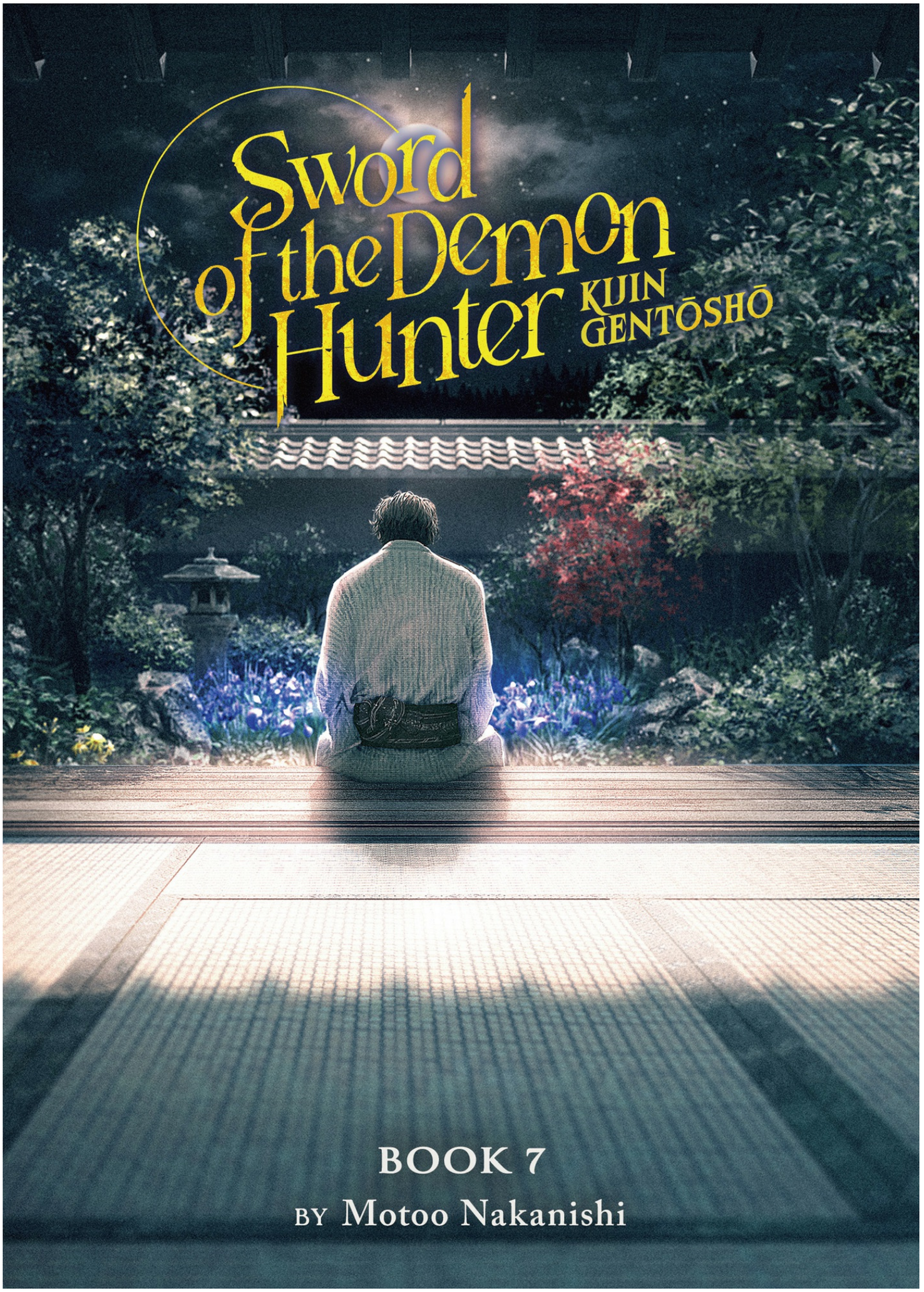
Sword of the Demon Hunter
KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ
BOOK 7
BY Motoo Nakanishi

Table of Contents

Copyrights and Credits

Title Page

Table of Contents Page

Character List

Meiji Arc

Walking with You (Continuation)

Fading Faces, Evening Twilights

Thoughts of You

Meiji Arc Final Chapter: Lone Shizuka

Intermission: Privileges of the Inexperienced

Footnotes

Newsletter

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Sword of the Demon Hunter

KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ

BOOK 7

WRITTEN BY

Motoo Nakanishi

Seven Seas Entertainment

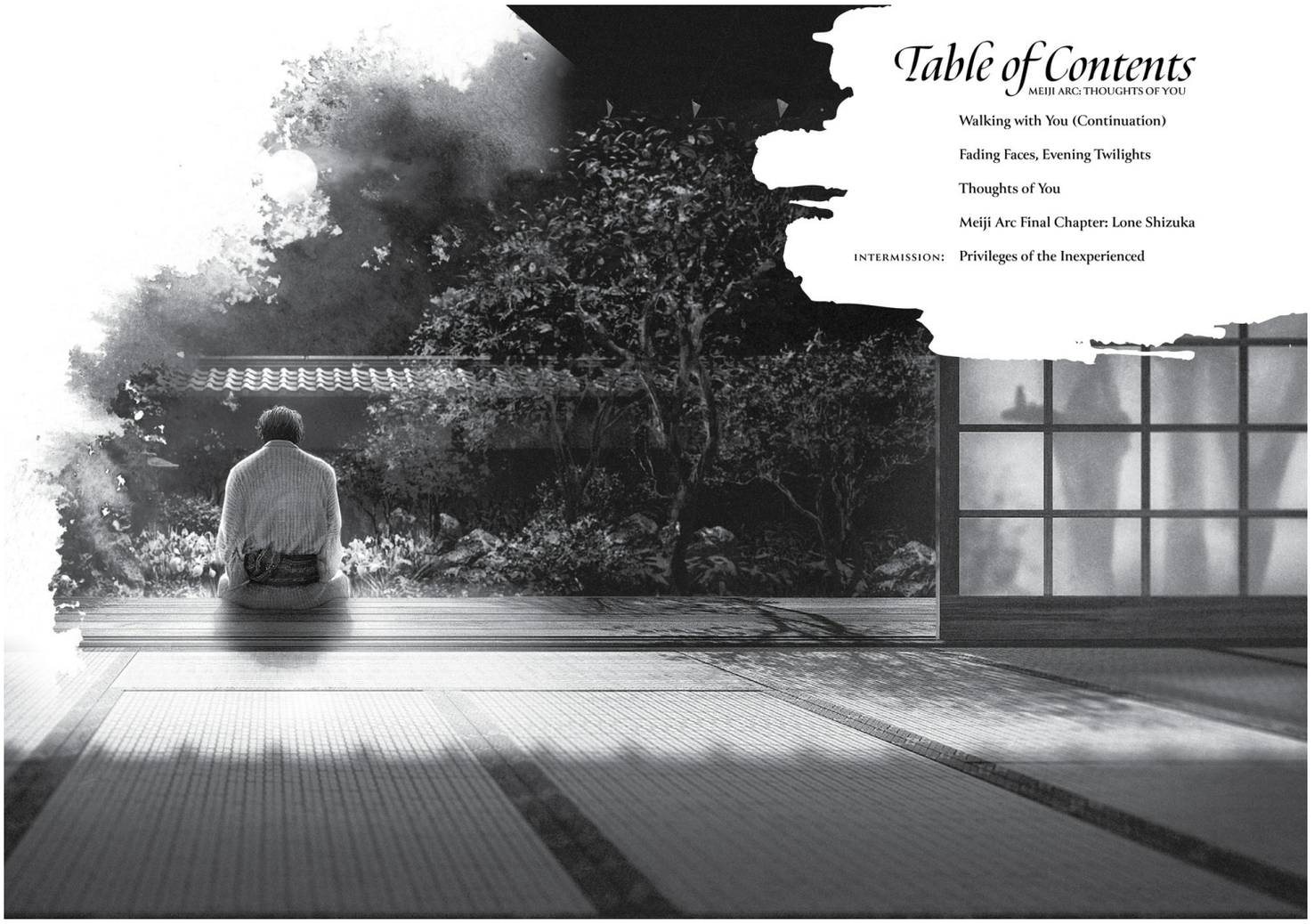

Table of Contents

MEIJI ARC: THOUGHTS OF YOU

Walking with You (Continuation)

Fading Faces, Evening Twilights

Thoughts of You

Meiji Arc Final Chapter: Lone Shizuka

INTERMISSION: Privileges of the Inexperienced

Character List

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.

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

Kaneomi: The spirit of one of the Yatonomori Kaneomi demonic swords.

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

Utsugi Heikichi: Somegorou's disciple. Loathes demons.

Himawari: A demon born from a fragment of Magatsume's heart.

Azumagiku: The Shrine Maiden of Healing, able to give others reprieve by temporarily erasing painful memories with her demon power.

Suzune: Jinya's sister by birth. A demon, and the one who killed Shirayuki, the woman Jinya loved. Under the name Magatsume, she appears once more before Jinya in Kyoto.

