Aw, Izuchi. Ya shoulda told me you had liquor."

Ikyuu sloppily wore Japanese attire when he took human form. He was shorter than Yonabari, and fairly slender but muscular. His clothes alone made him seem like some wannabe academic, but his gaze was abnormally sharp. That, combined with his build and his constant irritated expression, gave him a dangerous air.

"Here."

"Mm-hmm, thanks. Doesn't look like the old fart's going to make a move for a while. The boredom's *killin'* me."

Instead of a cup, Izuchi handed Ikyuu a whole decanter bottle that he downed in one go. He sounded pretty fed up; his irritation was evident from his tone.

Eizen likely didn't have any choice but to play things safe, though. The Demon-Eating Demon had gotten him good. Eizen had to stock up on more life and wait until he had a plan to guarantee a kill on the demon. He'd ordered

Izuchi and the rest to not make any big moves for the time being.

"I'm sure Eizen-san's got something planned. Not that a simpleton like you would understand what it is," Yonabari said.

"Oh, shut it. Cowards too chicken to kill humans should just keep their traps shut."

"I'm sorry, what was that? I couldn't hear you from all the way down there, short stack."

Yonabari's provocations made Ikyuu glare back with openly murderous intent.

Izuchi sighed. He'd seen this development far too many times to be surprised. Yonabari and Ikyuu got along like oil and water, and they would bicker whenever they met. They were fine to deal with separately, but putting them together was a recipe for disaster.

"Calm down, both of you." Izuchi stood up and got between them.

They both clicked their tongues and retorted in unison, "It's their fault, not mine, Izuchi!"

As their reluctant mediator, Izuchi couldn't help but be annoyed at how synced up they were in this one regard.

"Look, I know you both don't like one another, but calm down. You're here because you're trying to get something done, right? Then give the infighting a rest."

He knew there was no way he could get them to make up, so Izuchi tried persuading them to back down instead.

Ikyuu thrust his decanter bottle into Izuchi's hands and sharply turned away.

"Shoot. I can't stomach Yonabari, but I'll back off 'cause I respect ya, Izuchi."

While Ikyuu didn't get along with Yonabari one bit, he didn't feel the same way about Izuchi. The two both served Eizen for the same reasons. They were not friends, and there wasn't much camaraderie between them, but Ikyuu liked

Izuchi enough to relent.

"Sorry, man."

"Nah, I was just gonna head out anyway. I wanna see what the Demon Eater's mug looks like."

"Hm? Wait, what's that supposed to mean?"

Without so much as a glance at Yonabari, Ikyuu began to walk off. The space around him seemed to warp for an instant, and then he was gone.

Ikyuu was a superior demon who had lived over a hundred years. In other words, that was his demon ability.

"What the hell was that? Instant movement? No, the space around him was what warped, so maybe it's something else. Dang, must be nice..."

Izuchi was still a lesser demon who hadn't yet awakened his ability. He felt a bit envious of Ikyuu and his power.

Yonabari scoffed and started grumbling like a child. "I can't stand that guy."

"Yonabari, you..." Izuchi sighed in exasperation. "You're not without fault, y'know?"

"Yeah, yeah," they said dismissively before starting to walk off as well. "I'm gonna head out too."

"Huh? Where to?"

"Just the theater. I found a fun-looking kid there."

"Wait, Eizen-sama said not to do anything for now."

"Laaater." Yonabari waved him goodbye, laughing as they left.

Ikyuu could be rough and violent, but Yonabari might just be more unpleasant to deal with. Izuchi couldn't even begin to imagine what they might pull.

"Ugh. My stomach..." he grumbled, feeling his belly twist into a knot. He had lost any urge to drink.

"I turned a hundred this year," Jinya began. He continued with further details, all equally hard for Kimiko to swallow. He told her of Eizen's plans and Ryuuna's identity and what kind of people they all were, and he touched lightly on his past, something he had never done with her until now.

"It was your father, Michitomo-sama, who took me in. I'm an old demon, born back when Tokyo was still known as Edo."

"A demon..."

"I can show you my demon form if you're having a hard time believing all this."

Kimiko shook her head gently. "No, that's all right. I believe you. You may hide things from me sometimes, but you've never once tried to lie to me."

She didn't fear him or feel any disgust after learning he was a demon. She was a bit surprised, but it made sense in a way. He had always been a bit different from the other servants. He'd supposedly taken care of Kimiko's mother, but he looked far too young for that. None of the other servants ever commented on his age, so his situation must've been an open secret with them.

"Um, Jiiya?"

"Yes?"

"This isn't going to be anything like the story 'The Crane Returns a Favor,' is it?"

It was a common theme in folktales for spirits to disappear after having their identities revealed, but Kimiko's fears were unwarranted.

With a smile, Jinya said, "Don't worry. I have no plans of going anywhere anytime soon. Not when your father has ordered me to protect you."

She felt relieved but also a bit peeved to hear her father mentioned as the reason he was staying. Jinya always placed her parents before her, saying he was doing something because Shino was his employer or Michitomo requested

"I wish you'd say you're staying for my sake, not my father's." She puffed her cheeks out in vexation and received a light apology, which was enough to fix her mood. She continued, "But if my father ordered you to protect me, then I take it he knows as well?"

"Yes. Your father is mostly aware of what is going on," Jinya answered. However, his next words made her shiver slightly. "To be frank, I do not fully know what Nagumo Eizen's plans are, but there is no doubt he is targeting you. The main purpose of his evening party was to summon you over."

Kimiko had never once received affection from her grandfather, so there was nothing Seiichirou could do that would disappoint her at this point. But learning Eizen had deceived her all this time was a shock. He'd always asked if she was in good health when they met, but now she understood that was only because he wanted her well for his own schemes. All the kindness he had ever shown her was fake. Part of her didn't want to believe Eizen could be so malicious, but after seeing Ryuuna locked up underground in that cage, what choice did she have?

"Lady Kimiko?"

"I'm sorry. I...I don't know what to say. This is all so much."

"It's only natural for you to feel overwhelmed. I'm sorry I'm unloading this on you all at once."

"Not at all. I understand you're only doing what's best for me. I do, but..."

If Eizen was planning something malicious, then Kimiko had to prepare herself for the worst. She understood that mentally, but emotionally there was something holding her back.

"I'll be all right. I'm just a bit surprised."

Trying to defend Eizen here would only serve to insult Jinya, so she forced a smile instead.

He looked at her for a few moments, then said, "I understand. Shall we go on an outing, then?"

The suggestion was such a non sequitur that she couldn't help but blurt out, "What?"

And so, the two of them left her home on Jinya's initiative for once. They headed for the trendy district of Ginza, hiring a rickshaw en route. Along the way they picked up Ryuuna, who watched the town pass by with emotionless eyes. After reaching Ginza, they found a stylish café and enjoyed some coffee. It was a nice afternoon, more pleasant than they should have been able to afford given the circumstances.

"Um, Jiiya? I'm thankful, but should we really be out and about like this?"
Kimiko was finding it hard to enjoy herself after she'd only just been told of the danger she might be in. She was so skittish that even the slightest noise coming from behind her was making her jolt.

"Why not? You sneak out of the house all the time," he pointed out.

"That's true, but, um..." She glanced at Ryuuna.

Ryuuna's black hair was tied back, but it still reached her calves, which made her stand out greatly. She grimaced at the bitter taste of her coffee. "...

Mmgh..."

Ryuuna was in an even more precarious position than Kimiko. Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity for Eizen to attack?

"Ryuuna needs recreation from time to time as well," Jinya said. Not seeming particularly conscious of anything, he slowly raised his cup to his lips. Despite being the one who would actually have to fight if it came down to it, he was the most relaxed of them all. "Let's put some milk in if it's too bitter."

"...Mm..."

Ryuuna was too clumsy because she wasn't used to using her hands, so Jinya

dutifully did everything for her. It was heartwarming to see him pouring milk for the girl, but unease still won out for Kimiko. Jinya seemed to sense this and looked her way.

"You can only keep yourself on edge for so long. We may not know what Eizen is planning, but now's the time to give yourself some much-needed peace."

Kimiko had no words. He was comforting her without dismissing her worries. She began to consider his way of thinking, starting to believe there might really be no point in brooding so much.

"A tense mind can't think properly," he said. "Relaxing with some coffee is the best thing we can do right now."

She realized then that his relaxed manner was probably just an act to help calm her down, but she felt happy he would go to such lengths. She was a bit annoyed that he thought he could handle her like a child, though.

"You're so unfair, Jiiya."

"Unfair? How so?"

"You see right through me like I'm an open book. Is that because you've lived a hundred years?"

"Not at all. If just living a hundred years were enough to understand other people's hearts, then the world would be a far kinder place than it is. I've known you since you were born, and our short time together, not my many years, is what lets me understand you."

To a demon, the sixteen years Kimiko had been alive were but a blink of the eye. But spending that time together was what allowed him to understand her mood so well, even if he couldn't read people's hearts.

Unable to understand what he was getting at, she cocked her head. "Um, and that means...?"

"I may not be able to see through others, but I still want to cheer up those

close to me when they're down."

"Oh, okay, I get that... But it's a bit embarrassing to hear." She smiled bashfully. She had always known Jinya to be strict but doting, and ever so kind like this. "Thank you, Jiiya." She kept her gratitude as concise as possible. He himself had once taught her that dressing up thanks in fancy words only diluted the intent.

He smiled softly as her feelings fully reached him. "You're very welcome. I only hope you were able to relax a little."

"I was...but I'm still somewhat uneasy, to tell the truth." Still unsure what to think, she couldn't bring herself to mention Eizen's name.

"I don't think Eizen will make his move anytime soon."

"What makes you say that?"

"He lost decisively to me in our last battle. He won't try to fight me again until he has some kind of strong move to make."

"I don't think I completely understand, but can I really assume it's safe for the time being?"

"You can. What's more, Eizen has shown no intention of wanting to harm you in the first place—or at least he hasn't so far."

Knowing his personality, Jinya probably had some countermeasures in place anyway in case an attack came.

"Is that so... Well, if you're giving me the go-ahead like this, then I'd better enjoy myself." Kimiko finally released her tension and dropped her shoulders. She wasn't used to being so on edge; even her breathing sounded more relaxed now. With a happy sigh and a smile, she said, "Spending an afternoon drinking coffee at a café... How wonderful, Jiiya. It's like something straight out of a film."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, although I'm sure you'd prefer to drink with a younger gentleman than myself."

"Oh, if only."

Jinya had looked after Kimiko since birth. She was fond of him, but certainly not in any romantic sense. The two of them were practically grandchild and grandparent.

With her earlier gloom forgotten, Kimiko enjoyed her short breather.

Kimiko's relaxed smile set Jinya at ease. Picking a café seemed to have been wise; she had always been rather curious and fond of foreign things. He hoped the current situation with Eizen would end soon so he could free Kimiko from worry quickly.

They chatted some more until Ryuuna tugged on his sleeve. She gave him a look, having finished her coffee and become bored just watching the two of them talk.

"Oh, sorry. Shall we get going, then?"

"...Mm," she grunted back, face expressionless. Except for that one time, she still didn't speak.

Kimiko got up as well, only then realizing how long they had stayed. Jinya stepped away to pay, when suddenly the space before him began to distort.

"Wha-?"

Jinya hadn't mentioned anything to Kimiko, but he had more or less expected an attack to come eventually. Just not like *this*.

The space twisted in on itself as a disembodied arm appeared out of thin air. The arm had sharp nails, developed muscles, and dull bronze-like skin—the arm of a demon. Driven by a clear objective, it reached out for Jinya's throat.

INYA WASN'T ARROGANT enough to believe he could protect Kimiko and Ryuuna from anything and everything, but he'd taken the two of them out anyway, for reasons beyond just giving them a breather. He wanted a read on what Eizen's approach would be. Would he go so far as to attack them in public? Or would he wait for an opportunity that wouldn't drag bystanders in? If the old man did nothing, then that was fine in itself, but if he attacked them even with eyewitnesses, then Jinya would gain valuable information on how far Eizen was willing to go and what he could expect from the old man in the future. That all being said, Jinya was mostly certain Eizen wouldn't make a move here. If an attack were to come, it was unlikely to be on his orders.

The grotesque arm reached out to snap Jinya's neck.

Jinya began to think—if Eizen had ordered this attack, then Izuchi would have appeared beforehand to target the people in the area with his Gatling gun and limit Jinya's movements. Izuchi's absence had to mean this was an underling acting alone. This method of attack itself was unexpected. The demon hadn't appeared fully formed but only as an arm suspended in the air.

However, Jinya's expression didn't shift in the slightest. Showing his surprise would only reveal openings—not that he was lax enough to freeze up against his opponent anyway. He slid his left arm forward and placed a hand on the inner side of the grotesque arm, then gently brushed it aside without stopping its momentum. Or at least, that was what he intended to do. He had only touched the arm for about a second when it vanished.

Quite a few moments passed before he suddenly felt pain course through his back. "Gnh?!"

He almost fell to the ground but threw a foot out in time to catch himself, then spun around. There was nobody behind him, but he had definitely been hit. The same disembodied arm from before, then.

Perhaps it was a power similar to *Jishibari*, something that could make arms manifest in the air. Or perhaps it was an ability that allowed its user to transport

an individual body part. Jinya didn't have enough information to know yet, but he was vigilant for the next strike.

"Jiiya? Is something wrong?"

Seeing him suddenly put himself on guard, Kimiko and Ryuuna looked at him strangely.

Jinya had accounted for the possibility of an attack in broad daylight, but he didn't think it would go as unnoticed as this. The arm had only briefly manifested. When it aimed at his neck, it waited for the moment he stood up and came at an angle the girls couldn't see. He was able to react because that angle meant it appeared right in front of him, but this ability would prove troublesome if it could strike from any direction.