Meiji Arc

Walking with You
(Continuation)

3

Like always, we link hands and walk the path home.

"THERE'S SOMETHIN' that's been buggin' me for a while now," Heikichi abruptly said. He and Azumagiku were sitting in the main building of an abandoned temple.

When she wasn't keeping up the saintly facade of the Shrine Maiden of Healing, Azumagiku was just like any other girl: She had a cheerful disposition, a sweet tooth, and a smile on her face. Right now, she was childishly stuffing her cheeks with red bean bread the way any ordinary girl might.

"What's that, then?" she said between bites.

"Well, your ability lets you erase and alter memories, but you're called the Shrine Maiden of *Healing*. Doesn't really track, does it?"

Azumagiku swallowed the last piece, wiped her mouth, and then pondered for a bit with her fingers pressed against her lips. The paleness of her fingers made her lips seem all the more scarlet in contrast. Heikichi couldn't help but stare.

"Okay, so imagine we were husband and wife for a second," she said.

"H-husband and wife?!"

"Hypothetically. Relax."

Out of a guilty conscience, as well as some bashfulness, Heikichi checked his surroundings. This may have been official work, but the fact that he was meeting a woman without telling Nomari still weighed on his mind.

Feeling a bit put off by his overblown reaction, Azumagiku smiled awkwardly.

She cleared her throat, then continued. “Ahem… Imagine we were husband and wife. How would you feel if someone murdered me?”

The question flummoxed him. But he could tell she was looking for a serious answer, so he pulled himself together and said, “Well, I suppose I’d have it out for your killer.” His voice was stiff and cold. He knew the pain of losing loved ones.

She nodded contentedly. His answer had been what she was looking for. “Right? You would hate my killer and live your life tormented by your failure to protect me.”

“This sure took a dark turn, huh?”

“But what if my death was something you could do nothing about instead? What if I were lost to disease or reached the end of my natural life? You would be saddened, sure, but you would come to accept my death, would you not?”

“Well, I suppose so.”

If a loved one’s death was natural, then the most one could do was blame the gods. If their passing was after a long and fulfilling life, then there might be no reason for sadness or mourning at all.

“It’s the same with sickness. If there is no pain, one will forget they were ever diseased. Humans are creatures of convenience. I amend one truth, and the rest falls into place on its own.”

Even if she couldn’t change reality, she could alter the memory of what caused a person’s suffering. Those she “healed” did the rest for her, recontextualizing the remaining memories in ways convenient for them.

“That is why I am merely an azumagiku. I offer a facsimile of healing as a pale imitation of a shrine maiden.” She took a joking tone, but her eyes could not hide her sadness. She wanted to save others, but she couldn’t. Not truly. Her powerlessness tore at her. Heikichi understood the feeling, as he bore a similar sense of inadequacy.

“That’s the flower that grants brief respite, right?” He understood the meaning behind her name now: Azumagiku. She could only heal people by making them forget precious memories, much like the beautiful flower that gave comfort to an exiled emperor by allowing him to briefly forget his home.

“I’m surprised. You know about it?” she asked.

“Kind of, yeah. Azumagiku’s also called miyakowasure, right? It’s a pretty tasteful thing to compare yourself to.”

“Tasteful, huh? Heh. Well, I’m flattered.”

That seemed to cheer her up. He let out a sigh of relief, then tensed. Something about her words bothered him. She’d previously said she was looking for someone but didn’t know who they were. Taking her ability into account, a certain possibility came to mind.

“Hey, um…”

“Yeah?”

“Nah… Never mind. It’s nothin’.” He thought she might have *chosen* to forget the person she was looking for. Perhaps their memory had been painful for some reason. But he wasn’t tactless enough to ask.

“Do you have any memories you’d rather forget?” she asked.

He balked for a moment at the absurdity of the question. Was she making a lighthearted joke, or was she asking in earnest? Either way, the question was like a punch to the gut.

“I can erase them for you if you’d like. I’m sure you’d be happier that way,” she said.

After a long few moments, he managed to cobble together a reply. “I’m good. Thanks, but it just wouldn’t feel right.”

“Is that so?” She didn’t push any further, and the conversation came to an abrupt end.

The thought of forgetting his parents' deaths *did* occur to Heikichi. But losing such a memory was sure to change him, and that put a little fear in him. For some time, he stared at Azumagiku's sorrowful visage in profile.

***

Some sights remain unforgettable no matter how much time passes.

There once was a shrine maiden who chose to live for the sake of others, even knowing it would mean the end of something dear to her. She stayed true to the way of life she'd chosen for herself instead of acting on her feelings. She found it difficult to voice her true thoughts, but that, too, was a side of her he loved. The choice they both made might have seemed foolish to others, but to them, it meant everything.

"…Shirayuki?" He said her name in a half daze.

Jinya was bewildered. Someone gone from this world was before him, and that shook him to his core. He couldn't tell whether the emotion swelling inside him was joy or terror.

"What's up?" Shirayuki regarded him curiously. Her expression overlapped with that in his memory, causing him to start reaching out a hand.

"Sorry… Just still waking up." He regained his composure in only a few seconds, again adopting his usual blank expression. It was only thanks to his clear mind that he managed to avoid losing himself to nostalgia. Immediately after stepping into the Inverted Alley, he had been attacked by a black shadow. The next thing he knew, he was waking up in this bed. It was safe to assume that whatever was currently happening was the shadow's doing. He clenched his left fist and gritted his teeth at the uneasy feeling that something was missing.

Assimilation. *Superhuman Strength*. *Invisibility. Dart*. *Dog Spirits*. *Flying Blade*. *Falsehood*. *Indomitable*. *Blood Blade*. *Jishibari*. He couldn't feel a single one of the abilities he possessed. His demon-devouring left arm was just a normal human limb right now. It seemed his memory was fine, but his body was that of

the old *Jinta*.

The world around him reminded him of the time he was under the influence of Ofuu's ability, but there was something more to it. He lacked the information to make any conclusions, however. Seeing no point in even attempting empty conjecture, he instead addressed Shirayuki, who had been giving him a mystified look while he thought it over. "I'm fine."

"If you say so. C'mon, let's eat breakfast." She didn't seem convinced, but she didn't pry either. She never did. She knew he hid things from her in those days, and she never once tried to learn what they were.

Being reminded of the distance that had lain between them—something he'd been on the verge of forgetting—made him feel emotional all of a sudden. He couldn't help but feel nostalgic despite it all.

"Right, breakfast. I'll get right to it."

Perhaps the nostalgia dulled his judgment. Without a hint of wariness, he stood up and walked to Shirayuki's side.

"We should be eating something yummier today, since we have the princess with us."

Suzune joined the two for breakfast now that she was awake. She grumbled, unhappy with their usual meal of boiled barley and rice paired with pickled vegetables.

"Jinta? Is something wrong?" She looked up at him, apparently confused by his silence. Despite all the suffering she'd once caused him, not a trace of hatred surged in him now.

"It's nothing, Suzune." Unfettered by his emotions, he patted her head, making her smile. The two had been like this in the past—a happy family.

"You really dote on her, huh?" Shirayuki commented.

"Not at all." His reply came out a bit too dry. A brother who once tried to kill

his own sister couldn't be called doting, now could he?

"Jinta, you're weird today," Suzune said.

"I'm fine. Really," he replied. He couldn't smile for her, though—not when he knew there was something more behind the smiles she gave.

Jinta had been such a blind fool back then. Things were already coming apart at the seams, but he chose not to acknowledge it. The past events he was experiencing should have been happy memories for him, but it felt like he was being shown his shortcomings more than anything.

"Shall we be off, then?" Shirayuki said.

He took a deep breath to shake off his thoughts, then tried to act normal. "Be off where?"

"Did you forget? Seriously? There's something I need to tell you. Something important. That's why I wanted to spend today with you." A touch of sadness filled her gaze as she looked down at her feet.

He already knew what she wanted to tell him, of course. The Itsukihime was holy. She was never to leave the shrine. Shirayuki's presence now could only mean one thing. This was a recreation of that particular day.

"Take care!"

Shirayuki and Jinya left the house after breakfast, and Suzune cheerfully saw them off. Whenever he had demon-hunting duties, she would be left home alone like this, but she had never complained even once. She had been too kind to burden him then.

"She's such a sweet girl," Shirayuki said as she looked back at Suzune, who was still waving the two of them goodbye.

Jinya was about to walk around the village together with Shirayuki, but he felt no joy at the thought. He knew something between the two of them would come to a clean end by nightfall.

The people of the village gave the two curious looks and teased them as they walked past. Shirayuki drew close to him as if she were showing off to the others, causing him to catch her sweet fragrance and blush slightly. All the sensations—her touch, her smell—were just as he remembered. He wondered if this world was less like Ofuu's *Dreamer* and more like *Falsehood*, which worked off real memories.

He should have been happy to be with Shirayuki again, and yet his mind remained cold and analytical. One could say he had grown, but he found it hard to be proud of his new self.