"Are you feeling ill? You can sit for a while longer if you'd like," Kimiko said.

"Thank you, but I just slipped a bit. That's all," he replied.

Some of the other customers were beginning to stir. A few seemed to have seen the demon arm. It would be a problem if any further commotion occurred, so he acted as though nothing had happened.

He swiftly took care of the bill while keeping watch on their surroundings. He then brought his right palm up to his mouth and bit into it. Clenching his fist, he allowed blood to pool in his palm.

As strange as it was to say, this attack was a blessing in disguise. It clarified many important things for Jinya. Firstly, it showed Eizen had no plans to act anytime soon. Secondly, it showed Eizen's demon underlings weren't entirely obedient. And thirdly, it showed the demons were not trying to kill Kimiko or Ryuuna. Still, Jinya did not enjoy having his relaxation time ruined. The discretion of his opponent's attacks worked in his favor, though. He decided to take a page out of their book and fight discreetly as well.

"Let's be off, then. Lady Kimiko, could you lead Ryuuna?"

[&]quot;Huh? Me?"

"If you would. I'm sure she'd like to interact with someone her own age."

"That's what you say, but it's not like she's spoken a word to me yet..." Kimiko stepped outside first.

"Come on, you too, Ryuuna."

"...Mm."

Ryuuna still didn't say anything, but she obeyed. It hurt to think her compliance was the result of her upbringing in that cell.

Jinya intentionally positioned himself behind them both to make himself an easy target. He walked along without a care, almost daring an attack to come.

Whether because he provoked someone into action or simply by coincidence, he heard the air twist with a hard-to-describe echo. The grotesque arm attacked once more.

"I said wait!" Izuchi grabbed Yonabari's shoulder and forcibly spun them around.

"What's up? You coming too?" Yonabari didn't seem to care one bit about being manhandled.

Ikyuu could be rather free-spirited, but Yonabari was on another level. There was no end to the problems they caused.

"You bet your ass I am. Somebody's gotta keep you in check."

"Oh, c'mon. Don't you trust me?"

"Hell no," Izuchi said flatly. He wanted to list all the reasons why he *didn't* trust them, but he decided it wouldn't be worth it. They would probably just be amused by his grumbling, anyway.

"And, heeey, why are you stopping *me*? Ikyuu said he was going to meet the Demon Eater. Shouldn't he be the one you stop?"

"As if I could catch up to him," Izuchi scoffed. Ikyuu had an ability that

resembled instantaneous movement. The best Izuchi could do was pray he didn't cause any problems. "He better not do anything crazy..."

"I'm sure things'll be all right. He's a jerk, but he's got more brains than you. The Demon Eater should be on an outing with Ryuuna-chan and Kimiko-chan right around now, so Izuchi probably won't give him more than a quick greeting." Yonabari's tone was indifferent, as though they were only making small talk. It took Izuchi an extra moment to register what they said.

"Wait, what? How do you know all that?"

"It's obvious if you just think about it. Eizen-san won't be making any moves for now after he got beaten so one-sidedly. His priority will be stocking up on life until he's sure he can win, which means he'll focus on eating. As for our Demon Eater, it doesn't make much sense to blindly look for Eizen-san when he could instead investigate unnatural disappearances of people. That's why he'll head out regularly to gather information." Rather than fumble around looking for Eizen, it made more sense for the Demon Eater to check out rumors of events that could be tied to him, at least according to Yonabari.

"All right, then why would he be out with the girls?" Izuchi asked.

"Well, there's still an off chance that Eizen-san might attack, so he'd rather have them close than not."

Yonabari didn't stop walking at all as they talked. Izuchi followed behind, looking out at the townscape with a conflicted heart.

Classic Japanese buildings reminiscent of Edo times stood shoulder to shoulder with modern structures. The town looked beautiful but incongruous, and the sight of Yonabari, a demon in Western attire, was equally jarring. They worked with Eizen because they rejected the values of the Taisho era, but they still took an interest in modern clothes and wore something different every time Izuchi saw them. Today they had on a dress shirt with a necktie, as well as round glasses with thick rims. They were the very image of a dapper modern man and seemed to be in high spirits about it.

"Hm? But I thought you said Eizen-sama wouldn't make any moves," Izuchi said, continuing their discussion.

"He won't, but the Demon Eater has no way to be sure about that. That's why he's acting as bait to try and see what we'll do. He'll probably be happy to be attacked by Ikyuu." A spring entered Yonabari's step. With an impish look, they indifferently said, "Maybe they're strolling through trendy ol' Ginza right about now, taking a chance to relax while gathering information and probing Eizensan for a reaction. The Demon Eater knows we can't kill the girls, only kidnap them, so he just has to worry about his own life. It's the perfect situation for him."

Izuchi was bewildered. It always seemed as though Yonabari was simply acting haphazardly. He hadn't thought they had it in them to interpret the situation so well. "Holy hell. I had no idea you were actually thinking about things."

"Ouch. Getting the idiot treatment from *you* is a bit rough. Just so you know, even Ikyuu can figure out this much of what's going on."

In that case, Izuchi was the only clueless one. Apparently there would be no denying the idiot allegations anytime soon for him.

"Ikyuu's only going over to feel out the Demon Hunter. He'll probably be back after getting a blow or two in. He's kinda dumb, though. If he just wanted to see how strong the Demon Eater was, he could've sent some small fry demon, or, hey, just rile you up into going after him. There was no need for him to go as far as revealing his own ability."

"Hey now..." Izuchi groaned. He didn't like the way Yonabari always had to joke at the expense of others, but he still gave a little sigh of relief. Some parts of the conversation had bothered him, but at least it sounded like Ikyuu wouldn't be too reckless. "All right. What you're basically tryin' to say is that Ikyuu won't pull anything too stupid, yeah?"

"Yeah. He rubs me the wrong way, but he's not that dumb. Of course, I

wouldn't mind if he went and got himself killed, y'know?"

"Look, I won't tell you to be buddy-buddy with him, but at least give the infighting a rest. What are your thoughts on the Demon Eater? How strong is he?"

"I only saw him for a little bit that night, but..." Yonabari's grin spread wider than usual. "I'm thinking we'll get to see Ikyuu make quite the face later."

Jinya sharpened his senses to a fine point. He had no sword on him. There had still been ruined samurai carrying swords as late as the early Meiji era, but even they were gone by the middle of the period. He was a servant of the Akase family now, so he couldn't publicly carry a sword and risk causing trouble for Michitomo and Shino. But as a man who had lived by the blade, he couldn't bring himself to conceal a pistol on his person either. Still, he was far from weaponless.

"Ryuuna-san, shall we go?" Kimiko said.

"...Mm." Ryuuna nodded back.

Kimiko's expression softened slightly as she stepped out of the café. Ryuuna followed her, and Jinya trailed them both, taking a single step. The other customers and the girls were not looking his way as he passed through the entrance. Before his right foot could reach the ground on his second step, he heard the air begin to warp.

The sound was slight. He would have missed it if he hadn't been paying attention. It came from his left behind him, the strike aimed at the back of his head. From the pressure emanated toward that spot alone, he could easily envision his skull being crushed and its contents spilling out, but the fierce pressure only made the strike that much more obvious.

Jinya slid forward diagonally on his stepping foot, then pulled back his left leg and made a half turn.

The grotesque arm grazed his cheek. He failed to completely dodge the strike, but that was fine. He was already moving to counterattack, which he had enough time to do because he'd read the blow.

He spun his body and swung his right arm without killing his momentum. He didn't have Yarai or Yatonomori Kaneomi with him, but gripped in his hand was a sword nonetheless.

Be just and courageous, know benevolence and respect, swear loyalty to the Tokugawa, and be willing to fight in the Shogun's name. These were the tenets a samurai followed, and to live by them brought pride. It was for the sake of these values that samurai were willing to fight as warriors down to the last drop of blood in them.

Once, there was a man who wanted to fight down to the last drop of blood in him. The sword in Jinya's hand now had been entrusted to him by that friend.

The sound of parting air could be heard. The strike came so fast that not a soul even saw the blade.

"Jiiya, where should we go next?"

"Good question. How about a store that sells Western clothes and accessories? Ryuuna could use some."

"That sounds great. Would it be all right if I picked out some outfits for Ryuuna-san?"

Kimiko looked back at Jinya as she chatted happily with him. The two girls were still a bit stiff, but they definitely felt less stressed than before.

After swinging his blade, Jinya had undone his ability, then followed the girls like nothing had happened. They didn't seem to notice. He decided to call this a success.

"Hee hee. Don't you think Jiiya would definitely dote on his child if he ever had one?" Kimiko looked at Ryuuna.

"I wonder about that," Jiiya said.

"...Mm."

"Ryuuna-san nodded! She thinks so too."

Jinya hadn't felt the sensation of cutting bone, but he knew he'd sliced into flesh. No follow-up attacks were coming, so his counterattack must have done some damage.

What he cut was definitely a real arm. In other words, the demon's ability allowed them to send parts of their body across distances. There was a good chance that this ability was something like instantaneous movement. Not knowing when and where an attack would come from was problematic, but that only made the outcome of their just-concluded exchange all the more favorable. Making his opponent think he could even react to surprise attacks would make them second-guess themselves before attacking.

Jinya dropped that line of thought there. For now, focusing on Kimiko's happiness was more important.

"Let's go! I'll pick out the perfect dress for Ryuuna-san," Kimiko said.

"Lady Kimiko, I was actually thinking of something along the lines of casual wear for her."

"In that case...a skirt! I'm sure she'd look good in a kimono, but a skirt would be just perfect too!"

"Oh...a skirt..."

Tokyo was a different place than it had been back when it was called Edo. The Taisho era could feel suffocating at times. Swords were outlawed, spirits had no place in the world, and many ways of life had been lost to the changing times. But not every change was for the worse. The townscapes were different, and the hearts of mankind were ever-changing, but there were some sights people would always hold dear.

The girls strolled the streets of Tokyo looking at various things. Jinya watched by their side, enjoying the sight of this mundane yet hard-to-come-by slice of

After returning to Eizen's private residence on the outskirts of Tokyo, Yonabari and Izuchi had tea in the latter's room.

"We really just watched a film and nothing else, huh?" Izuchi said.

"What did you think was going to happen? But man, *Song of Summer Clouds* is so good. I just *looove* how bittersweet it is."

"I feel like you like it for the wrong reasons..."

Izuchi had tagged along to keep watch on Yonabari, but nothing of note ended up happening. He wasn't hoping for anything to happen, of course, but it was so anticlimactic that it got to him a bit.

"You go to that theater a lot or something?" he asked. "That ticket boy, what's-his-name..."

"Yoshihiko-kun?"

"Yeah, him. He seemed pretty friendly with you."

The two appeared to be quite familiar with one another, even joking back and forth. Yonabari looked like a regular customer.

"Were we? Aren't you just imagining things? Oh wait, don't tell me you're jeeeeealous?"

"Get real."

Izuchi wasn't particularly interested in Yonabari, platonically or otherwise. He didn't even care to know whether they were a man or a woman. He simply wondered why a demon like them was being friendly with a human.

"Mm, should be any minute now."

"Hm? What should be any minute?"

Yonabari smiled knowingly.

Then Ikyuu suddenly appeared in the room, clicking his tongue in irritation. "Great. *You're* here..."

"Oh, welcome back, Ikyuu. How 'bout using the door when you come in?" Izuchi asked.

It wasn't uncommon for Ikyuu to return with the aid of his power, so Izuchi and Yonabari weren't startled by his sudden arrival. They were, however, surprised to see his right arm wrapped in a bandage. He hadn't had one on him when he left.

"What's with the bandage?" Izuchi asked.

"The Demon Eater got me. Bastard figured out my timing by the third move."

Redness had seeped through the bandage, showing how deep the wound was. Ikyuu stared at his right arm. He didn't seem bothered in the slightest; in fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"I take it you're not joking."

"Do I look like the kinda guy to joke around?"

"Guess not."

Izuchi was perturbed. He knew how strong Ikyuu was, and the fact that there was a demon out there who could match him so easily made him shudder.

"No wonder the old fart's so wary of 'im. Looks like I can expect some fun," Ikyuu said. His ability had been easily handled by the Demon Eater, but their exchange was really nothing more than them feeling each other out. Neither knew the depth of the other's skills, and Ikyuu felt no humiliation or defeat. The only thing that could be seen in his eyes was unadulterated admiration.

"Looks like someone's happy," Yonabari dryly said with an exasperated sigh. Their cold eyes mocked lkyuu's bloodlust-filled smile.

"I am happy. If we're gonna kill him anyway, he'd better at least be someone worth killing."

"Yeah, I don't get it. I'm not crazy about killing like you; my ability does the literal opposite, for crying out loud. I don't think I'll ever get what you're on about."

"That makes two of us. I doubt I'll ever come close to understandin' why scum like you exist."

The two stared one another down with naked hostility. Izuchi moved to step between them for what felt like the umpteenth time, but Yonabari backed down before he could.

"Now's really not the time for arguing, huh? I hate to admit it, but I wouldn't be able to match Ikyuu's ability in just a few moves. What about you, Izuchi?"

"Impossible. If I sprayed my Gatling gun his way, then maybe I'd manage something, but it'd be tough."

"Right? In that case, two of us would stand even less of a chance in a head-tohead battle with the Demon Eater."

Without his Gatling gun, Izuchi was just a lesser demon with above-average physical strength and martial arts skills. Ikyuu was far greater than him in terms of pure fighting power. It stood to reason, then, that Izuchi would be no match for someone who could stand equal to Ikyuu.

"Of course, that doesn't mean we can just throw our hands up and surrender," Yonabari said.

"What, you got a plan?" Izuchi asked.

"You bet. If we'd lose in a fair fight, then we just need to fight *un*fair!" They looked proud of what they said, unashamed and greatly enjoying themselves.

"What do you mean?"

Yonabari was, to be blunt, not that strong. They could fight to a certain degree, of course, and they had enough skill to pull out of a battle with the Demon Eater as they'd demonstrated with the grip gun, but Yonabari lacked something that could end a fight in one go like Ikyuu's demon ability or Izuchi's

Gatling gun. Izuchi couldn't tell where their confidence was coming from.

"Not telling." Yonabari said. "A plan is only valuable if it stays secret, dummy." "Is it...?"

"Okaaay, fine, I'll let you in on just a little bit. So, lately I've been going to the theater and this antique store I found the other day to get ready for a little something..."

"Yeah right. You were just goofin' off, weren't ya?"

Yonabari deflated, pretending to lose heart. They were really as harebrained a demon as they came.

"...Yeah, I really hate your guts after all." Ikyuu gave Yonabari an icy look, fed up with their messing around.

"I can't stand you either, y'know. You're sure a tight-ass. A guy who kills for sport shouldn't be trying to preach." Yonabari looked back at Ikyuu with a fake smile.

The air in the room grew strained. It felt as though a fight would break out at any second. The two stared one another down for a few moments until Ikyuu clicked his tongue, easing the tension once more.

"You disgust me," he spat, then used his ability to leave Izuchi's room.

Izuchi breathed a sigh of relief, grateful nothing had happened. Yonabari looked displeased.

"No, you disgust me! Ah, jeez. Why's he so full of himself when he kills people like it's nothing?"

Izuchi was a bit surprised to hear such a humanlike opinion from Yonabari. "Seriously, give the infighting a rest. And don't you think that's a bit of a weird thing for a demon to say?"

"Is it really? I mean, it's not like I'm trying to say killing's bad or anything. I just think life should be treasured at least a little bit. Killing for no reason isn't good.

I don't really like revenge killing or other messy stuff like that either."

"Wow. Something that actually sounds sensible just came out of your mouth."

While Yonabari's outlook was a bit naive, Izuchi didn't hate it. He could see why they wouldn't get along well with Ikyuu, who'd only come to serve Eizen so demons could again be the threat they once were.

"Mm, but yeah, that's why I don't really like Ikyuu or the Demon Eater. Oh, but you're different, Izuchi. You're just a lovable idiot who's fun to toy with."

"I'm gonna pretend you meant 'hang with' there."

Yonabari laughed heartily, regaining their usual fake-looking smile.

"But I gotta wonder, why'd you come serve Eizen if that's the way you feel?" Izuchi asked. Izuchi and Ikyuu were serving Eizen because they wanted demons to be powerful like they were in the past, but he had yet to hear Yonabari's reasons for working with them.

"Huh? Whaddya mean?"

"Why are you fighting alongside us? You clearly have different reasons."

"Ah..." They pressed a finger to their lips and nodded to themselves a few times. With a smile, they answered, "I just want to vent, I guess. As one of the ones who couldn't change, I'm against all that's changing."

"The hell? Isn't that just like the revenge you said you hate?"

"I guess. There's no right or wrong to what I'm doing. I'm just having a temper tantrum. I'm not invested enough to call this revenge, so 'venting' describes what I'm doing just fine."

Yonabari claimed to take issue with things that changed. Sadly, being the simple soul he was, Izuchi couldn't read deeper into those words.

"J IIYA, WHY DO YOU protect us?"

"...Mm."

Several days had passed since the last attack, and Jinya and the girls had spent their time in peace, undisturbed. Without anything special to do, Jinya defaulted back to his usual work as gardener of the Akase garden. He carefully checked the hydrangea flowers one by one, spraying insecticide here and pruning excess branches and leaves there. Kimiko and Ryuuna watched curiously as he worked.

The two girls had grown closer after the café visit. They had developed surprising chemistry, both being somewhat confined to the bounds of the Akase home, and spent much of their time together.

Ryuuna was given her own room in the servants' quarters. The official story, as Michitomo told it to everyone, was that she was a relative of Jinya's who had lost her immediate family and been placed in his care.

Seiichirou showed no signs he cared much about Ryuuna's presence, which likely meant Eizen didn't tell him about her. Seiichirou's only purpose had been to ensure Kimiko was raised and offered to Eizen; he was nothing more than a tiny pawn in Eizen's plans.

As a result, Ryuuna had no real issue living in the Akase home. Eizen most likely already knew she was there, but since hostilities had stalled between him and Jinya, that wasn't an immediate problem. Though they knew it was just the calm before the storm, they could enjoy a rare peace.

"Pardon?" Jinya asked back.

"Why do you put yourself at risk to protect us? I'm sure nobody would blame you if you didn't. Oh, it's not that I don't appreciate you or anything, of course."

"I protect you because I promised Michitomo-sama I would. Plus, I've been by your side ever since you were a baby. I have a responsibility to keep looking after you."

"Is that all?"

"There are other reasons. For instance, I'd rather like to keep taking care of these hydrangeas." He accompanied his joke with a wry smile. His tone was soft, carrying with it the sweetness an elderly man might show his granddaughter.

His joke relaxed Kimiko a bit, and the discontented look on her face disappeared. "I never realized you were so thorough."

"Hm?"

"With the hydrangeas, I mean. Your work is surprisingly time-consuming." She watched his hands, seemingly rapt with admiration for his dexterity. Ryuuna saw her and mimicked her expression.

"Living things require money, time, and effort. That goes for both plants and people." With a sharp snip, Jinya cut an unwanted bunch. His gaze remained on the hydrangeas as he spoke.

Kimiko's mind felt at ease. Because of their difference in age, talking with him felt like talking to a grandfather. It was a peaceful afternoon, filled with the rustle of leaves and the intermittent snips of pruning.

"Will the flowers get less beautiful if they're not pruned every day?"

"No, not at all. Hydrangeas are actually a type of flower that don't need to be pruned. They'll bloom just fine every year if you leave them alone."

"...Mm...?" Ryuuna cocked her head, confused by his answer. Kimiko seemed just as baffled, with a similar expression on her face.

"Huh? Then why go to so much trouble to look after them?"

"Because if you leave them be, the shrubs will grow bigger every year, and the flowers will bloom from a greater height. This sight, as it is now, will disappear. In other words, I'm not pruning so the flowers will bloom beautifully next year, but so they will bloom ten years from now the same exact way they do today."

In ten years' time, Kimiko would be twenty-six. That was the far-off future for

her current self, beyond even imagining. Similarly, she couldn't wrap her head around the work of a gardener. Jinya labored hard every day for a payoff that would come ten years later—and the flowers wouldn't be any prettier than they already were. The effort didn't match the reward, no matter how she thought about it.

"That sounds kind of...wasteful?"

"You mean you think it's a waste of effort?"

"No, no! Nothing like that." She waved her hands, not wanting to be rude.

Jinya put so much effort into these flowers. It didn't seem right for them not to get more beautiful than they were. Effort should be rewarded, or so the much younger Kimiko believed.

"There is merit in working hard for change, and there is merit in working hard to keep things the same. Both are equally valid." Jinya softly smiled. "These hydrangeas are the same as they were when your parents married. They are not so beautiful that they would make everyone stop in amazement, but I am proud of these unchanging hydrangeas all the same."

"But isn't it kind of...sad to have to look after them every day only for them to never change?" She had something she was trying to express but found it difficult. Her inexperience felt heartwarming to his much older self.

He looked back at the hydrangeas once more. The end of the season was approaching, and the shrubs were gradually becoming bare.

"There might come a time, Lady Kimiko, when you've wed and have a child of your own."

"A-a child?" she said, surprised.

"It's very possible. And when that child grows big, they might play here in this courtyard, and then your eyes might fall upon these hydrangeas."

He reached out and touched a flower softly, as though cherishing it before the season would whisk it away. The texture of its moist petals made him smile.

"I'm sure these unchanging hydrangeas will look all the more beautiful to you then. You'll know what I mean when the time comes."

"...You say some really confusing stuff sometimes."

"What can I say? Old people love to preach."

As one lived on, the preciousness of things that changed and things that didn't became clear. Jinya had once been an ignorant, foolish man, but he had learned from his many experiences and could now be the teacher, as strange as that felt.

"Oh, Kimiko. And Jiiya and Ryuuna-san as well. So this is where you are."

Just around the time he finished tending to the hydrangeas, Shino—Kimiko's mother—called out to them. She looked like a woman the word "elegant" was made for as she gracefully walked out into the courtyard.

"Oh, Mother."

"Mm..."

Kimiko and Ryuuna turned to look at Shino.

"Good afternoon, Shino-sama," Jinya said.

"Really, Jiiya? I thought I told you not to be so stiff with me."

"Right. Sorry about that, Shino."

Seeing him return to his old, informal tone, Shino nodded in satisfaction.

Jinya had known Shino ever since she was a child, and it warmed his heart to see she had become such a refined lady. She had been a tomboy as a young girl, much naughtier than Kimiko ever was. He fondly recalled the way she ran circles around poor Michitomo. There had really been no choice but for Jinya to directly look after her.

Jinya was grateful to both Michitomo and Shino. It was thanks to them that he'd found peace again after losing Nomari and Somegorou.

"Jiiya, it's just a rumor that you're Mother's lover, right?" Kimiko narrowed

her eyes onto Jinya, suspecting infidelity based on his tender exchange with her mother. Her glare lacked intensity, but being suspected like this still stung.

"Now, don't be rude, Kimiko," Shino said.

"But, Mother..."

"Jiiya looked after me as a child, and nothing more. I just can't get used to him talking so formally since he didn't in the past."

As a child, Shino had been very willful, so he'd ended up treating her informally as a result. Kimiko was a far more obedient child than her mother had been, though she still inherited her strong curiosity and drive.

"Michitomo-sama was the one who brought Jiiya here as a servant. I was only eleven when we were engaged, if I remember correctly, so I played with him a lot. I even got him to sneak me outside like he does with you two girls." Shino sighed nostalgically.

Jinya's ability *Invisibility* allowed him to go unseen. In the past, he'd only been able to use it on himself, but experience had allowed him to hide others as well, so long as they were willing and he was touching them. Using this ability, he would sneak Shino past the prying eyes of the other servants and let her explore Tokyo. It was a frivolous way to use a demon ability, but it had apparently allowed Shino to make some good memories.

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"Really?"
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"Oh yes."

Kimiko's eyes were wide with surprise. She had only ever seen her mother as she was now, so it was hard to imagine her ever sneaking out to have fun in town.

"I received some cake as a gift. Why don't we share it over tea, you two?" Shino said to Kimiko and Ryuuna.

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"Oh, uh, okay."
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[&]quot;...Mh."

Still trying to process things, Kimiko answered half in a daze. Meanwhile, Ryuuna responded vigorously, fiercely nodding her head. It was a bit unexpected to see her so eager for cake.

"Ryuuna-san, do you like cake?" Kimiko asked.

Ryuuna shook her head. Suddenly, it was unclear just what she was so excited about.

"Shall we go inside?" Shino said.

"Let's. Could you tell us some stories from back then, Mother?"

"Of course."

Though the three of them were by no means the lively sort, they became animated in their own way. Jinya was watching them go with a warm expression when Shino suddenly looked back and called out to him.

"Would you like to join us, Jiiya?"

"Thanks, but I'll pass."

"Very well." Shino seemed to have expected his refusal and didn't look disappointed in the slightest.

"Why not, Jiiya? Come join us."

"Now, now. Don't force him, Kimiko." Shino chided her daughter before urging them all along.

He could have joined them if he really wanted to. Himawari was keeping watch on the area surrounding the estate, and the attacker from the other day seemed wise enough that they'd only attacked to try and size Jinya up. There shouldn't be any real danger right now. Even so, he chose not to.

"Maybe next time," he said.

"All right..." Kimiko replied.

Though they seemed disappointed, the two girls followed Shino inside. Jinya

smiled as he watched them go. He'd lost so much over the years, but that only made this ordinary happiness feel all the dearer.

"Now, where was I...?" He began tending to the hydrangeas again.

Though they were now a symbol strongly associated with the rainy season, hydrangeas had not been particularly popular in the Edo era. In fact, they were even loathed by many because they were believed to represent treachery and fickleness. It was strange to think they would become popular enough to be a staple in gardens. Though the changing times caused many things to lose their value, sometimes people could find value in old things too. The flowers themselves hadn't changed, but something else had, something Jinya couldn't quite name.

"Why I protect them, huh..." He thought back to Kimiko's question.

The hydrangeas were in bloom. They looked as unchangingly beautiful as they had around the time Michitomo and Shino became engaged and in the days when Kimiko was still growing. He hoped Kimiko would one day come to see the beauty in these flowers as well. Perhaps she would gaze upon them with her elderly parents and finally understand. Some might say such a hope was not worth fighting tooth and nail for, but for Jinya, it was reason enough.

As he cut away an excess bit with his shears, a crisp snip resounded through the garden.

Intermission:

A Girl Called Ryuuna

"CHOOSE. You can die here, or you can come with me."

Ryuuna froze over the sudden choice thrust on her. A life of pain was normal for her, and she had long grown accustomed to the feeling of her body being altered by another. Her visitors only ever forced things upon her. Someone extending a hand out to her like this was a first.

Not that it mattered one bit to her. Whether she lived, died, or somehow left this dark place, she could never truly escape it. She'd been made the way she was to fulfill a purpose, and that wouldn't change.