"Oh, Jinta-sama! Wel…come?"

They stopped by a teahouse, where a nostalgic face greeted them.

"Hello, Chitose," he said.

Chitose, the girl working at the teahouse, gawked at the two of them with wide eyes. She would become Itsukihime one day and marry Kunieda Koudai—but right now she was just a young girl making a fairly silly face. Jinya let a smile slip.

"Um, who might this lady be?" she asked.

"An acquaintance of mine. Please don't ask any further."

"Right… Oh, u-um, sorry. Your order?"

They ordered tea and dango, and he chatted with Shirayuki while they waited. Not long after, Chitose returned with a wooden tray holding teacups and a couple of small dishes. She gave Shirayuki the dango and Jinya some isobe mochi.

"Isobe mochi. It was your favorite, right?"

"I'm surprised you remembered," he said. Her recalling it had made him so happy in this moment, just as it did many decades later.

"Y-yes. By chance, we just happened to have some on hand, so I figured I'd

serve it.”

“Chitose… Thank you.”

“Please, um, enjoy.”

He’d taken it for granted at the time, but the days he spent in Kadono were truly filled with small joys like this. Shirayuki ate her dango and complained that he was the only one getting special treatment. Even the sight of her getting childishly huffy was nostalgic. He cast his gaze down and said, “Nothing ever remains as it is, huh?”

He had spoken those words back then as well, but he said them for different reasons now.

Byakuya said nothing in reply. The silence felt oppressive.

The two walked around the village some more, talking about inconsequential things. The village was scant on entertainment, but Shirayuki still seemed to enjoy her first outing in a long time. Jinya let himself be swept along with her mood and enjoyed himself to the fullest as well, feeling like he had returned to his youth.

Slowly, the sun sank on the horizon. The colors of evening were not far off, so the two made for the spot where Shirayuki’s parents—Jinya’s foster parents—were laid to rest.

In Kadono, the deceased were cremated and their ashes scattered in Irazu Forest. The village worshipped Mahiru-sama, the Goddess of Fire, so cremation was a sacred rite. It returned people to the earth, where they nurtured the trees that would be burned to become the tatara charcoal that brought the village prosperity.

Jinya used to come here occasionally, but he had been unable to do so since leaving the village. Such a thing would not be proper—paying respects to the deceased was one of the duties of the living.

Jinya closed his eyes and cast his gaze down. He wished he could stay in this place longer, not only so he could pay his respects but also because he knew what would come next. If things went as he recalled, he and Shirayuki would go to the hill overlooking Modori River soon. There, the two of them would bare their feelings to one another, then agree that would be the end of it. He was not ready for that, and so he remained where he stood.

“Jinta?” Shirayuki called out to him worriedly. He heard her but did not answer.

He knew everything that would come after this. After the two of them agreed to let things end, he would go fight the demon with *Superhuman Strength*. Meanwhile, Kiyomasa would secretly meet with Shirayuki, and then Suzune would become a demon and kill Shirayuki. From there, they would be set on a path that ended with a Demon God hellbent on bringing ruin to man.

But none of that had happened yet. Jinya didn’t exist, nor did Magatsume. He had no reason to part with Shirayuki. So long as he stayed here, rooted in this spot, the end would never come. No demon would ever come to embark on a meaningless, unsightly journey for strength. He could live a proper life.

“There’s something I want to tell you, Jinta.”

He heard her slow, emotional voice and lifted his head. Opening his eyes, he saw his surroundings were already orange with the evening glow. But evening was supposed to come around the time they reached the hill.

Something was wrong. This was not how he remembered things being.

Now suddenly wary, he looked at Shirayuki. He already knew what feelings she was hiding behind the transparent smile she wore.

“I wanted to tell you here, the place where it all began for me. Will you listen to what I have to say?”

This wasn’t right. Up until now, the same events he remembered had occurred, but all the people involved had felt like real, distinct individuals. But

this Shirayuki was just repeating words from his memory.

“Jinta…”

She gave him an empty smile, looking like she would melt away into the sky. He remembered this. Here she would tell him she was going to wed Kiyomasa, and then everything would come barreling toward the end.

Or at least, that was the way it had been.

“What is it you wish for?”

His mind came to a halt. Those were not the words she had said that day.

Could this be his chance? Could he have the different future he wanted?

His wavering did not pass unnoticed. A strong gust of wind blew by, and the trees shivered. Leaves cascaded through the air and wrapped Shirayuki whole. In the blink of an eye, she was gone.

“Shirayuki!” He looked around, but not a soul was in sight. What was going on?

He tried to steady his breathing. Then he focused on his surroundings again. A man he swore hadn’t been there moments ago was walking toward him.

Jinya felt his breath catch in his throat. There was no way that man could be here, not in this memory. He’d died long, long ago.

“Oh. Heya, Jinta.” The man waved when he noticed him.

“If you have nowhere else to go, why not come stay at my place?” Jinya heard the nostalgic words repeat in his mind. This was the man who had brought him and Suzune to Kadono after they fled Edo. Shirayuki’s father, and Jinya’s predecessor as the shrine maiden guardian. The very man who had extended a hand out to two helpless kids battered by the rain.

“…Motoharu-san?” Jinya said, filled with trepidation.

Motoharu smiled broadly back at him.

4

You squirm ticklishly

at the warmth of my touch.

“You’re such a child,” I laugh.

My heart fills with nostalgia,

but as the end draws near,

the world blurs together.

***

“ALL RIGHT, break it up, people. Shoo, shoo. The Shrine Maiden’s busy; give ’er some space.”

It was already afternoon before Heikichi and Azumagiku began their search efforts. He had her change out of her shrine maiden clothes and into a normal kimono to avoid attracting attention. That was enough for her to pass unnoticed at first, but eventually a single passerby recognized her face, and after that they were swarmed by people in need of healing like they had been yesterday.

Heikichi rudely drove the people away, not bothering to hide his disgust for them. Their selfish pursuit of healing rubbed him the wrong way, as did the way Azumagiku accepted their demands without a second thought. The people gave him hateful looks, but he didn’t care about the opinions of those so far beneath him.

“Thank you.”

“Not at all. Just doing my job.”

After driving the people away, they walked along Shijyou Street. Their plan for the time being was to wander aimlessly in the hope that Azumagiku would

remember something. They had no better options, given that she couldn't recall the name or appearance of the person she was looking for.

Unsurprisingly, their aimless search turned up no results. They walked around for a full koku[1] with only tired legs to show for it.

"Utsugi-san, do you mind if we rest for a moment?" Azumagiku asked. Her exhaustion was obvious; she had already shed the graceful facade of a shrine maiden. Even though she was a superior demon, she lacked stamina.

"You're tired already? Aren't you supposed to be a superior demon?" Heikichi said.

"So what? I'm still a lady," she said with an attitude, causing him to burst into laughter.

They had indeed walked quite a distance. He wasn't tired, but he saw nothing wrong with a short break. They walked around a bit more in search of a good place to relax when suddenly he came to a stop. An old man with an unsteady gait came out from a shrine facing Shijyou Street and crossed their path.

"What's wrong?" Azumagiku asked. Only then did Heikichi remember where he recognized the old man from. He had overheard him arguing with someone. The old man looked fairly unmemorable, but while everyone else was flocking to Azumagiku like flies to honey yesterday, he alone had walked away without seeking her healing powers.

"…Tasuke, was it?" Without thinking, Heikichi muttered the old man's name.

The old man looked up. It was too late now. He looked dubiously at Heikichi and asked, "Have we met?"

His gaze was cold. Heikichi felt more on edge than he did when facing demons. He forced a smile and glibly said, "No, no. I just happened to overhear your argument yesterday."

"Oh, I see. Sorry if we bothered you." The old man's expression softened into an exhausted smile. He then looked Azumagiku's way. "I take it you're that

shrine maiden, then?" His tone didn't change, but he clearly was not particularly fond of her. His gaze was the same that one would direct at a pebble lying on the side of the street—utter disinterest.

"That I am," she answered. She was assuming her noble shrine maiden persona again. Even so, the old man—Tasuke—continued to regard her with disinterest.

"You're somethin' else, acting so lukewarm toward her. She's *the* Shrine Maiden of Healing, y'know?" Heikichi remarked. He was a bit bewildered to see someone treat Azumagiku like this, given how everyone else practically worshipped her.

"I have no interest in the 'healing' she offers. I know what happens to the ones she heals," Tasuke said.

Azumagiku's eyebrow twitched. She seemed calm on the surface, but his comment clearly disturbed her.

"What's that mean? Did somethin' strange happen to someone she healed? They get sick or die or somethin'?" There were still many unknowns regarding her ability, and Heikichi wanted whatever information he could get.

"No, nothing of the sort. The people I know whom she healed are living peaceful, healthy lives."

"Sounds like they're getting along just fine, then."