"It's settled, then. Let's go."

And yet she had made a choice before she even knew it. Even now she didn't know why she took his hand. But she remembered the feeling of his rough, calloused skin and how reliable he felt.

This was a memory she would never forget, one core to her being that would persist for a long time to come.

"Good morning, Ryuuna."

After escaping her cell, she lived in the outside world. She came to learn the man greeting her first thing in the morning was Kadono Jinya. She observed him being called Jiiya, though, so she did the same. She knew little of who he was but did not dislike him. He was a monster who took the guise of a human, making the two of them the same.

Jiiya took her outside, and she learned of the world. She had been taught simple things inside her cell, but this was her first time experiencing anything firsthand. The people working where she lived treated her as Jiiya's niece,

though she didn't understand what that meant. She was given three meals a day. As she had only ever swallowed what was forced into her mouth, she had to learn how to use chopsticks from the basics.

"Not that way, Ryuuna. Hold it like this."

Jiiya was oddly strict at times. For instance, he made sure she tried to greet people and had proper manners. Others saw this and said he was taking good care of her. The way his strictness made for proper care was lost on her.

"I can't help but feel lonely sometimes, though I know this is simply the way it must be."

"Indeed. Uncle would be arrested if he were seen carrying you around."

There were many strange people around Jiiya, such as Talking Sword and Small Demon, who both looked after Ryuuna while he worked. Sometimes an old acquaintance of his would watch her instead, but she didn't like them. The way they acted like they understood Jiiya so well bothered her.

"You can take it easy. There are other demons hidden in the area around us, keeping watch."

Ryuuna gave Small Demon a nod. She wasn't unable to speak; she simply couldn't communicate well.

To talk was to communicate the self. She saw no worth in herself and, by extension, no meaning in communicating. She was still fated to become a monster-birthing demon god who would bring ruin to the world. Escaping her cell changed nothing.

"Not working too hard, are you, Ryuuna?"

"Mm."

She often helped Jiiya with his work. Nothing important, just carrying things around at most, but the others still praised her for it.

Jiiya always looked at peace when he took care of the flowers. As he did so, he would occasionally pat her head when the thought occurred to him. He

probably saw little difference between looking after flowers and looking after a child.

"Your hair is very beautiful, Ryuuna-san."

Young Lady liked Ryuuna's hair and would play with it. Ryuuna allowed it because she was used to being treated as a toy and it didn't hurt.

"Oh, I know. Why don't we try on those clothes we bought for you? Wait here; I'll go get them."

It was wrong to resist. Most things passed if she just endured, so Ryuuna nodded. At least Young Lady would be happy this way.

Things tended to go well when Ryuuna mimicked what Young Lady did, so she often spent time with her. But being with Young Lady made Ryuuna's chest feel tight for reasons she couldn't understand, much less bring up to anyone.

"Oh, hey. How's it going, Ryuuna?"

Jiiya would bring her to the study, where she sometimes encountered Master of the House. Ryuuna thought the man was somehow like Old Man from the Cell. He was a creature of secrets and deceit, unlike his wife.

"Aha, ha. Kind of hurts to be snubbed like that."

"She can't help it—not when you're so suspicious."

"What's that supposed to mean? You know I pay your salary, right?"

Jiiya paid more attention to Master of the House than to her. Master of the House's smiles were superficial, but he was someone close to Jiiya anyway.

"What're you reading?"

"The Flowering Spirit."

"Ah, Zeami. 'The flowers have beauty because they scatter,' right?"

"That's the one. An acquaintance taught me about a Noh song called *Twin Shizuka* once, so I've been interested in Zeami for a while. Personally, I don't think flowers are beautiful just because they scatter, though."

"Oh? What makes them beautiful, then?"

The two of them talked about something uninteresting. Bored, Ryuuna tugged Jiiya's sleeve.

"Ah, sorry, we can get going. Michitomo, you mind if I borrow this?"

"Just make sure to put it back when you're done. But man, you're good at looking after kids, huh?"

"Especially troublesome ones, as you should know."

Jiiya smiled. His smiles were small and easy to miss, but he did it surprisingly often.

"How could I forget? But if you ask me, Shino was the real troublemaker between the two of us."

"It's hard to believe that tomboy could grow up to be so collected. Becoming a mother really changes people."

Jiiya's expression turned terribly gentle then.

Later in the evening, she returned with Jiiya to her room, where there was a flower he'd given her. He'd taught her its name and what it represented, but she had already forgotten most of it. Flowers weren't her thing, it seemed.

"Good night, Ryuuna."

"...Mm."

And so another day came to an end.

Her new life bewildered her, being so different from her time in her cell. There was no suffering, but it didn't give her joy either.

Maybe it was because she didn't fully believe any of this was real. Part of her thought she would pull her blanket up, go to sleep, and then wake to find herself in the cell again. The first thing she learned when she left her lightless world was fear—fear that all of this would suddenly come crumbling down around her.

The silence of the night was deafening. She shut her eyes as tightly as she could, as though to block out her thoughts. Surely even this room was still within that dark cage.

1

N ASAKUSA, TOKYO, a bit removed from the street of the famous Kaminarimon Gate, there was a dimly lit alley with an antique store called Kogetsudou. It had been around since the middle of the Meiji era, but not many customers ever came by. The building was old, giving the store a rather shabby look. The sun was setting for the day, bathing everything in the color of sunset, and the store's antiques looked bewitching basked in the orange glow.

The young man looking after the store was Motoki Soushi, eighteen years old. The store belonged to his grandfather, but his poor health meant Soushi often took charge instead. Soushi's father was employed normally elsewhere, so Soushi would likely inherit the business sooner or later. That was, if it even managed to keep its doors open that long.

"Not much business, eh?" Akitsu Somegorou said as he browsed the antiques.

"You mean the store or my other line of work?" Soushi smiled wryly. He was immersed in reading, taking advantage of the total absence of customers. The fact that he had already completed a full volume without interruption showed just how dead business was.

"Both, of course."

"We're a bit of a peculiar antique store, so not having many customers is just the way it goes. As for my spirit-hunter work, well, let's just say it doesn't pay the bills by itself anymore."

"We're livin' in rough times."

Apparently the spirit hunters of old could make a living just hunting demons. Demons and other spirits were that real of a threat back then, but times had changed. Belief in such things had faded in the Taisho era. Few people sought

out hunters for their spirit problems, and it was hard enough for famous spirithunter families to get by, let alone the humbler ones.

The Motoki were a lesser-known family of spirit hunters. They had neither a long, respected history like the Kukami of the Magatama or the Nagumo of the Demonic Sword nor the skill to command respect like the Akitsu. They were a relatively young and small family. They did not fight the powerful demons often associated with spirit hunters but instead handled old antiques that had developed souls of their own as well as objects possessed by spirits. The antiques at Kogetsudou were such items, sold to customers looking for those very things. In that way, it was very much like the mysterious antique stores that appeared in many ghost stories. Of course, the Motoki made sure to exorcize any dangerous items beforehand, and they trained to fight for the sake of it, but they'd hardly ever fought any truly violent spirits.

That was why Soushi idolized Akitsu Somegorou, the legendary spirit hunter. The man was larger than life. He was like the heroes in the adventure stories that ran in those pulp fiction magazines.

"So, you wanted to ask me about something?" Soushi said.

"Oh, right, right. Well, ya may not be active much, but yer still a spirit hunter, so I figured ya might know if there's been anythin' strange going on in Asakusa lately. Any disappearances or the like?"

"Disappearances? I haven't seen anything like that in the papers."

"Bah, figures. They'd be makin' my job too easy if they acted so openly," Somegorou grumbled.

Having been partially dragged into things himself, Soushi had an idea why Somegorou was asking these questions. He was discreetly pursuing Nagumo Eizen, the mad cannibal. Unfortunately, Eizen had yet to leave a trail.

"Sorry. There've been rumors of ghost sightings, though. Comes with the territory, being Asakusa and all."

"Not quite what I'm after, but thanks."

"Not at all. I'm only sorry I couldn't help more."

Somegorou was based in Kyoto, meaning he didn't have connections here in Tokyo. He was likely grasping at straws by coming to Kogetsudou.

"I could help gather information if you'd like," Soushi offered.

"No, that's all right. The one I'm chasin's a bit of the mean sort. No good will come of ya gettin' involved. I appreciate it, though." Somegorou gave him a wink. The message was obvious: If you value your life, steer clear. Though he was much older, his aloof attitude gave him an aura of dignity.

Soushi saw the man's self-confidence and thought him amazing, plain and simple. Though they were technically in the same trade, they were worlds apart. He admired Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth—perhaps the strongest there ever was—from the bottom of his heart... Although recently he had found the old man's presence to be *ever so slightly* bothersome.

"Akitsu-sama, I brought you some tea."

"Oh, thank ya, missy."

A young woman with a brimming smile, Saegusa Sahiro, came out from further inside the store and handed Somegorou a hot cup of tea. She turned sixteen this year and was employed at Kogetsudou, albeit as an unpaid worker. Maybe it was more appropriate to say she was lending a hand instead.

Sahiro's father was an acquaintance of Soushi's grandfather, and her family were spirit hunters as well. She was lodging at Kogetsudou for learning purposes.

"Wait, where's my tea?" Soushi asked.

"What do you mean? Are you a customer?"

Her cheeky reply irked Soushi a bit. This was why Somegorou's presence slightly bothered him.

Soushi had first met Somegorou at the Nagumo's evening party. Antiques were expensive, so the best clients ended up being either antique buffs or nobles with too much free time to kill. The Nagumo were has-been nobles, but they were vain and still visited Kogetsudou from time to time. That was how Soushi's grandfather got to know them and why he received an invitation to the evening party. Soushi and Sahiro went in his grandfather's place.

Of course, it ultimately turned out they'd been invited as part of Eizen's schemes. All the invitees were about to be sacrificed for some sinister ritual or something like that, but Somegorou stepped in. With his splendid artifact spirit techniques, he fended off the demons and saved everyone.

"Oh, I'm not really a customer. Just window-shoppin'. Don't deserve no special treatment," Somegorou said.

"Nonsense! We're honored to have you, Akitsu-sama!" Sahiro said.

"Ha ha, yer too kind, missy. Say, I should ask you too while I'm at it. Have ya heard any weird rumors lately?"

"Rumors? I heard the neighbor's girl ran away from home, but that's probably not the kind of thing you're looking for, huh?"

Soushi was thankful to the man for saving his life, but he just couldn't get over how Sahiro treated him so differently. She was usually a strongheaded girl. Seeing her fawn over somebody else like this felt wrong.

"Sahiro, don't bother him too much," Soushi chided, speaking a bit more curtly than he intended.

"I'm not bothering him. If anything, you should be more respectful to him!" she argued back.

"I am being respectful!"

The two bickered childishly, which was nothing unusual for them. Soushi made a face, though; this wasn't quite how he'd wanted things to go.

"The two of ya are a riot." Somegorou watched them with a broad grin.

Feeling like he was being mocked, Soushi glared, but that only made Somegorou burst into laughter.

"...What?"

"Sorry, sorry, just felt kinda nostalgic seein' ya like that. Couldn't help but laugh rememberin' how I used to be like ya." He smiled wistfully.

"You were...like me?"

"Oh yeah. I couldn't speak my mind in front of the woman I was smitten with, but I could sure butt heads with 'er father..." He seemed to look back fondly on how immature he had been. Soushi thought for a moment that Somegorou was lost in his nostalgia, but then he grinned impishly and threw his arm around the young man's shoulder. In a whisper only Soushi could hear, he said, "Just sayin', if ya like her you should tell her sooner rather than later."

"Wh-what?!" Soushi blushed bright red. Somegorou had hit the nail on the head.

"She's a cute girl. A bit energetic, but she's the sort who'd make a good wife."

Soushi looked Sahiro's way. She was sixteen, so it wouldn't be strange for talk of marriage to begin for her. They were both from spirit-hunting families. There was a nonzero chance he'd be chosen as her husband.

"I know ya feel embarrassed, but there are some things that won't get across if ya don't make the effort. Dillydally too much and someone else will sweep her off her feet."

"But we're not... She's... I don't see her that way."

"Don't get in the habit of lyin' to yourself. Folks who lie to themselves all the time can't choose what's dear to them when it really matters, then pretend they never cared all that much to begin with after it's too late. Ya don't wanna be that kind of pathetic man, d'ya?"

"Ngh..." Soushi knew the old man was right. He could remember making lame excuses like that when things hadn't gone his way before.

"Well, in the end it's yer decision." After egging him on so hard, Somegorou relented with sudden and surprising ease. He then began to leave.

"Are you going already, Akitsu-sama?" Sahiro asked disappointedly.

"Yeah. There's somethin' I want to check on." Without looking back as he left, Somegorou said, "Well, good luck with yer thing, Soushi-kun. See ya around, missy."

Even the mere stride of the man who'd seen countless battles looked like something beyond reach for Soushi.

"Why am I just 'missy,' but he calls you by name?"

Sahiro puffed out her cheeks, but Soushi wasn't in the mood to banter with her. As he kept ruminating over Somegorou's words, his gaze inadvertently rose to meet hers.

"What?"

"O-oh, um, nothing."

"You're turning red. Are you all right?"

He couldn't stop his thoughts from turning into a wild mess. For a little while, he was still too flustered to even look her in the eye.

Asakusa was famous for its temples and the Lantern Plant Market, but at one time it was also well known as the site for some execution grounds. If a criminal from the area was to be executed in the Edo era, it would likely have been done in either Asakusa or Shiba to the south. But after the population rose and more houses were built, the execution grounds were moved to a more isolated location. Still, people remembered. A major reason why Asakusa had so many ghost stories was because of this more brutal aspect of its history.

Somegorou left Kogetsudou behind and made his way to Kozukahara. He had only visited the antique store because the place happened to be along the way to his real destination.

He had come across a strange rumor as he followed Eizen's trail. Apparently, the ghost of a woman wearing burial clothes had been seen at night in Asakusa. There were a number of other rumors as well: one about a wicked revenant wandering the streets at night and another about someone being spirited away right before another person's eyes. The rumors were dubious at best. Soushi and Sahiro had also mentioned ghosts and a girl running away from home earlier. There was no knowing if any of it was connected, but from the way the rumors converged around Asakusa, Somegorou felt there had to be something going on.

His investigations led him to Kozukahara, where Asakusa's execution grounds were located back in the Edo era. He thought it would be a bit too clichéd for this place to really hold the answers he sought, but he paid a visit anyway.

The sun had already fully set, and night had arrived. The street of Kozukahara was sparsely lined with temples and shrines, giving the dark path an eerie feel. Of course, remembering the ghost rumors only made things more chilling.

"Now, what'll it be? A ghost, or perhaps a demon? Personally, I'd rather have a demon appear myself..."

Somegorou continued down the dark path, which was dimly lit by streetlamps. Occasionally he stopped and checked his surroundings. After a while of this, he heard the sound of gravel crunching behind him.

He vigorously spun around at once. For a moment, he thought he had struck gold, but he was disappointed when he saw who it was. "Oh, it's just you..."

A demon with chestnut-brown hair stood there, smiling in a way ill-suited for the eerie night. "Good evening, Akitsu-san. Is it okay for you to be out this late? I figure a man of your age would rather sleep early."

"Ha. But aren't ya 'bout as old as I am?"

"Oh dear." She feigned a gasp. "Don't you know it's tactless to mention a lady's age like that?"

Somegorou felt like he was being mocked by a child. He didn't know the right way to handle Himawari. He didn't see her as an enemy, but he didn't especially like her either.

He said, "Don't tell me you're the female ghost that's been spotted around here?"

"Ah, so you really were looking into that too."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Just that we're both after the same thing."

If a daughter of Magatsume was bothering to investigate the same situation, then the rumors might have weight to them after all.

"Shouldn't you be guarding Ryuuna-chan and Kimiko-chan?"

"Uncle is looking after Kimiko-san, and Ryuuna-san is with an acquaintance of his." Her expression clouded slightly. She might've been trying to hide her displeasure, but it was quite obvious to Somegorou.

"What're ya so grumpy about?"

"I'm not so fond of this acquaintance of Uncle's, though I understand we need their help."

This acquaintance must have been the person Jinya knew from back when he lived in Fukagawa. Somegorou had heard him mention them before. They must have been quite the dislikable person for Himawari to have such a low opinion of them. Her complaints made her seem more childish than usual, which caused Somegorou to feel a bit conflicted.

Somegorou hadn't interacted much with Himawari so far, and he kind of preferred it that way. She was the daughter of his master's killer, as well as the older sister of Azumagiku. Seeing her reminded him of how powerless he used to be. He understood mentally that blaming her for what happened would be misplacing his anger, but a part of his heart still stiffened around her.

"Is that right? Well, I've never met them myself." He acted indifferent to hide

his feelings. He wasn't the cheeky brat he used to be. He could hide his thoughts with ease now. Age had given him the experience to do that.

...Or had age simply made him jaded? How would his younger self have interacted with Himawari? It was a pointless, unknowable question, but it flitted through his mind all the same.

"I envy you. There's someone better off not knowing. Oh, down this way next." Himawari led him down a dark path, towards the supposed source of the rumors. He followed, wary that this might all be a trap.

"Sure. But a female ghost, huh... Ya think Eizen's involved?"

"He is. Without a doubt."

He thought her assured tone was strange, but they were interrupted before he could question her. A warm breeze blew past them—and yet he felt a chill run up his spine.

"Speak of the devil, huh? How polite of 'em to show up right on cue."

"They have that tact you're missing."

"Oh, be quiet."

Near some temples and shrines, in an alley cut off from the light of the streetlamps, a lone figure stood distinct against the darkness.

The rumor heard by Somegorou had involved the ghost of a woman wearing burial clothes, but some details were off. The figure's short stature did resemble that of a woman, but nothing about them looked remotely like a ghost. They had no eyes, no nose, no mouth, no ears, no hair—no features to speak of whatsoever.

"Is that...a demon?" he murmured. Even he, who had fought countless spirits, was bewildered by the sight of the thing. Meanwhile, Himawari showed no surprise whatsoever about the spirit's appearance, instead gritting her teeth unbearably.

"Yes. I kind of expected this, considering Ryuuna-san and all the life Eizen's

stockpiled..."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Be careful. We have company."

A number of people began to approach them all at once. Their eyes were lifeless. They looked far more like ghosts than the featureless demon did.

"Say..."

"Yes, Akitsu-san?"

"Ya think we've fallen into a trap?"

"I'd say so. Following rumors in pursuit of Eizen has put us in this spot, after all." No emotion rode her voice as she replied matter-of-factly.

Somegorou took up a fighting stance. Slowly, they were surrounded and left with nowhere to run.

"That demon's ability lets her possess the minds of humans with weak hearts."

Himawari revealed what the demon could do, and Somegorou didn't question how she knew it. Her bitter expression made both her thoughts and her connection to the demon clear.

"Her name is Furutsubaki...my younger sister."

2

THE ABILITY TO CONSUME and store the life of others, the art of taking a human and making them a demon-birthing temptress... Such things wouldn't possibly be passed down within a family of spirit hunters who made their name through the sword."

Himawari's voice trembled. Her eyes carried an emotion that couldn't quite be described as sorrow or grief.

"My mother created the art of molding the heart and manifesting whatever ability you desire, as well as the art of changing humans into demons. Eizen stole my mother's techniques and kidnapped Furutsubaki, then changed her into something else. Furutsubaki is without will now, a mere puppet that follows Eizen's orders."

Magatsume's daughters were discarded pieces of her heart. As her heart thought only of Jinya, Furutsubaki was supposed to stand in opposition to him in some way, but she had been changed and made into a tool for Eizen's own devices.

"We are the feelings our mother left unspoken, her wishes unrealized. We are the dear fragments of her heart that she had no choice but to discard. That is why I must slay both Furutsubaki and Eizen. To protect my mother's heart...and to make sure it isn't sullied any further than it already has been."

That was why Himawari had gone so far as to align herself with Jinya. She would do anything to defeat the one who mocked her mother and robbed her of a younger sister—even work with her mother's sworn enemy if she had to. Finally, Somegorou could bring himself to accept their alliance.

"...All right, Himawari." For the first time ever, he addressed her by name. "Sorry for doubtin' ya. I get it now. That Eizen bastard messed with your family. Even a human would want to take revenge."

He still didn't approve of Magatsume—she was a demon who threatened all of mankind. But he could let Himawari's presence slide. Though she was affiliated with Magatsume, he respected her trying to strike back for her family's sake.

"So, what'll it be? We savin' this demon?"

"Furutsubaki is beyond saving. She's been changed to the point of no return. I originally wanted to let Uncle devour her, but if that's not possible..."

Then the next best thing was to put her out of her misery. Somegorou understood and stepped forward so the small girl didn't need to finish her

explanation. He wasn't that tactless.

"I see. Then I guess I don't need to hold back."

He kept his gaze fixed solely on Furutsubaki even though he was surrounded by the possessed people. The demon deserved nothing less than his full attention in her last moments. He positioned his arm, wrapped in prayer beads, so he could deploy his artifact spirits at any time.

As though sensing his intent, the possessed let out groans and descended on him like a tidal wave.

But they were all too slow. For an experienced man like Somegorou, the average human was nothing. He hesitated to strike them, however. They were only possessed, not strengthened in any way. He could easily mow them down with Mad Skeletons, but they would die in the process. So he fought them without using his artifact spirits—if he couldn't do at least this much, he wouldn't have become known as a legendary spirit hunter.

He stepped forward with his right just as the approaching people came into range. He slammed his left shoulder into the first one, intentionally missing their solar plexus. He didn't need to hit them hard, just to create space. Jinya had shown him this move a long time ago. At full strength, it could make even demons falter. He held back, but that was still enough to send his opponents flying.

He continued to fend the possessed off with martial arts alone, standing in front of Himawari. He held back enough to not kill anyone, but leaving them unscathed was impossible. Hopefully they would forgive some slight injuries when all was said and done.

But no matter how much he struck them, they didn't stay down. They couldn't be knocked unconscious, nor did they seem to feel pain. Somegorou only had so much stamina. If things continued like this, the situation would turn sour, so he decided to settle things quickly.

"Paper swallow." He found an opening to pull out the paper swallow artifact

spirit his master had once used. It dashed forward as sharp as a blade, darting between the wall of people and aiming straight for Furutsubaki.

"Hmph..." With a click of the tongue, he diverted the swallow's trajectory. A few of the possessed had moved to block the path to Furutsubaki before it could reach her. However, he had predicted that she might use the humans as a shield—his strong irritation was for another reason.

"That's a real nasty power yer little sister's got, eh?"

"Don't say that. Her ability, like my own, is a precious, unfulfilled wish of our mother's."

A demon's ability wasn't inborn but a manifestation of the unmet desires of the heart, and so Furutsubaki's ability was something desired by her mother. Yet another reason for Somegorou to dislike Magatsume.

"Besides, Furutsubaki's ability wasn't meant to be used for something like this in the first place," Himawari said. "It was born from our mother's wish to control Uncle and enjoy a short tryst with him."

"That's disturbing in its own way."

"Perhaps. But in the end, that wish of hers never did come true. Perhaps we demons are fated to pine over what we can't have." Himawari had a look of resignation about her. She seemed peaceful, and yet so terribly sad.

"So Eizen ended up takin' control of her, huh? It's hard to tell which of you all is the real demon." Somegorou mainly said that to change the topic, but he meant it. Obviously humans weren't always just and demons weren't always evil, but Eizen's actions were simply inhumane—even if the one he harmed was a daughter of the monstrous Magatsume. Just thinking about what he had done made Somegorou's blood boil.

"Whoops."

The possessed lunged forward, interrupting their conversation. Their weapons were no better than things like construction timber picked off the

ground, but then again, they had likely not been gathered for fighting purposes but to be food for Eizen.

If they left her alone, Furutsubaki would cause many deaths. Somegorou wanted to put her to rest here, but there were only so many moves he could make. If he attacked from a distance, she would just use the possessed as a shield again. Perhaps he was meant to use Mad Skeletons to hold everyone in check and close the distance to her, then.

He considered doing that, but then thought better of it. Given the potential ways the fight could unfold, using his strongest artifact spirit for such a thing would be a blunder. But it didn't seem like he could handle all these people with martial arts alone. There were too many of them. Perhaps he could if he were younger, but as he was now his stamina wouldn't last him until he reached Furutsubaki.

"Hey, Himawari. You command demons, right? Can you bring some out now?"

Somegorou called out as he sidestepped a few of the possessed while making sure they didn't get too close to Himawari. He was lending a hand to her here, so surely she could repay the favor.

"If it's just a few, then I can summon them right away."

His offer must've already been on her mind. Three demons appeared right behind her from who knew where.

"Perfect. Clear a path for me. Just don't kill any of these folks."

"Very well. I normally wouldn't hesitate to, but Uncle will come to hate me if I kill senselessly." Hearing such a statement come from the little girl reminded Somegorou just whose daughter she was. She was as dangerous as his master had warned him.

"Sheesh. Do yer worlds revolve around Jinya or somethin'?"

"Not quite. It's more accurate to say he *is* our world." That wasn't a metaphor but the unmistakable truth. Jinya had meant everything to Magatsume, or

rather Suzune. That was why she had no choice but to turn her hatred against everything that night.

But Somegorou didn't know Himawari well enough to pick up such subtleties, and he just interpreted her words as a joke. He turned his attention back to Furutsubaki, shooting her a fierce, piercing glare. He dropped his weight low and gathered strength in his feet, preparing to dart his aged body forward.

"Heh, sure. Just don't start daydreamin' on me and mess up now."

"Shouldn't you worry about yourself first? I do believe you're old enough to be senile, Akitsu-san. Aren't you liable to start daydreaming on me first?"

"Oho, now you've said it."

As Himawari's demons moved ahead of him, he kicked off the ground. The demons were only lesser ones without a will of their own, weak and slow. But they could at least hold back the possessed and make a path for him.

Somegorou dodged what charging humans he could, and the demons handled the ones he couldn't. By repeating this simple process, he gradually gained ground. He didn't need to be right up close to Furutsubaki, just near enough that she couldn't use the humans as shields.

"Have a little more consideration for this old man, will ya?!"

He punched a human in the chin and slipped past when they stumbled, but a few more hurried up just as quickly. Though the possessed humans were not strong, they were numerous and annoyingly persistent. He moved to shove them aside, but Himawari's demons appeared to hold them back first.

"Appreciate it."

That gave him a clear path ahead. He was close enough now. There would be no missing at this range. He had the paper swallow in hand, and all he had to do was release it. He felt bad for Himawari and her younger sister, but at least he would be putting the latter out of her misery.

"Paper sw—agh?!"

Somegorou raised his right arm but didn't manage to swing it down. He heard a quick, dull sound, then his vision blurred. Pain coursed through his chin, and his head felt like he was spinning. Not understanding what had happened, he stumbled defenselessly before his enemy.

It took quite a few moments for him to understand that he had been struck in the chin. The blow had landed clean and rattled his brain, taking away his sense of equilibrium.