"I'd imagine. But I still can't bring myself to look favorably upon this Shrine Maiden of Healing. If it weren't for her—" Tasuke's gaze turned into a glare. "—the Inverted Alley wouldn't have returned."

The unexpected accusation seemed to shock Azumagiku. Heikichi hadn't expected to hear of such a thing here either. He leaned in and said, "The… Inverted Alley? That's that thing that kills everyone who knows of it, right?"

"I'm surprised a man as young as yourself has heard of it. Come to think of it, a man looking for the Inverted Alley came by not too long ago."

That had to be Jinya. He had said he would investigate the Inverted Alley today. It was an odd coincidence for the dots to connect here.

“You know somethin’ about this Inverted Alley?” Heikichi’s tone stiffened slightly, but the man replied with the same indifference.

“I do. I’ve known about it since I was young, in fact.”

“And you’re still alive?”

“Of course. The Inverted Alley never existed to begin with.”

Heikichi made a face. Tasuke was saying the Inverted Alley had returned while also claiming it didn’t exist. Wasn’t that a contradiction?

Tasuke cast his cold, self-deprecating eyes downward. Maintaining his indifferent tone, he asked, “Would you like me to tell you about the Inverted Alley?”

***

Motoharu had appeared out of nowhere, taking Shirayuki’s place. Jinya should undoubtedly have been wary—deception was second nature for wicked spirits.

“Motoharu-san… You’re alive.”

But joy won over caution. Motoharu had been the shrine maiden guardian before Jinya, as well as his sword master. He was someone Jinya respected dearly and looked upon as a role model.

“Uh, I’d sure hope so?” he joked. “Any reason I shouldn’t be?”

He was a second father to Jinya, even though they were not related by blood. Jinya was happy to have known him but saddened by his memory. Motoharu had died protecting the village. He’d sacrificed his life fighting a powerful demon. Jinya respected the way his second father died, but, to tell the truth, he wished the man had lived.

“You’re headed off to see Shirayuki, right? Come home when you’re done. I’ll

make some isobe mochi for you.” Motoharu carried no sword and showed no sign of aggression. He simply made small talk exactly like he used to. The way he grinned wryly was also just as Jinya remembered. He pointed off toward the small hill.

Jinya stepped forward, intending to leave for that hill, but despite what Motoharu had just said, he stepped forward to block Jinya’s way. Jinya bit his lip and fought back against nostalgia. To try and make sense of what was going on, he coldly inquired, “Why are you here?”

“Because you don’t want to go, I suppose?” Motoharu answered, a little nonsensically. He continued, “If you proceed beyond this point, you will have to make a choice. That’s why you’re trying to stay here.”

His words cut sharper than any blade. Motoharu was right. There was so much Jinya would come to regret beyond this point. He would lose the sister he promised to be with, the woman he loved, the true father he abandoned, the girl who could have become his sister in another life. Beyond this point, a life of pain awaited him. On that small hill lurked a decisive end to what he shared with Shirayuki.

“Or maybe what you want is to make a different choice this time? If you had decided to take Shirayuki’s hand instead, then maybe things would be different now. Of course, as her father, I’d be nothing but happy to see you two together.”

Jinya knew all too well this was all the work of unnatural forces, but a past he had once given up on was in front of him now. The thought of being able to reach out and grasp it was tempting. His lips trembled, and his throat was dry.

“Oh wait, but I’m *your* father too, aren’t I? Ha ha ha.”

When he was young, Jinya would spar with Motoharu, the strongest swordsman in the village. Jinya never did manage to land a blow on him, but Shirayuki would be there to cheer him up with every loss. Around the time they finished sparring, his younger sister would belatedly wake up for the day, and

together the three of them would run off and play without a care in the world.

He recalled life being so perfect back then. But he also still remembered the sound of a neck being torn from its base and the weight of Shirayuki's lifeless body in his hands.

"Suzune's at home waiting for you. Let's all eat together once you're back."

If Jinya took Shirayuki's hand on that hill and chose to stay with her, Suzune would have no reason to kill her and he would never become a demon. If they simply abandoned their duties, they could live happily as husband and wife. Suzune and Motoharu would be with them too. The temptation was great, and the softer parts of Jinya's heart were firmly enthralled by the idea.

"Are you the one behind all this?"

Motoharu smiled sadly at the question. "No. What lies beyond this point is a scar of yours, recollections of a moment you've pretended to forget. I am nothing more than a scab formed on that scar."

The cheerful and strong Motoharu whom Jinya knew looked so feeble all of a sudden. Jinya felt as though the man would fade into nothing with just a small touch.

"You've been avoiding the memory of what lies beyond here, haven't you? You've thought about redoing everything, but the memory ahead is the one thing you try not to remember." There was no blame in Motoharu's voice; he was laying bare the truth in order to comfort Jinya.

"…Perhaps you're right," Jinya admitted. The truth came out more easily than he himself had expected.

He had considered letting himself be trapped where he was and living out a different life, but he was too scared to do it, too scared of the place ahead of him to step forward. And it wasn't because he didn't want to part from Shirayuki.

"I learned how to make soba," he said in a lifeless voice, almost as if he were

making a confession of guilt. “I even have a restaurant with quite a few regular customers. I’ve learned the names of flowers and become familiar with trinkets like netsuke sculptures. It’s been a while since I’ve last done it, but I even know how to change diapers now. That thing you always said proved to be true. A man like me who was only good for the blade has *changed* so, so much.”

He could look back and laugh about the experiences now, but they had been nothing short of arduous at the time. Getting the names of flowers to stick in his mind had been a challenge. He’d broken countless plates and ruined many meals. He’d had to beg the help of his friend’s wife to learn how to change diapers. They were all worthless skills to have, frivolous excesses that had nothing to do with his true goal, but they all shaped who he was.

“I chose this path of hatred for the wrong reasons, but I can proudly say some good has come of it.”

Those words came from the heart. But…

“But I can’t help but think… If my new situation only came to be because I made such a wrong choice, then maybe my old unfulfilled wish is meaningless.”

He was sure he would never forget the passion he felt for Shirayuki back then, not even if he lost his memory of her voice and face over the coming decades. There was no doubt in his mind that he would never love as intensely again. But the days he had lived since leaving Kadono were more than just hardship.

Ofuu taught him the names of flowers. Sadanaga good-naturedly chided his way of living. Naotsugu and Somegorou were there for him as friends. Yuunagi left him Nomari. Even his clash of wills against Tsuchiura was unforgettable. Jinya had made more connections with others than he could count, and in exchange, he reflected on the past less and less.

Such a change was hardly a surprise, but the difference still frightened him from time to time. The more precious the present moment became, the more he felt he was devaluing the future he’d once sought together with Shirayuki.

“I’ve lost sight of something amid the happiness I’ve gained.”

He lamented that he couldn't help but compare the past and present. Perhaps that was where the black shadow found its opening.

"Then you only need to find it again. What is lost can always be regained," Motoharu said. He stepped aside, revealing the path ahead.

"Shira…yuki?"

There she stood, returned to him once more. From a distance, she reached out a hand to Jinya.

"Come," she said.

Such an expressionless face did not match his memory of Shirayuki, but he knew it was her.

If he would just take her hand, then a cruel future could be circumvented. Such a thing, of course, couldn't actually be true, but he was beyond thinking logically.

"I…"

If he would just take her hand, he could return to the time when he believed without a doubt that she meant everything to him. Hadn't Motoharu, standing there himself, said that was something he wanted? Jinya—no, *Jinta* reached out for her hand.

But before he could grasp it, the brilliance of the evening lull filled his sight —*"…But will you still be my family anyway?"*

"…What's wrong?" Shirayuki looked at him with emotionless eyes now that his hand had paused. The coldness of her gaze reminded him of her last moments. She was still alive now. If he just took her hand, surely a happy future awaited him, one different but not quite unlike the happy life he knew now.

"It probably doesn't matter what choice I make. I lost as soon as you appeared before me."

Jinya had a faint idea what this all meant. Shirayuki and Motoharu were the same thing at their core: not phantoms here to lead him astray, but ones that

appeared because he had *already gone* astray. The weaker parts of his heart that valued the past but shied away from the fact that it was losing value to him were ensnared by the black shadow.

“You took advantage of my wavering, but I’m sorry to say that aging has only made me more wary.”

Even if the black shadow was what had started this, the Kadono Jinya saw and all the people he met came from within himself. Rather than turn his gaze away from it all, he had to accept everything.

“But you know what? I don’t think I would’ve taken that hand, even if I hadn’t realized what was going on.”

Maybe the pining he once felt would fade, but it would never fully disappear. So long as he could remember being able to give his heart to another, he could know happiness again.

“Part of my heart truly wants to go back to these days. The time I spent with everyone—you, Motoharu-san, Yokaze-san, and even Suzune—it’s all still so dear to me.”

But if he took Shirayuki’s hand now, everything would become a lie. It would effectively be saying that all the new precious things he’d found along his difficult journey were worthless.

It was true that clinging to the present made Shirayuki feel even more distant. The transformation of the passion he once felt into nothing more than a memory saddened him greatly. It scared him, even.

“But I’ve come to gain many more things—things that have clouded my true purpose, but that are important to me nonetheless. What was dear to me in the past is no longer so close to my heart, but…that is simply the way things are. I can no longer be Jinta.”

If he held dear the Jinta and Shirayuki who once upheld what they believed in, then he had to uphold what he believed in now. Living so long had made it

difficult to remain devoted to one thing, but his heart still felt pain because Shirayuki was gone. To give that pain meaning, Jinya had to live for the people who were with him now.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to reach out for the past if it means letting go of what I have now.” With a calm mind, he rejected the woman he loved. He thought himself pathetic for becoming capable of this, but a part of him felt proud.

Shirayuki said nothing. Jinya didn’t know what she thought of his answer, nor did he have time to ponder the matter.

The world around them rapidly lost its color. Outlines blurred and shapes failed to hold themselves. Only Shirayuki remained distinct amid it all, but then she, too, lost form and gradually faded away.

Jinya felt a hand on his shoulder.

Motoharu nodded without saying a word. The weight of his hand slowly disappeared, and his presence faded.

Jinya would continue to waver between past and present—that would never change. But he could decide which he would prioritize, and that small act was enough to cast away whatever had trapped him. The village formed from his dredged-up memories began to crumble with the loss of its core.

He had found himself at the mercy of a strange phenomenon, but he had an idea what was behind it all.

“My lingering regrets, huh…?”

It was all nothing more than his fixation over the path not taken. He had not met spirits borrowing the guises of Shirayuki and Motoharu, but manifestations brought on by his nostalgic heart. Having gained so much, he had lamented the fact that he no longer looked back on the past like he once did, and this brought about the world he saw.

Even now, he was as pathetic of a man as he ever was, but he was happy to

have met everyone again. Even though his present life left him fulfilled, he was elated to know that a part of him still held dear the days of his past.

The end approached. Cracks began to form on the faded world.

Jinya murmured a few words, knowing full well there was no one to hear them.

Slowly, he closed his eyes and welcomed the end.

With a pop, the transient days burst like bubbles upon the water's surface.

5

A smile graces your face,

like it once did in the past.

In pursuit of the memory of those fleeting days,

I walk with you.

THE TALE OF THE INVERTED ALLEY was a chilling one. Anyone who ever heard what it was would endlessly shiver out of fear, then die before three days passed. The first victim who saw the Inverted Alley went mad prior to passing away. All who witnessed his ravings were too afraid to repeat what he said, no matter who asked. Eventually they, too, departed the mortal coil, and just like that, all who knew of the Inverted Alley died, with only its name remaining to be passed on. Such was the dreadful tale of the Inverted Alley…

Or at least that was how it was supposed to be. Despite its supposedly unknown nature, Tasuke claimed he knew what the Inverted Alley was. "I can tell you where it is if you'd like." He even explained how to get there.

Normally, Heikichi wouldn't have had any reason to investigate the rumor, but he figured it was worth hearing Tasuke out since Jinya was looking into it.

Heikichi often took a thorny attitude with the man, but he was genuinely indebted to him. It wouldn't hurt to pay him back for a favor or two here.

"Tasuke-san, you know what the Inverted Alley is?"

"I do. It's been more than forty years now since I first heard of it, though."

"And you say it doesn't exist?"

"That's correct. The Inverted Alley does not exist."

Heikichi had never been much for thinking and lacked experience in such complicated cases, so he couldn't make heads or tails of the matter. "I don't get it. If it doesn't exist, then how do y'know where it is? And why would ya share that with a passerby like me, anyway?"

Tasuke had no apparent reason to tell Heikichi anything, and yet here he was freely offering information. But why? Quite frankly, Heikichi was suspicious.

"Why? Because it is my duty, I suppose. But if that answer doesn't satisfy you, then just chalk it up to me airing my resentment."

"What?" Heikichi said, confused.

"I resent the Shrine Maiden of Healing for bringing back the Inverted Alley. You can call that my reason for telling you about it. Now, if that'll be all, I'd like to take my leave here." Tasuke walked away without waiting for a reply, leaving Heikichi and Azumagiku slightly bewildered.

"What was that all about?" Heikichi muttered. He looked at Azumagiku by his side and saw her hanging her head. "Something wrong?"

"No. I'm all right." She smiled softly at him. She had mentioned she was tired earlier, so he figured that must be it.

"Good, good. So was all that stuff he said 'bout you bringin' the Inverted Alley back true?" he asked.

"Of course not. I've never even heard of this Inverted Alley thing."

"Is that right? I wonder what that Tasuke fellow was on about, then." Heikichi

racked his brain, but thinking really just wasn't his thing, so he quickly gave up. It would be easier to just go to the Inverted Alley and see it for himself. He figured he might as well, seeing as he'd been told the location. He slapped his cheeks to build up some energy. "All right! Go ahead and rest here, Azumagiku. I'm gonna step away for a bit."

"Huh? Where are you going?"

"Someone I know is lookin' into that Inverted Alley thing. I figure I might as well hop over and check on him. Maybe make him owe me a solid, y'know?"

"Oh, I see. You're worried about your friend, huh?"

"What? How'd ya get that idea in your head?" Heikichi frowned bashfully.

She looked at him with a soft gaze, the way someone would a child who didn't know how transparent they were being. "There's no need to be embarrassed. I'll go with you. What that old man said about this all being my fault is bothering me…"

"Wait, no. I'm supposed to be your bodyguard. I can't have ya goin' somewhere that might be dangerous."

"It'll be fine. You'll be there if anything happens. Besides, if you're my bodyguard, then wouldn't it be stranger for you to leave my side?"

She had a point. And it wasn't like anyone was actually after her or anything like that. So long as things were kept quick and simple, it should be fine.

"Well, I guess you're right," he said. "Okay, let's head on over."

"Let's get something sweet afterward."

"You're *still* hungry?" He sagged his shoulders in exasperation, prompting her to laugh.

The location Tasuke had given them wasn't far—an alley located near a set of shrines and temples on Shijyou Street.

Heikichi focused himself, then checked the prayer beads on his wrist.

Together, the two made for the Inverted Alley.

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With a *pop*, Jinya's surroundings changed. His sweet dream faded away, and he suddenly found himself standing in a dilapidated alley. Not a trace of the dream remained, and Shirayuki's dear smile was gone as well. That was how things should be, of course, yet he couldn't help but feel disheartened. Softly, he sighed.

"Kadono-dono?"

He heard a woman's voice coming from his swords. On his hip were Yarai and Yatonomori Kaneomi. He clenched his left hand, confirming his powers still resided within his grotesque arm. After a pause, he replied, "I hear you, Kaneomi. Don't worry."

With surprise and joy, Kaneomi exclaimed, *"You've returned."*

"How long was I out for?"

"About a quarter of a winter koku's[2] *worth."*

"I see." He fixed a sharp gaze forward. A familiar black shadow was swaying not too far in front of him.

"It's coming."

The shadow attacked once more, but this time it was too slow. At this distance, Jinya had more than enough time. He drew Yatonomori Kaneomi from its scabbard and fired off a *Flying Blade* in the same motion.

The shadow was bisected at its waist before it could close the distance. Jinya took another step forward, bringing Yarai overhead and swinging it vertically down to cut the shadow into fourths. Without so much as a death cry, the shadow faded away.

There had been no weight against Jinya's blade. It was like he had been cutting at smoke or mist. The shadow must've been a creature entirely without

substance.

Jinya fixed his stance and dutifully checked his surroundings. After confirming no threat was to be found, he sheathed his blades.

“Splendid. But what was that shadow?”

The feel of the alley had changed with the shadow’s departure. Wind blew; leaves rustled. A beam of sunlight, filtered through leaves, could even be seen now. The alley’s dismal atmosphere had eased somewhat.

“I suspect it was a clump of negative emotion that failed to become a demon—too weak to hold flesh, but just strong enough to deceive minds.”

Naotsugu and the streetwalker had once been attacked by a similar being. But this shadow Jinya had slain was slightly different, slightly *more*. It lacked flesh but was able to reflect lingering regrets like a mirror.

“I’ve seen something similar before, but that one could only change its form. It didn’t try to possess and kill people like this one did.” The one who gave Jinya this job said his friend who found the Inverted Alley had died. It was safe to say Jinya would never have woken up if he had chosen to take Shirayuki’s hand in his dream.

“So this is the truth behind the Inverted Alley?”

“No, I doubt it.”

The shadow killed people by trapping them with their lingering regrets. As far as supernatural occurrences went, it was fairly ordinary. One could even survive it by using the right tactics. It was hard to imagine it could develop into a rumor that killed all who knew of it. The shadow and the Inverted Alley were unconnected.

“Perhaps the Inverted Alley never really existed.”

“Pardon?”

Jinya had a theory, but he lacked facts in which to ground it. Some information gathering was in order.

“There’re some things we need to look into. You up for it, Kaneomi?”

“Of course.”