"Wh...at?"

Furutsubaki was gathering humans, successfully enough for rumors to spread. She did so for two purposes: to stockpile people for Eizen to consume and to lure out and entrap any spirit hunters pursuing him. It followed, then, that somebody would be ready to kill those lured-out spirit hunters. Somegorou had expected that much and purposefully held back his Mad Skeletons to react to any potential change in the situation, but a surprise attack still managed to land on him.

Through blurry vision, he saw someone step out from behind the featureless Furutsubaki. He thought he saw the air contort for a moment, but perhaps it was just his hazy consciousness.

"What a pain... My first job in forever, and I'm stuck with babysittin'?"

Standing there was a black demon of short stature but strong musculature. He had sharp claws and an even sharper, scalding glare.

"Who...?" Who are you? Somegorou wanted to ask but couldn't. His rattled brain was still recovering.

"Ikyuu. One of four demons aligned with Nagumo Eizen."

The demon gave his name with no hesitation, and Somegorou couldn't quite grasp his reason for doing so. He had a similar aura to Jinya, daring and old-fashioned, but that only made Somegorou more wary. This demon's boldness could only mean he was just that confident in his strength.

"...Mad Skeleton."

Somegorou forced his body to move, bringing out the artifact spirit in his left arm's prayer beads. Since he'd already passed Shouki down to his successor, this was the strongest artifact spirit in his arsenal.

He deployed a Mad Skeleton in front of him, aiming to put distance between himself and the demons. Just as he was about to move back, however, he felt pain course through his leg. A hideous arm had appeared out of thin air to grab and hold him in place. He looked back at the demon that had just appeared and saw the space past the creature's left shoulder was warped.

"His arm alone instantaneously moved itself...?"

Or perhaps the demon had the ability to connect spaces. Either way, he was able to send part of his body a short distance and attack remotely. He must've struck Somegorou's chin with a fist earlier. It didn't seem like Mad Skeleton would be an effective shield.

"Gah!"

There was no avoiding or blocking a fist that could come from any direction. Somegorou took a blow to the stomach and doubled over on himself, but his lucky sparrow artifact spirit kept the strike from being lethal. The sparrow had been made by his master and reached his wife after a series of ups and downs. She'd handed it to Somegorou in hopes it would be his protective good luck charm. Her kindness was what allowed him to survive this blow.

Just sitting back and enduring hits forever was meaningless, though, so he directed his Mad Skeleton to attack. But Ikyuu dodged to the side and delivered a backhand blow to the skeleton with his right hand. Even though he was a demon, his martial arts were well honed. It was clear how much he had cultivated himself from that simple dodge-and-strike alone.

It would take more than a single hit to shatter Mad Skeleton, however.

Understanding this, Ikyuu quickly lowered his stance and followed up with an elbow strike. Not finished yet, he pushed off his right leg and struck with the

heel of his palm.

"Oh, give me a break..." Somegorou's head had only just cleared, but another headache was starting to come on.

Using no demon ability whatsoever, nor any firearm like Izuchi had, Ikyuu had shattered Mad Skeleton with pure martial arts alone.

"I'm surprised you managed to counterattack there. You've got guts for an old man, Akitsu the Fourth." Ikyuu sneered, but he seemed to be enjoying himself, even grinning.

Somegorou gritted his teeth hard. He was indeed past his prime, but he was still known as a legendary spirit hunter because he remained strong enough to beat most spirits. And yet, this demon was proving to be a challenge. To think such a strong demon would still be around in the Taisho era.

"They don't call you a legendary spirit hunter for nothin'... It's a shame, though. We could had a real fight if only you were a bit younger."

"I don't exist for yer amusement, y'know."

"No, of course not. But you can at least make this babysittin' job not a complete bore, right?"

Somegorou knew Ikyuu's type. He'd crossed paths with his sort many times over his life. People like Ikyuu lived to fight and sought out any possible excuse to do so. Ikyuu likely joined up with Eizen not out of shared belief but for more opportunities to brawl. In a sense, then, he was not a particularly wicked demon. But he was still trouble nonetheless. Ikyuu could have been a saint for all Somegorou cared; if he was aiding Eizen then he was their enemy.

"Grant me a duel, Akitsu the Fourth."

"I decline."

"Is that wise? If you don't stop Furutsubaki here, all these humans will be fed to the old fart, y'know."

As a man who bore the name Akitsu Somegorou, he was hesitant to abandon

these people to their fate, but he did not favor his chances fighting both Furutsubaki and Ikyuu. They were not opponents he could defeat without preparation. His younger, more reckless self might have chosen differently, but age had made him far too levelheaded to chase death.

"Akitsu-san..."

"I know."

Himawari agreed. They had to flee.

Somegorou gritted his teeth, frustrated over how weak he was.

"You can't be serious. You're really chickenin' out and abandonin' these people?"

"Egg me on all ya want, but we'll be headin' outta here."

Having made up his mind, Somegorou moved fast. He summoned one Mad Skeleton after another and sent them at Ikyuu, who methodically shattered them one by one. It hurt Somegorou to see the artifact spirit he was so proud of be destroyed like this, but it was what it was.

"Oh, but I'm not leavin' empty-handed."

Ikyuu's eyes shot wide, but it was already too late. While he was distracted, Somegorou deployed even more Mad Skeletons and used them to snatch away the possessed humans. He might have failed to slay Furutsubaki, but he could at least prevent these casualties.

Lastly, a demon controlled by Himawari shouldered Somegorou and immediately moved to flee.

Ikyuu watched them go but made no move to attack. A look of pure disappointment filled his eyes.

"Doesn't look like they're followin'," Somegorou murmured after they had made some good distance.

"It seems that demon was tasked with killing anyone who checked out the rumors and discovered Furutsubaki. It doesn't look like he was all too sincere about obeying Eizen, though."

"Of course not. Who'd want to obey that nasty geezer? I think his reasons for not chasin' us are a bit different, though."

Perhaps Ikyuu simply saw no merit in chasing them. Somegorou was reminded again just how weak he'd become, but now was no time to be depressed.

"Hey, is there anythin' you can do about these guys?"

Even after distancing themselves from Furutsubaki, the possessed humans still remained under her control. Somegorou hoped Himawari could do something as a fellow daughter of Magatsume.

"I do not know. But I will try."

"Countin' on ya. I think I'll head over to you-know-who's now. Eizen's movin' faster than I expected."

If Furutsubaki had been active for a while, then Eizen must have had a decent amount of life stored up. His plan to take back Ryuuna could well be underway.

Somegorou clenched his fist tight, fearing the worst. The peace that had been formed out of compromise would crumble all too quickly.

Ikyuu stood amidst the shattered pieces of the Mad Skeletons. Seemingly detached from the world, he stared off in the direction Somegorou and Himawari had fled and sadly murmured, "What a bore..."

His words, weak and forlorn, faded into the night.

The day after that tumultuous night, Toudou Yoshihiko was hard at work at Koyomiza. Business had been as successful as ever for the past few days,

leaving Yoshihiko few moments to breathe between ticket collecting and cleaning. He still found time to observe the customers who came in, though. People from all walks of life visited the theater and watching them was one of the job's many joys.

Kimiko happened to come that day, joined this time by someone else.

"Oh, films really are just wonderful. Wouldn't you agree, Ryuuna-san?"
"...Mm."

The girl she was addressing looked younger. She was smallish, fair-skinned, had long black hair tied in a braid, and was rather pretty. Yoshihiko's heart skipped a beat when he laid eyes on her. Despite her youthful appearance, her mannerisms and the way she played with her hair felt acutely alluring. He couldn't help but blush.

"Oh, Yoshihiko-san. How do you do?"

He finally broke out of his daze and approached them with a smile, pretending like he hadn't just been staring.

"Um, hello, Kimiko-san. I need to clean up, so please be on your way."

"I'm sorry, I've done it again. Shall we go then, Ryuuna-san?"

"Mm."

The two held hands, and he smiled in amusement. "You two seem pretty close."

"We are! This is Ryuuna, by the way. She's Jiiya's niece."

Yoshihiko and Jiiya hadn't ever spoken with one another before. They would give each other a slight nod of acknowledgment when they saw each other, but that was it. Yoshihiko was surprised to see Jiiya was so young, since jiiya was usually a title for an elderly manservant. He had to be a good-natured young man if Kimiko respected him so much, but he was still a complete stranger to Yoshihiko.

"Ryuuna-san and I have been going everywhere together lately."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Jiiya says it's safer that way. He can be such a worrywart," Kimiko said with a soft smile.

Had Jiiya brought them today? Yoshihiko could swear Kimiko had only arrived with Ryuuna, but...

"Lady Kimiko." Without warning, a tall and muscular man was suddenly standing next to Kimiko.

"Jiiya, thank you for waiting."

"Not at all."

They talked like nothing was wrong, but Yoshihiko was sure Jiiya hadn't been there when he came in. He dazedly watched the two of them talk, unable to process what had happened.

"Did you like the film too, Ryuuna?"

"Mm."

Jiiya roughly patted Ryuuna's head. His attitude toward her was looser than with Kimiko. Ryuuna didn't say anything, but she narrowed her eyes contentedly.

Jiiya turned to face Yoshihiko next and bowed. "Forgive me for introducing myself so belatedly. I am Kadono Jinya, servant to the Akase family. I believe this is our first time talking?"

"Um, y-yes. I'm Toudou Yoshihiko." Yoshihiko was so surprised that his voice jumped a pitch.

"I've heard about you from Lady Kimiko. She tells me you've been good to her."

"N-not at all, um... So you must be Jiiya-san, then?"

"That is what Lady Kimiko calls me, yes. Her mother thought my name was

Jiiya as a child, and at some point it stuck." Jiiya's (or rather, Jinya's) smile was so slight that Yoshihiko almost missed it, but his tender tone clearly showed how much he treasured the memory.

"Oh, I see. You know, I was thinking you looked young for a 'jiiya.'"

"Yes, people often say that," Jinya replied flatly. His blank expression made it unclear to Yoshihiko whether or not he was teasing him. Not sure how to react, Yoshihiko forced a smile.

"Ah ha ha. Sorry. I'd just been wondering for quite a while why Kimiko-san calls you 'Jiiya' when you're about the same age as her."

"Ah. Actually, I'm quite old. More than twice her age."

Then that made him at least thirty, Yoshihiko realized with astonishment. They continued to chat for a time. Jinya's expression didn't change much, but he was well-mannered and proved surprisingly affable. He had some admonishing words for Kimiko, but he clearly cared for her.

"Jiiya, shall we get going? I'm sure Yoshihiko-san would like to return to his work." At a good stopping point, Kimiko spoke up.

Jinya straightened his posture and said, "Indeed. I'm sorry for keeping you so long, Toudou-sama. Until next time."

"Not at all, I had fun talking to you, Jiiya-san. There's no need to be so formal with me, though. Calling me Yoshihiko is fine."

Though their conversation was short, talking to Jinya together with Kimiko had been pleasant. Yoshihiko wished he could be on more equal terms with him. Having Jinya address him so formally was also troubling given their age difference.

"Very well then, Yoshihiko-kun."

"Just perfect. Thank you."

Jinya had mulled it over for a bit, but he eventually relented. However, Kimiko seemed a bit displeased by this development for reasons that were lost on

Yoshihiko.

Since they had chatted some more to boost Kimiko's mood, Yoshihiko's allotted cleaning time had shrunk far more than he anticipated. He walked with the group toward the entrance so he could politely see them off and heard an excited man's voice.

"Oh, here it is! The theater, the king of entertainment!"

Right outside were an almond-eyed young man and a small but animated young woman.

"I've never been to a motion picture theater. Have you, Soushi?"

"Yeah, I go every now and then."

"Even though you're inheriting an antique store?"

"The hell's that gotta do with anything?"

Yoshihiko had thought they were a couple on a date at first, but it sounded more like they were just friends out on the town.

"I apologize, but we just finished screening a film. The next one won't be for a while." He felt bad to disappoint them, but nothing could be done about it.

The young man seemed greatly embarrassed all of a sudden. He'd apparently been hoping to show off to the woman by coming here. "Yikes. I screwed the pooch now, huh?"

"You didn't check? Oh my gosh, you're so stupid."

"Ouch. That hurts extra coming from someone really stupid..."

Their argument didn't seem very serious, more on the level of teasing. Yoshihiko thought they felt like family from the way they didn't mince words, but Kimiko disagreed.

"Yoshihiko-san, don't the two of them seem like they have something *special* going on?" she whispered excitedly into his ear. He found her giddiness rather odd.

"I don't think it's our place to say, Kimiko-san..."

"Do you think they're lovers? They must be on a date right now." She giggled. "It's like something straight out of a film."

"Ah ha ha. You're surprisingly gossipy, aren't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" She puffed out her cheeks.

Yoshihiko couldn't stick his nose in where it didn't belong, though. That went against the basics of customer service. It would be a real problem if they got offended and complained.

"All right, guess we'll kill time and come back later." The young man gave a slight nod—not to Yoshihiko but to Jinya.

"Oh, uh, please do come by again." Yoshihiko bowed deeply as the pair began to leave. He felt mystified by what had just happened.

"Ah!" Kimiko exclaimed just then.

"Is something wrong, Kimiko-san?"

"No, it's just...I thought I recognized those two."

"Are they nobles? Wow, I guess you can't judge a book by its cover. Oh, whoops. That's a bit rude, isn't it?"

Kimiko didn't react. Her earlier excitement was gone, and she seemed hesitant now.

Jinya spoke up and said, "I believe those two are Motoki Soushi and Saegusa Sahiro. We met them at the evening party."

"I thought so. Didn't they recognize us?"