He felt some reluctance about leaving the alley behind. Even if it was just an illusion, he’d been able to meet old faces—the experience hadn’t been a bad one. Still, it was time to go. Without looking back, he left the place behind.

The next morning, Jinya visited Shijyou Street once more.

“Oh, hello.”

His destination was a small shrine encircled by trees, where he found Tasuke alone. After asking around, he had learned the old man came there every morning to pray.

“Hello,” Jinya replied.

“Kadono-san, wasn’t it?”

Tasuke reminded Jinya of a reclusive hermit. He conveyed a sort of detached indifference at all times.

“That is correct. Your name was Tasuke-dono, I believe? I hate to trouble you, but would it be possible for me to ask you a few questions?”

“Depends, I suppose. Questions about what?”

“About the Inverted Alley.”

Tasuke’s expression stiffened. Jinya hadn’t pestered the man with questions the first time they met, but by all accounts, it seemed he was right on the mark about the old man knowing whatever truth lay behind the rumor.

Jinya said, “I’ve looked into the alley and even found a spirit capable of killing a person, but none of it seems to connect to the rumors people speak of. I was hoping you might know something about the Inverted Alley that kills all who

learn of it.”

“What makes you think I know anything?”

“Because everyone else I’ve talked to only knows the name ‘Inverted Alley’ and nothing about what it might be. You’re the only one who stated clearly that it doesn’t exist. Only somebody who knows what the Inverted Alley is could say whether it exists or not.”

The shrine went quiet, quiet enough to hear the wind howl. Jinya had no real proof that Tasuke knew anything. If the old man chose to play dumb, then that would be the end of it. He had no obligation to tell the truth, especially not when Jinya was being so intrusive. Even so, Tasuke spoke up. “A man your age probably wouldn’t know about it, but there was a great famine long ago. Around the Tenpo era, I believe.”

The abrupt change in topic seemed strange to Jinya, but the old man’s eyes were sincere. It didn’t seem like he was trying to evade Jinya’s question.

“The one that began around the Mutsu and Dewa provinces? I know of it.” Of course Jinya was familiar with the famine—he’d been alive then and had felt its effects firsthand.

“Well, I’ll be,” Tasuke said with surprise. “But yes, back then there was no food and disease ran rampant. Even here—far away in Kyoto—many, many people died.” He spoke of the tragedy with a weary look. “And when many people die, well… How should I put it? It becomes hard to…*process* the dead. At first, people took care to quickly give them proper rites. But when the number of the deceased rose, services for those without relatives became postponed and a new problem arose: Where do you put the corpses? They ended up being thrown into an out-of-the-way alley as a temporary measure.” Despite the horrific nature of his words, Tasuke’s voice remained flat, but the folds of his face creased sadly, as if he didn’t want to recall the memory. “Corpses were piled upon corpses. But then, one day, someone found the dead bodies had been torn into. We thought it might’ve been a wild dog, but none had been

spotted. From then on, the corpses kept being defiled…" He heaved a self-deprecating sigh. With difficulty, he said, "We discovered the cause not long after. Some folks had taken to eating the corpses." He sank his shoulders, seeming much older all of a sudden.

"…Demons?" Jinya asked.

"No. Ordinary people. For some, hunger withers away not just the body but the mind as well. One person even ate their own deceased child."

Jinya understood how frightening starvation could be. He had seen children gathering flies by the roadside and grown adults fighting over scraps. Hunger could drive people to do the unthinkable at times.

"I was only a hungry child myself then. There was nothing I could do to hold them back. I…couldn't bring myself to stop them, not when I knew why they did what they did," he said guiltily. "In time, the alley became known as the Inverted Alley. The name was meaningless; anything suitably eerie would have done. People whispered about how terrible the alley's tale was and how all who spoke of what they saw there would be cursed. And so people stayed away."

The Inverted Alley was a fabricated rumor from the start. Its frightful nature was meant to keep people away from it, and its vagueness made it difficult for anyone who was curious to find the alley—all so people could eat the corpses there without being bothered.

Perhaps that was where the "Inverted" in its name came from. The rumor was the inverse of what a rumor should be: Rather than speaking of an ugly horror, it was created to conceal one.

"I see. But wasn't that more than forty years ago?" Jinya said. "Why is that rumor back now?"

"Because people chose to forget." Tasuke's expression changed from weary to bitter. "It is in our nature to seek peace. I do not condemn others for wanting to escape their past sins when given the chance. They are probably happier having forgotten the taboos they've violated."

Guilty memories were replaced with convenient fictions. That was why nobody Jinya talked to had told him the truth behind the Inverted Alley—they weren't clueless, they chose to forget.

"But there are some who can't forget, so the name alone spread. Occasionally someone would mention they knew what the Inverted Alley was, and that would start some hubbub that would spread the rumor along even further… Eventually, the rumor somehow became real." Tasuke heaved a defeated sigh. "We live in a strange world. The mistakes of the past can be erased, and fabrications can be made real. Sometimes, I find myself forgetting just what's true and what's not."

Hearing all that, Jinya finally had an idea what the shadow he encountered was. As he'd thought, it was a clump of negative emotions, coalesced from the desire to forget both the harsh past and one's own misdeeds. There might have been some general curiosity about the rumor mixed in as well. Without a clear will to be had, it latched on to the alley and the baseless rumor surrounding it, inadvertently giving itself substance.

The black shadow called back nostalgic memories of the past. It became a mirror that laid bare lingering regrets one tried to hide, potentially killing those who could not move past such regrets. Through it, the false rumor became real.

"Sorry. I wound up rambling there," Tasuke said.

"Not at all. Thank you for your time. I believe I've found my answers."

"Glad to hear it. I'll be going now if that's all." He walked unsteadily past Jinya toward the shrine's torii gate. The short-statured man seemed so forlorn from behind that Jinya couldn't help but call out.

"Tasuke-dono?"

"Yes?"

"You said everyone chose to forget about the Inverted Alley. Why haven't you? Wouldn't you find peace by forgetting?"

“Ah, that,” the old man said with a wry chuckle. “I just don’t think it’s something that should be forgotten.” His tone became firm for the first time. “No matter how much time passes, no matter how many new eras come and go, there are some things that shouldn’t be forgotten or tossed aside.”

Jinya could not see the man’s expression from behind, just as he could not see the life the man had led up until now. But Tasuke’s walk did carry an air of gravity.

“I’ll tell the truth of the Inverted Alley to all who ask. Even now, I still remember the feeling of flesh passing down my throat. Remembering is the only way I can atone.”

Leaving only those words, Tasuke departed the shrine. The memory of eating another person would haunt him forever, but he would not try to forget what he did. He chose to remember, and he had to live by that decision.

“Somewhere between human and demon…” Jinya mused.

In all likelihood, the moment Tasuke ate human flesh, part of him became a demon and he was bound by his choice to atone.

Jinya had defeated the shadow, but the incident in general remained unresolved. The shadow was nothing more than emotion without a home, and completely erasing it was beyond him. Even if people tried to hide away their bitter pasts, the story of the Inverted Alley would continue to be told from here on out. But perhaps that was what Tasuke wanted.

“Hm?” A few moments later, a familiar face came to the shrine. “Heikichi?”

“Oh, it’s you. Say, have ya seen an older fellow around here? I was told he comes by every day.”

“If you mean Tasuke-dono, he just left.”

“Huh?” Bewildered, Heikichi looked at Jinya with his mouth agape.

They talked for a while. Apparently Heikichi had been investigating the Inverted Alley as well. Nothing of note happened when he went to the alley

itself, so he came here hoping to ask more questions.

“So you found out the Inverted Alley was a load of bull too then, huh?” Heikichi asked.

“Not quite. The rumors were partially true.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Things will be safe for the time being, but it’s hard to call things settled. It’d be better if nobody goes near there from here on out.”

The rumor wasn’t entirely fictitious, since a real threat had taken shape from it. There was no need for Jinya to go as far as to explain the rumor’s background, though. It wouldn’t be a pleasant discussion to have, and he would rather not intrude on what he felt was Tasuke’s duty.

“That so?” Heikichi remarked. “Anyway, my job looks like it’ll go on a while longer.”

“Is the Shrine Maiden of Healing causing you any trouble?”

“I sure wouldn’t say she’s not! How the hell am I supposed to look for someone she doesn’t even remember? Honestly, I’m stumped. I’ll keep at it for now, though.” Heikichi seemed to be running into some trouble, but he showed no signs of throwing in the towel. That was quite something considering he, a self-proclaimed demon hater, was helping a demon. He must’ve greatly warmed up to the Shrine Maiden of Healing in the few days he’d known her.

“I’m surprised to see you lending a hand to a demon.”

“Should you of all people be sayin’ that?” Heikichi said with a look.

“Hm. You got me there.” Jinya was, of course, a demon himself. It was odd of him to suggest that helping a demon was strange.

Heikichi sighed, then gave him a strong smile. “I’m way past judging demons just for being demons. You’ve shown me there are at least a few good ones out there.”