"Actually..."

The two of them were talking quietly so Yoshihiko couldn't hear. He didn't mind, and he certainly didn't want to pry, so he focused his attention elsewhere. The man and woman from earlier were bickering again. They were too far away for Yoshihiko to tell what they were complaining about now, but

he felt like their arguing was a sign of their closeness.

"I'm glad to see they're safe," Kimiko said with a sigh.

Yoshihiko had no clue what she was so relieved about, but he did think she'd made a good point earlier when she said the pair looked like they came straight out of a film. They seemed practically made for each other. He hoped they would come back to Koyomiza soon.

But he never did get to meet them again. The following day, Saegusa Sahiro vanished from Kogetsudou.

3

A THIN LAYER OF CLOUDS covered the sky, making it rather dark out even at midday. Ikyuu violently downed cup after cup of liquor as he sat on the veranda of Eizen's secondary residence. Izuchi gave him a side glance and drank his own cup dry, then sighed in satisfaction.

"You seem upset, Ikyuu."

"Ya don't say. The old fart's got me on babysittin' and fodder collection, and the so-called legendary spirit hunter turned out to be nothin' but hot air. 'Course I'm upset."

"Really? I thought the fourth Akitsu wasn't half bad myself. But I get you're not satisfied with your work. I'd swap with you if I could, but you know how it is."

Izuchi's Gatling gun stood out too much, and Yonabari's ability wasn't well suited to this kind of task. Ikyuu was by far the best candidate to safeguard Furutsubaki, especially since he excelled in fights that happened in town. Eizen had assigned him after careful consideration, and the decision was undoubtedly correct. But that only made Ikyuu all the more annoyed, as it left him without a clear target to vent his frustration at.

"It's fine; I got nothin' against you. We can say this liquor makes us even if it really bothers you," Ikyuu said.

"I'll take it. 'Nother cup?"

"Of course."

With a grin, Ikyuu let Izuchi pour him another cupful. Thinking about how much he appreciated Izuchi's concern, he drank the cup down in one go. Though the liquor was of poor quality, high spirits kept them knocking back one cup after another. Drinking under a drab, overcast sky like this every now and then wasn't so bad, Ikyuu thought. Things were peaceful.

"What'chu boys doing? Moaning and groaning over drinks?"

But of course, their peace couldn't last. Yonabari called out to them from behind with a bored expression.

"Ugh. Go bother someone else." Ikyuu dismissed them with a grimace.

Izuchi didn't care to take anyone's side; he just wished the two wouldn't fight right when they had a good drinking vibe going on.

"I'm here to talk to Izuchi, not you. You just happened to be here," Yonabari said. "What're you moping for, anyway? You act real girly for a man."

"Oh, stuff it. You're the last person I wanna hear that from."

Izuchi found himself nodding in agreement. Yonabari was tall and kept their hair cut short, but their figure was slender, and their features were soft in a feminine way. Izuchi had known them for a while now, but he still didn't know what gender Yonabari was.

"Say, enlighten us real quick, Yonabari. Are you a man or a woman?" Izuchi asked.

"Wait, you're only asking now? After all this time?"

"I've been wondering off and on for a while now. There just hasn't been a good time to ask." Ikyuu's allusion to Yonabari's ambiguous gender had brought

the question to the forefront of Izuchi's mind.

Yonabari shrugged. "I mean, I don't mind answering. I'm both. I'm a haniwari."

"Haniwari" was another word for the two waning and waxing half-moons. In ancient texts, it was used to refer to someone who possessed male genitalia for half the month and female genitalia for the other half. In actual practice, the word referred to people with both male and female genitalia, as well as those whose gender couldn't be categorized because they lacked clear male or female characteristics. They could also be called haninyou ("half-yin, half-yang") and futanari ("possessing two parts").

In the *Kojiki*, one of Japan's earliest chronicles of myths, three gods were said to have come into existence at the dawn of the world: Ame-no-Minakanushi, Takamimusuhi, and Kamumusuhi. These gods were all hitorigami, deities that came into being alone instead of in male-female pairs. They were simultaneously male and female, while being neither as well. The hitorigami were worshipped as the gods that birthed Japan, and those who were of similarly ambiguous gender—the haniwari—were believed to be more perfect and closer to godliness than the common man by the people of the ancient world. At times, they were even instated as mediums to speak the word of the gods. As they could embody all three types of gods—male, female, and hitorigami deities—they were believed to be the gods' blessed envoys.

"Hani-what? Whazzat mean?"

"You really don't know a lot, huh, Izuchi? It means I got both man parts and woman parts."

But time passed and things changed. The development of medicine caused haniwari to be redefined as a diseased people, and reverence toward the gods faded as the world entered the modern age. No longer did people see haniwari as people touched by the divine. Instead, they came to treat them with revulsion. The once-worshipped haniwari were deemed aberrant in the Taisho

era.

"So...you're not a man or a woman?"

"The opposite. I'm a man *and* a woman. To put it in simpler terms for you, I have breasts, a rod, and a hole."

"You don't have to paint me a picture... Have some shame, damn..."

"I do have shame! It's your fault for being too dumb to understand if I'm not at least *this* direct!" Yonabari raised their voice. They sounded genuinely angry and not just their usual self.

"Leave it at that, Izuchi. This ain't the kinda topic for those sorta comments." Ikyuu cut in, being the one to stop the argument for once. He was offhand about it, not even looking their way as he drank, but Yonabari was flabbergasted nonetheless.

"Huh? Ikyuu is actually being considerate for once? What's next, pigs flying?"

Ikyuu could guess at what kind of treatment Yonabari had received to want to serve Eizen and overturn the world of man. Perhaps that explained why he was acting so uncharacteristically for once.

"Don't get me wrong. I just stopped y'all 'cause I want to enjoy my liquor in peace," he said with an annoyed look as he downed yet another cup.

"Hmm... So you're saying you're technically a woman? Okay then, whaddya say you and I get drinks together sometime?" Izuchi asked. It was a bit lowbrow for a joke, but he figured it'd lighten the mood.

"Ah ha ha, I've never had someone hit on me with such obvious ulterior motives. Don't think I won't pop you one!" Yonabari played along, letting things be water under the bridge between them. "Ah, whoops. Shouldn't waste too much time dillydallying here."

"Hm? Why's that, then?" Izuchi said.

"I got work, dummy. Boss man's orders." Yonabari rolled their eyes. They clearly weren't particularly loyal to Eizen, but they seemed pretty eager

nevertheless.

"Is that right? You look pretty psyched for once."

"My task just so happens to line up with my interests this time. Anything goes so long as I don't kill my target. Perfect for me, yeah? I'm thinking I'll drop in at Koyomiza afterward."

Bringing a target back alive was child's play for Yonabari.

"Is that so? Don't do anything too reckless while you're out," Izuchi said.

"Yeah, yeah." Yonabari left then without looking back.

Izuchi downed his cup, which had now gone lukewarm. The liquor tasted duller than it had before.

Saegusa Sahiro was an ordinary girl with ordinary sensibilities. Her family were spirit hunters in name only. They didn't have a rich history like the Kukami and weren't renowned for their strength like the Akitsu. They couldn't even match up to the humble Motoki, who only handled the spirits of old objects. They were a family that had merely mimicked folk spiritualists at their best and had long been ruined by the world's modernization.

Naturally, such a family had no techniques to pass down. The only valuable things they had left were ties to the similarly low-standing Motoki family. Wanting to protect those ties, Sahiro's grandfather sent her to Kogetsudou for learning purposes. Whether he actually meant for her to learn from the Motoki or simply wanted to cling to his family's pride as once-relevant spirit hunters was unclear, but Sahiro went gladly because she was fascinated by the mysterious world of spirit hunters. She was welcomed with open arms and got along well with the grandson, Soushi.

Soushi was young but capable. He could handle a wide variety of bizarre jobs, whether they involved awasegai shells full of emotion, a folding screen that had fallen in love, a netsuke sculpture that played pranks, or a mosquito net that

drove away nightmares. He handled each request sincerely, respecting the emotions of the objects. The Motoki way wasn't to slay spirits but to understand and reason with them so they could grant them a peaceful rest.

Sahiro thought that was wonderful. Japan had modernized, and the markets were now full of mass-produced goods. A store like Kogetsudou that dealt in old, obsolete items was behind the times—there was no arguing against that. But Sahiro secretly adored their way of life anyway.

"Uuugh. Where are the customers?"

Sahiro was left manning the store alone because Soushi had stepped out for work. She had no particular abilities to speak of. Her senses were sharper than those of a normal civilian, but that was about it. She had only been at the Nagumo's evening party because Soushi had been kind enough to bring her along. If a customer walked in now, she wouldn't be able to give them any spirit-hunter-related service.

"Hello. Oh, is it just you today, Sahiro-chan?"

Finally, a customer appeared, and a repeat one at that. However, this particular customer was strange in that they'd yet to ever buy anything, only coming to look at the antiques and chat up Soushi and Sahiro.

"Oh, hello, Yonabari-san."

"Where's Soushi-kun at? I had some business with him."

"I'm sorry, he left a while ago for some work."

"Mm, that's a shame." Yonabari sagged their shoulders theatrically.

This androgynous customer had come by a lot recently, mainly to tease Soushi. Despite never buying anything, their presence was welcome since things could get so quiet.

"Hm, what to do..."

"Was there something you wanted to tell him? I could pass a message along if you'd like."

"No, that's okay. There's no point if I don't have him in person. I guess you'd do too, though." Yonabari sized Sahiro up, nodding to themselves. Then, with a sudden broad smile, they said, "Heeey, Sahiro-chan. I'm a bit embarrassed to ask this of a girl, but could you help me with a little something?"

"Well, that depends on what you need."

"Oh, it's nothing extreme."

A fake-looking smile remained on their face, and the silence in the store made their footsteps early distinct.

"I just need you to come with me for a bit."

Yonabari approached Sahiro and pierced her heart with one hand.

"I'm back. Hello? Sahiro?"

Sometime later, Soushi returned to Kogetsudou. Sahiro was nowhere to be seen, and a rust-like smell filled the air inside.

"Just where the hell did you go?"

Ultimately, he never learned of her fate.

Yonabari didn't like killing people and wasn't afraid to admit it. That was why they hated Ikyuu so much. Ikyuu was someone who killed with ease, showing no mercy to the weak and strong alike. It was revolting, really. Yonabari loathed those who killed people senselessly.

That didn't mean Yonabari was a pacifist or anything. They simply believed that life was precious and shouldn't be wasted—especially the lives of women. That was why they manifested the ability they did.

"You doing all right there, Sahiro-chan?"

Sahiro, being carried by the head, could do nothing but groan. The look on her

face was one of sheer despair.

"This here is our current base, Eizen-san's second home! Isn't that crazy? Nobles are something else. Could you imagine having two homes as lavish as this?"

Yonabari cheerfully laughed, wearing the same expression they did when they visited Kogetsudou as a customer. Frightened, Sahiro felt a wisp of air escape her throat.

"Now then, shall we play a little more?"

Sahiro's tears mixed with blood and were washed away.

Yonabari's ability, *Plaything*, was a simple one. It allowed them to prevent one person other than themselves from dying.

From the bottom of their heart, Yonabari did not want to kill people. Sure enough, Sahiro was not dead.

"P-please...just kill...me..."

Even with her heart pierced through, she lived. Her arms and legs had been torn off, her entrails pulled out, her skull split, but she still remained alive. She felt all the pain without losing consciousness and would keep living until Yonabari released their ability's hold on her. As the ability's name would suggest, she had been made into Yonabari's plaything.

"Jeez, Sahiro-chan, you silly goose. Don't say sad things like that. You have to keep living no matter how tough things get! Those are Eizen-san's orders. Not that I can keep you alive forever, of course."

Life was a precious thing that needed to be enjoyed to its fullest. Killing someone right away was blasphemy against it.

"But don't worry, there're tons of lesser demons around here waiting to keep you company, so you won't be bored anytime soon. They might be a little rough, but I'm sure you can handle that. It's not like a little roughhousing will kill you, right?"

Sahiro's lungs and throat were destroyed. She couldn't die, but she had long lost any of the dignity a human deserved. Yonabari might as well have been talking to themselves.

Left with no choice, Sahiro did the only thing she could do to escape. Yonabari laughed at the sound of the sickening squish.

"Ah, no, no. How many times do I have to tell you, Sahiro-chan? I have no intention of letting you die."

Sahiro had tried to bite her own tongue off, but it was pointless. She wouldn't die even from that, and she had no choice but to endure the coming suffering against her will.

"Hey, playtime's over. Old man Eizen's callin' for ya."

Yonabari, who had triumphantly waltzed in carrying Sahiro by the head, stopped dead in their tracks. Ikyuu stood blocking their way, a disgusted look on his face.

"Couldn't you have waited a bit to tell me? I've got so many fun things ready for Sahiro-chan!"

"Shut up and do what yer told, scum. Boss's orders."

"Scum? Why am I scum? You kill people too, don't you? Why are you making me out to be the only bad guy here?"

Neither made any effort to hide how much they loathed the other. There was clearly no understanding to be had between them, but Ikyuu spoke up anyway.

"You're not wrong. I'm a lowlife who kills people. But I've never once toyed with a life like you."

"You reaaally are such a tight-ass. What's it matter? At the end of the day, it's still killing. You think you're a saint because you kill cleanly or something? That's hilarious."

Yonabari laughed, making Sahiro grimace with pain as her head dangled in their left hand. It was intentional, of course. Yonabari was enjoying her pain and

Ikyuu's reaction.