The child had grown into a splendid man. Jinya felt a bit proud to think he was partially responsible for Heikichi's growth.

"Is that so?" Jinya said. "Why don't you bring that shrine maiden over to the restaurant sometime, then?"

Without missing a beat, Heikichi replied, "What? No way. What if Nomari-san gets the wrong idea?"

Jinya sighed. He knew Heikichi liked Nomari, but the instant reply left him exasperated. "Just hurry up and tell my daughter you're interested in her already."

"Wh-what?! No way!"

"So telling her is too much, but making things painfully obvious to her father isn't? Do what you will, I suppose. I'll be heading over to the restaurant. What about you?"

"I'm on my way to Azumagiku's." It seemed he really had warmed up quite a bit to the shrine maiden.

The two bade one another goodbye, and Jinya walked past Heikichi. A cool wind blew, making the tree leaves rustle. Jinya was about to pass under the torii gate when a thought came to mind. He looked back and said, "Oh yeah. Don't even think of two-timing my daughter or I'll turn you into mincemeat."

"D-don't say that, not even as a joke!" The image ran through Heikichi's mind, making him shriek. He would *quite literally* be rendered mincemeat if Jinya so much as punched him with all his might.

Jinya left in earnest then, the corners of his lips upturned slightly.

"He's insane… Wait, but does that mean he approves of me getting together with Nomari-san…? No, no way…" Now left alone, Heikichi muttered to himself.

With the Inverted Alley case settled, he had no reason to stick around. He slapped his cheeks to refocus himself, then turned his gaze forward and returned to his own work. "All right. Let's do this!"

The case of the Inverted Alley had come to an end, and Heikichi went back to work on the case of the Shrine Maiden of Healing. But, unbeknownst to him and Jinya, the two cases were deeply similar at their core.

Nomari welcomed Jinya back to Demon Soba with a brimming smile.

“Did anything happen while I was out?” he asked.

“Gosh, you’re way too protective. How old do you think I am?” she huffed.

“It’s a parent’s nature to worry.” He patted her head to placate her, making her grin happily.

She’d gotten the restaurant just about ready for business while he was away. She really wasn’t a child anymore, now that she could help out on her own.

“A few more years and *I’ll* be the one pampering *you*.”

“I’m sure. Looking forward to it.” He knew her words were more than a joke. His feelings on the matter were complicated, but he took her kindness in stride.

Once noon rolled around, the restaurant became flooded with customers. People walked in and out of the entrance at a dizzying rate, leaving Jinya with no time to do anything but make soba. That was why Somegorou usually arrived a bit later, after business slowed down.

“Here you are. One kitsune soba.”

“Mmm, thank you kindly.” Somegorou accepted the bowl with a delighted smile. He chatted with Jinya between slurps of noodles. “So, how’s Heikichi faring?”

“He’s gotten stronger,” Jinya said. “And he’s handling jobs on his own fairly well. His current one has him a bit tied up, though.”

“I see.” Somegorou didn’t want to be nosy and bother his disciple about his own work, but he couldn’t help but be a little worried. In fact, this wasn’t the first time he had indirectly checked in on Heikichi through Jinya.

“Have a bit more faith in him. He’s not a kid anymore…is what I’d like to say, but…”

“But yer in no position to talk, eh?”

Just as masters were naturally overprotective of their disciples, parents were naturally overprotective of their children. The roles would eventually swap for Jinya and Nomari, however.

“I know he’s grown, but I still can’t help but fuss over ’im. Being a master’s rough business, I tell ya. But I guess you know what it’s like,” Somegorou teased.

Jinya averted his gaze slightly, a bit saddened by his thoughts.

“But in all seriousness, I’m sure Heikichi won’t need me lookin’ out for him in another year or so.”

Jinya felt the same was true for Nomari. She, too, would soon outgrow her need for her father.

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Back at the abandoned temple, Heikichi looked incredulously at Azumagiku as she lazed about.

“Droppin’ the act entirely now, huh?”

“Just take it as a sign that I trust you.”

His first impression of her had now been completely shattered to pieces, but he had to admit she was easier to get along with like this.

“Let’s head out already. Er, not that we know where to look.” They were still searching for someone she couldn’t remember the name nor face of. They hadn’t made a lick of progress at all. Heikichi was starting to suspect things had been hopeless from the start.

“It’ll be fine. I just need to see them once, and I’ll know they’re the one. Meeting them is what I was born for, after all.” For a brief moment, all emotion

faded from her face, although a kind look quickly returned to her crimson eyes. She smiled softly, but he could feel a great distance between them.

The two went outside, heading for Mihashiya first. The neighboring Demon Soba would be busy at lunchtime, so Heikichi didn't have to worry about running into anyone.

"I might've bought a bit too much." Azumagiku looked happily at the Nomari red bean bread she'd purchased. She had changed out of her shrine maiden wear into a normal kimono robe and tied her hair back in a single bundle. Her red eyes were also normal now, apparently thanks to a superior demon ability which allowed her to look just like an ordinary woman.

"The first thing you think to do is buy sweets, huh? Are ya even really lookin' for this somebody you're after?" Heikichi gave her a frustrated look. Nothing he said could ruin her gleeful smile, though.

With a tight grip on her sweets, she said, "It's fiiine. A few sweets never killed anyone. I'll be serious about the search starting now."

They exchanged banter as they walked past Demon Soba. Heikichi walked a bit faster, not wanting them to be spotted.

"What kind of person are we after, anyway?" he asked.

"I can't remember. There's this image of a place that comes to mind, though."

The light mood between them faded as her gaze turned listless. The sudden shift took him by surprise.

"They were probably someone very… No, never mind. Forget it." She smiled, but she seemed closer to tears than anything.

Not knowing how to comfort her, he just perfunctorily said, "Sure."

After the awkward exchange, they walked in silence.

Perhaps if she had walked into Demon Soba on some passing fancy here, a different future would have been possible. But instead, no fateful meeting took place, and the two left Sanjyou Street behind.

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“Mother, what was the point of all this, anyway?”

In a dilapidated residence somewhere, Himawari’s mother hung her head and looked languidly off into empty space.

“Azumagiku is just soothing people by erasing their memories. I don’t see what this has to do with your goal.”

Azumagiku was very different from her mother, the one who sought to bring ruin to all. Himawari did not know what part of herself her mother had done away with to make Azumagiku.

A soothing voice drove away the room’s silence. **“Inside Azumagiku is the skull I stole away. That’s why her appearance and character are so much like that whore. I knew from the start she would act so selflessly without her memories.”**

“Her memories are gone?”

“Yes. She doesn’t recall being my daughter, nor why I made her. But she’ll remember when she finds the one she’s looking for, and she’ll recall her purpose then too.”

Magatsume’s eyes gleamed maliciously as she stared into emptiness, but the unmistakable brilliance of affection was also there.

“I just want to know. When Azumagiku fulfills her purpose, what will he choose?”

Softly, her words faded away into night.

Fading Faces, Evening Twilights

1

IT WAS NOW May in year sixteen of the Meiji era (1883 AD).

“Here you are.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Jinya sat on the front steps of the Aragi Inari Shrine, sipping warm tea. Chiyo, the wife of the head priest, watched him from off to the side with a tender expression. After the tea, he reached out for the isobe mochi which she always brought out for him when he visited. That wasn’t the only reason he went out of his way to come by, of course, but it certainly helped. He found it easier to relax here than at the teahouses around town.

“What brings you here today, Jinta-nii?”

“I just wanted to see your face, is all.”

“Oh, please. Don’t tease this old lady.”

She had still been young when he left Kadono, but she was a mild-mannered elderly woman now. His unaging body made her change feel all the more incredible to him.

“You’ve grown, huh?” he remarked.

“Where’d that come from?”

“I was just thinking how fast time flies. It’s hard to believe that the little girl who always fumbled over her words has grown up so much.” He patted her head, making her smile a bit bashfully. Even after all these years, a shadow of her old self still remained, the changed parts of her overlapping with the unchanging ones. He felt keenly reminded of the length of his journey so far and thought of his old home as he stood up. “Thanks for the mochi.”

“Not at all. Come by whenever you like.”

After those brief parting words, Jinya looked ahead. He saw Somegorou leaning against the torii gate, gazing up at the sky as he waited for Jinya.

“Somegorou.”

“Oh, ya done already? Let’s be off, then.”

The well-organized streets of Kyoto were as crowded as ever. Busy shops filled them with noise, and all the people walking by had bright smiles on their faces. Jinya couldn’t bring himself to be so cheerful, however. Not when he and Somegorou were heading off to investigate a lead on a potential case.

“Now this sure brings back memories,” Jinya said.

“Yeah. It’s been, what? Ten years?”

“Maybe. Haven’t bothered to count myself.”

The two of them had worked on cases together a number of times, but this particular situation bore a number of resemblances to another one.

“Welp, we can leave the reminiscin’ for when all’s said and done. Let’s focus on the job at hand.”

They reached a liquor store on Sanjyou Street. The place seemed ordinary enough.