Though they were polar opposites, Yonabari could comprehend Ikyuu's way of being. He was a demon who believed two people fighting with their life on the line was the greatest thing in the world. He found bliss in triumphing over and killing the strong, but he had probably never once toyed with the weak.

Ikyuu believed strength was obtained by those who polished what life they had. Humans who dedicated their all-too-short lives wholeheartedly to training shone with brilliance, and so killing them was worthwhile. Though perhaps twisted, Ikyuu saw life as precious in his own way.

"Killing is killing, but at least I treasure the ones I kill instead of killing them outright."

Yonabari, too, saw life as precious in their own way. It was wasteful to kill quickly. Life was fragile and fleeting. It needed to be handled tenderly and enjoyed to the fullest. That was the respectful thing to do.

Their ways of thinking were incompatible with one another.

The air grew tense as they stared each other down with murderous hostility.

"You're late, Yonabari."

Right when it seemed a fight was about to break out, a hoarse voice sounded. Having eaten to his heart's content, Eizen's wounds had healed, and he looked more animated than before.

"You've brought the girl instead of the boy, did you? No matter. Bring her here."

"...Okaaaay," Yonabari replied with irritation.

Eizen showed no sign he minded Yonabari's attitude and moved further inside with agility abnormal for a man of his age. The fact that he revealed his back to them, despite no real trust shared between them, showed just how confident he was that he couldn't be killed.

In the end, Yonabari didn't manage to have his fun with Sahiro. They felt a bit

sorry for the girl but reluctantly followed Eizen.

"Well, I did what you asked."

"Good. Then let's begin right away."

They reached a dark inner room containing a featureless demon— Furutsubaki, the daughter of Magatsume turned loyal pawn of Eizen.

Confused, Yonabari cocked their head to the side.

"The daughters of Magatsume are defective husks on their own," Eizen explained. "Only by taking in another can they gain awareness."

Jishibari had bound Nagumo Kazusa's soul and Azumagiku had taken in Shirayuki's skull, but Furutsubaki was featureless because she had yet to become someone.

"At first I thought I'd go with just anyone, but then I realized what a squandered opportunity that would be. I look forward to seeing the look on Akitsu's face." A darkness filled Eizen's eyes. "If it weren't for his poor judgment, Kazusa would still be alive. That fool's disciple can bear my resentment." This was why he'd gone out of his way to fetch a youngster Somegorou knew. Bound by the past, the old man smiled hideously. "Go on then, Yonabari. Give her to Furutsubaki."

Yonabari offhandedly tossed Sahiro's half-destroyed body forward. The featureless demon made no move to catch it, but once the body touched the demon's own, it immediately began taking it in, breaking bone and slurping fluids as it gradually absorbed Sahiro's flesh. It was an uncanny, gruesome sight, but not everyone found it terribly interesting. Yonabari yawned. Eizen, on the other hand, watched with delight.

And so, Furutsubaki was featureless no more.

"It feels like...I've awakened from a bad dream."

Before them now was a demon that was the mirror image of Saegusa Sahiro.

The following day, Yonabari made their way to the place they couldn't go yesterday. Not on Eizen's orders but for their own amusement.

They reached Koyomiza to find a film already screening. Yoshihiko was sitting there with a bored look on his face. He couldn't leave in case someone needed guidance, so he just killed time dangling his feet. Things were peaceful, but he still sighed out of boredom.

"Heya, Yoshihiko-kun."

"Oh, Yonabari-san." He gave them a natural smile, genuinely happy to see them. "The screening's already started, but you can come in midway through if you'd like."

"Mm, nah. I'm not here to see a film today. I'm here to see you. I need a breather after all the work I've been doing."

Yoshihiko blushed in embarrassment at Yonabari's directness. His innocence was refreshing.

"Ha ha, well, I'm flattered."

"It's fun talking to you, really. I'm sure Kimiko-chan feels the same way."

"Oh? You know Kimiko-san?" Yoshihiko was surprised. He hadn't expected to hear her name mentioned.

Yonabari smiled from the bottom of their heart at his reaction. "I do, I do. I actually work at the Nagumo home, so I know all about her."

"The Nagumo? They're the ones the Akase are a branch family of, right? Small world, I guess."

"Oh, you said it." Yonabari reached into their pocket. "By the way, I also know Kimiko-chan considers you a dear friend."

"Oh, ha ha. How embarrassing." He blushed.

"Ah, what a sweet child you are. But I started thinking, see. If it came down to it, wouldn't Kimiko-chan listen to something *you* asked of her, more than what

the Demon Eater says?"

While Yoshihiko was pondering the unfamiliar term, Yonabari pulled out a knife. He barely reacted, though. Because it was someone he knew, he didn't immediately process the danger he was in—just as Yonabari intended.

Yonabari roughly forced the knife into Yoshihiko's gut. Then they pulled it out and showed off the bloody blade to him. Only then did he realize he had been stabbed.

"This is my ability, *Plaything*. Until I release it, you won't die. To put it another way, you *will* die if I release it. Got it?" Yonabari seemed to be implying that Yoshihiko would live so long as he obeyed.

He looked up at them in disbelief.

"The Demon Eater would abandon you in a heartbeat, but not Kimiko-chan. I'm sure she'd do whatever you'd ask of her."

Yonabari met his gaze and smiled the same smile that was always on their face.

"Good, good. With this, the Demon Eater has no chance of winning."

Jinya and Eizen would clash soon. Yonabari looked up to the brisk skies, eagerly anticipating the coming show.

Intermission:

Resentment

AKITSU SOMEGOROU spent his days in Tokyo looking into rumors around town and paying visits to Kogetsudou.

The first Akitsu Somegorou was a talented metalworker. He was able to put his soul into his work, in quite the literal sense. It was through his skill as a craftsman that he managed to develop the techniques to become an artifact spirit user. That was why craftsmanship was core to the identity of the Akitsu.

Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth was an old man now, but he still remembered dearly the lessons his predecessor had hammered into him. That was why he enjoyed browsing the antiques kept at Kogetsudou, which were all handled with love and care. This was the perfect place to stop and take a breather, especially since he could talk shop with a fellow spirit hunter as well.

"Ah, jeez. I've been just too darn busy lately. Really doin' a number on these ol' bones," he said.

"Really? Because you've been coming by an awful lot for someone who's supposed to be busy."

"That's, er, well... I have my reasons!"

Somegorou had been visiting Kogetsudou more often lately because the whole failure in the Furutsubaki incident had him down in the dumps. Motoki Soushi was willing to chat with him, even if he never bought anything. He'd teased the young man too much, though, which cost him some of the respect he once commanded as a more senior spirit hunter. Still, they got along fine otherwise.

"Y'know, I'd sure love to talk to that grandfather of yours sometime," Somegorou said.

"Gramps doesn't come out to the shop much nowadays."

"A shame." Somegorou rubbed a finger across an item on display. Not a single speck of dust. "You do good work maintaining the place. I'd love to bring my grandchild here."

"Thank you. I'm not really doing anything special, though."

The young man had probably been raised to be a hard worker. Such dedication was laudable, but Somegorou felt someone Soushi's age could cut himself a little more slack.

"Items used for a hundred years gain souls of their own and become artifact spirits, but the crafts of the Akitsu gain souls in a far shorter time. A lot of people think this is because we have some kinda secret technique, but no, we don't really do nothin' special." Somegorou grinned. "Just as ya can never get along with some people even if ya spent ten years with them, ya can become best friends with others in just ten days. Time means nothin' to the heart. We Akitsu have devoted ourselves to understandin' this."

Without saying a word, Soushi listened attentively. He was better than Somegorou's grandchild in that regard.

"We pour our heart and soul into makin' our crafts, then spend time with 'em and fill 'em with emotion. We don't care whether they turn into somethin' wicked or kind; we accept everythin' about 'em. That's the true technique of the Akitsu. The skills we learn to fight spirits and whatnot are all secondary. Learnin' how to fill our crafts with a hundred years' worth of care and love is what we're really all about."

The Nagumo had once truly loved their swords and been worthy of their epithet, the Nagumo of the Demonic Sword. But at some point, they fell victim to the tides of time and went astray. Somegorou's words might have sounded like the preaching of an old man to some people, but he felt he had to speak after seeing how much emotion the store was filled with.

"But you can't appeal to the soul by actin' in self-interest. To truly connect, ya

gotta be earnest. This is a skill that can't be learned, but you can do it just fine. Just look at how worried all these antiques are for ya."

Somegorou was so willing to share the teachings he had learned from his master because he saw the proof of Soushi's dedication. Grateful for all the care they received, every antique, every painting, every piece of furniture showed concern for their caretaker. They could neither speak nor reach out a helping hand, but they still hoped the favor they had been given would be repaid.

"Oh..." Soushi expressed surprise.

"What's wrong? Scared to share your worries with some geezer?" Somegorou joked.

Soushi thought quietly for a few moments before gradually opening up. "My family, the Motoki, are spirit hunters in name only. We're weak, but I've never minded that."

His grandfather told stories of the way he used to resolve strange incidents involving the antiques that found their way to Kogetsudou. One time, there was a folding screen that was tired and withered the flowers depicted on it. By patiently talking with the folding screen, Soushi's grandfather was able to make the flowers bloom brilliantly again. There were many other similar cases, such as one with an ukiyo-e picture depicting Kudanzaka Hill and another with a beckoning cat statue that got drunk, where the problem was resolved by simply talking with the objects about their problems. These weren't the grand battles with spirits that Soushi admired so much, but he did respect what his grandfather did.

His grandfather had an eye for spirits, but he was weak for a spirit hunter. Most of the cases he handled were ones that could be resolved simply by talking to the objects. His grandfather's greatest asset was his kind personality, which helped him make objects open up about their problems.

But the Motoki's family's history didn't run deep, and there were not many skills that could be passed down the family line. Naturally, that meant Soushi

inherited little for a spirit hunter, but he did not hate being born to such a family because it allowed him to meet Saegusa Sahiro.

"Sahiro's family has distant ties to mine, but they're no longer strong enough to continue the spirit-hunter trade. Sahiro is supposedly staying at Kogetsudou for training, but I think it's really because her family didn't want to lose its connection to this side of the world."

"Ah... I see." It was difficult to become ordinary after being something special for so long. Since he'd been brought up to be a spirit hunter, turning into an ordinary person was unthinkable for Somegorou himself.

"It's not like Sahiro is serious about becoming a spirit hunter. It's more like an interest of hers, something she's fascinated by. She treats me like garbage even though she's younger than me, and she has no manners whatsoever. She listens to gramps, but she's clumsy and blunders all the time when she works. She's really only good for sweeping the entrance. Seriously, I sweat bricks whenever I watch her handle our wares."

Soushi recounted his memories of Sahiro as if he were going through a list. She was more standoffish than her appearance let on, but she was sociable. It didn't take long for them to become friends. They argued frequently, but he—bashfully—admitted that he didn't hate that. Despite her sometimes-harsh words for him, he could feel how much she cared for him.

"But...she sympathizes with the objects so much. She can't see them or hear their voices, but every time an antique or picture comes along with a problem that I help it with, she smiles and says, 'Thank goodness.' Not for my sake but out of genuine happiness for the spirits."

Most people couldn't see the souls of objects, so few believed the cases Soushi got involved with. Sometimes he'd recounted experiences to a friend only to be called a liar. But Sahiro believed him unreservedly, as blind to such spirits as she was, and was even happy for the items that had their problems solved.

"She can't even sense them, but she understands how I feel. She praises what I do. Thanks to her, I've learned to feel proud of what we do here at Kogetsudou, even if we're weak."

Spirit hunters were losing their place in the Taisho era, but Sahiro had helped him feel pride in what he did. To a third party, what she did for him may not have seemed like much, but to Soushi it was like his whole world had been changed.

He gritted his teeth hard and said, "That's why...I can't help but hate myself for being so powerless."

Sahiro had disappeared days ago. Many people had helped look for her, but she had yet to be found.

Of course, mundane foul play at the hands of a human as well as her disappearing of her own volition were on the table, but Somegorou suspected Eizen was behind this. Perhaps he'd had Furutsubaki whisk her away. She might have already been devoured by the old man.

"Akitsu-san, have you found anything yet?"

Somegorou shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"No, no... It's fine. You've done more than enough already. You come by here so much because you want to check on me, don't you?"

The young man did his best to hide it, but even a half stranger like Somegorou could tell he was drained. He swung by Kogetsudou whenever he could to make sure Soushi wouldn't do anything rash in his desperation.

"I hear you've been takin' walks at night," Somegorou said.

"Ah, so you heard about that. Don't worry, I'm just looking for her. I'm not stupid enough to think I could do anything in a fight."

Somegorou wanted to tell him to stop, but he knew it would be pointless. The young man wouldn't have started at all if a warning would be enough to deter him. So instead, Somegorou made his voice as cold as possible and said, "I

won't tell ya not to worry 'bout her, but we're spirit hunters. Prepare for the worst."

"I know. I really do..." Soushi hung his head. He knew Eizen wasn't soft enough for him to expect a miracle. "But if someone really has hurt her...then I want to make sure they pay, no matter what."

Having lost his parents to demons and come to resent them for a time, Somegorou couldn't fault him for that. He left the store without looking back.

The sky was clear. If he walked a bit further, he would be greeted by a much more modern townscape and be able to enjoy a nice walk.

Foreign culture had taken root in Japan, and the world of the Taisho era was glamorous and colorful. But just because a new era had begun, it didn't mean they were without problems.

"Damn geezer... Just hurry up and be on yer way."

The elderly were revered because they entrusted the world to the young and passed away peacefully. As the student of a master who died with honor, Somegorou could not approve of the way Eizen clung to the past.

Somegorou clicked his tongue, irritated by the perfection of the afternoon.



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