“Welcome!” The man greeting them had broad shoulders and looked rather affluent. He’d actually come to Somegorou with a demon-hunting job before, although Heikichi had ultimately been the one to handle it. At any rate, he was a familiar face to the teacher-disciple pair. “It’s been a while, Akitsu-san.”

“That it has. Have ya been well?”

“Can’t complain. What brings you here today?”

“I heard there was a popular liquor that’s become the talk of the town. Figured I had to try it myself, so I grabbed a friend and came here.”

Their investigation this time began with a strange rumor. Apparently, for the

last six months there had been talk of a particular drink that all liquor stores now stocked.

“A popular liquor, you say?” the man repeated.

Somegorou glanced to his side at Jinya, who nodded and firmly said, “Have you heard of Snow’s Memory?”

The day after Jinya and Somegorou went to gather information at the liquor store, they decided to have lunch at a nearby beef hotpot restaurant. Meat consumption—a long-held taboo in Japan—was becoming increasingly normalized, which was evident from the good business the restaurant received.

Earlier beef hotpot was simpler: Meat was diced, then stewed in a miso-based sauce. The miso masked the gaminess of the low-quality beef, which was all that was available at the time. But as meat became more popular, its quality naturally rose, so it became common to use a sauce made of shoyu sauce, sugar, and dashi instead. This restaurant featured those ingredients, which proved that they used good meats.

“Mmm, that hits the spot.” Heikichi went for the meat first, downing bite after bite.

“Heikichi-san, aren’t you eating a bit fast?” Nomari watched, bug-eyed, as Heikichi gorged himself. She was pretty fond of the meat herself, so she also ate quite a bit—just not as quickly as Heikichi.

“Sorry, but I never get to eat stuff like this. Master Somegorou is always the one picking the places we eat.”

Jinya and Somegorou drank as they watched the two, occasionally nibbling the vegetables and pickled items that had been ordered to pair with the liquor.

“But, uh, are ya really okay makin’ this all yer treat?” Heikichi asked. He seemed to feel a bit guilty eating so much on someone else’s dime.

Jinya had been the one who suggested the four of them eat out, so it was his

responsibility to foot the bill. “Of course. Don’t worry so much. Children shouldn’t hold back on account of other people.”

“Er, I’m not exactly a child anymore.”

“A man who doesn’t drink might as well be a child.”

Heikichi frowned a bit, not happy to be infantilized. Jinya paid him no mind, however, and accepted Nomari’s offer to pour him a cup. The liquor tasted even more sublime when his daughter poured it for him. Just on its own, however, the drink had a nice dry taste and a mellow fragrance. The quality was surprisingly good.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I get where you’re comin’ from, Jinya.” With a wry grin, Somegorou downed his beer-sake. He grimaced as soon as he got a mouthful, though. The liquor was made through an imitation of foreign brewing techniques, but the flavor wasn’t quite to his taste. He grumbled that the bitterness wasn’t bad but he wished it had a sharper kick to it.

“Hmm… Say, are ya in a bad mood or somethin’?” Heikichi asked, looking at Jinya.

“Not particularly, no?” Jinya had thought he was keeping up his usual demeanor, but he was apparently acting more curt than usual.

Somegorou grinned and spoke up. “Heh. Get this, Heikichi. This guy here has actually been wantin’ to drink with ya for a while now, but ya say ya won’t drink, so he’s all sulky!”

“Shut it, Somegorou.” Jinya shot him a glare, but Somegorou just laughed it off. He was as cheerful an old man as ever, and it certainly didn’t help that he was right.

“Is that true?” Heikichi said in surprise.

“I won’t deny it. I was looking forward to sharing drinks with you one of these days.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Heikichi had no real idea why Jinya was so frustrated, but he

apologized anyway.

Somegorou flashed a knowing, mean grin. The cherry blossom liquor cup Jinya had bought was still lying unused. He had been saving it to drink together with Heikichi.

“Oh dear, oh dear. But anyway, how’s that taste, Jinya?” Somegorou asked. His tone was calm and indifferent, but his gaze turned sharp for just an instant.

Jinya made a show of effortlessly downing his cup. The liquor glided down his throat, spreading a comfortable warmth within him. The taste was pleasant. “It’s strong and has a good kick to it.”

“And?”

“That’s all. It’s a *normal* liquor.”

Somegorou stiffened when he heard the emphasis on *normal*. Stroking his chin, he thoughtfully said, “I see. Well, that’s ’bout expected, eh? This liquor has been around for half a year, but we haven’t heard anything strange.”

The liquor Jinya drank was called “Snow’s Memory.” The two of them had encountered a liquor with the same name before, one that incited hatred in people. The two of them went around various liquor stores and bought samples of this drink, but when Jinya taste-tested them, they all turned out to be ordinary liquor. It was made through the official channels, and no rumors had been heard of people becoming demons after drinking it. Grasping for straws, they went to this beef hotpot restaurant where the drink was stocked just to triple-check, but even here it was an ordinary, albeit fine quality, liquor.

In other words, this liquor was an entirely different substance, just with the same name. That didn’t necessarily mean it was unrelated, however. The lettering on the bottle was exactly the same as it had been in Edo, and that couldn’t be a coincidence.

Most damning of all, however, was that the brewery they were told made this liquor didn’t exist. In the address’s place was instead an abandoned mansion.

No matter what liquor store they talked to, they were always led back to the empty building. The intent behind the whole thing was so transparent that it was honestly laughable.

“What do you make of it, Somegorou?”

“It’s an invitation. A kindly prepared knotted letter sent by the woman from the rumors.”

In all likelihood, *she* was waiting for him in the mansion. It was hardly a rendezvous with some secret lover, but his heart still pounded at the prospect of meeting his sworn enemy. A malicious smile rose to his lips. “Well, how kind of her.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. Women hate a clingy man more than anything.”

“Sadly, I think this particular woman has it out for me enough as it is.”

The two made statements only each other would understand. With a frown, Nomari interrupted, repeating Somegorou’s words. “The woman from the rumors…?”

The two had no intention of explaining themselves, but her apparent misunderstanding got them flustered.

“Er, it’s nothin’ you need to worry about, Nomari-chan. We’re not talking about anythin’ immodest or anythin’,” Somegorou quickly said.

“Yes, we’re just talking about some dangerous work,” Jinya added.

Nomari’s expression softened with relief, but the danger Jinya mentioned quickly made her worried again. “Did you get another job request?”

“Kind of. We’re still only in the investigating phase. Don’t worry.” He answered like nothing was wrong, then drank his cup dry. This was not a topic to discuss over a meal.

The fake Snow’s Memory he’d ordered wasn’t anywhere near enough for him. He raised his hand to flag down a server, but Nomari gently grabbed his hand and pulled it down.

“I’d say you’ve had enough,” she chided him, as if she were talking to a child.

Such sternness suited her well, Jinya thought, keenly reminded of how much his daughter had grown. Her long hair was tied back with a pink ribbon like in her younger years, but her face had lost its childishness and her posture was more graceful.

“Surely a little more wouldn’t hurt?” he tried to argue.

“No way. Aren’t I always having to remind you not to drink so much?”

She was twenty years old now, and Jinya had stopped aging at eighteen—the daughter had outgrown the father. Not a single soul would look at these two walking side by side and think they were a father-daughter pair anymore. He had been dreading when this time would come.

“She’s like an attentive older sister,” Somegorou teased.

Nomari proudly smiled at Jinya. “That’s right. I’m an older sister now, so it’s my job to keep my younger brother in line.”

She said she was his older sister in public, but at home, she still called him “Father.” The fact that he was her father hadn’t changed, and to others they were still family. What more could he really wish for?

“Leave the drinking at that for today, okay?” she said.

“Sure thing, *oneesan*.” He jokingly called her his older sister, making her smile. The fact that his daughter was choosing to stay in his family, even if it was in a different form, caused him to smile as well.

“Nomari-chan’s always been cute, but she’s really grown into a fine woman. Don’t ya think so, Heikichi?” Somegorou said.

Heikichi choked on the meat he was eating. Through coughs, he washed it down with tea and fought to steady his breathing. “W-well, I guess she’s gotten pretty, y-yeah.”

“Really? Thank you, Heikichi-san,” Nomari said.

That awkward comment seemed to be all Heikichi could manage. The fact that he hadn't improved much in that regard since he was a kid was a bit of a worry.

"I agree, you've grown up beautiful, Nomari," Jinya said. "You've also become considerate, and you can handle household matters flawlessly. You even carry yourself with the grace of a flower that blooms in the evening. I'm sure any man would be happy to have you."

"Jeez, talk about doting much, am I right?" Somegorou teased. Jinya meant what he said, though.

"F-Father…" Nomari blushed at the overblown praise. Her sisterly act crumbled out of embarrassment.

"It's the truth," he said. Then he paused. "Although…"

"Oh? Now that's rare," Somegorou said. "You got a gripe or two to give her?"

"No, nothing like that. But…"

Somegorou saw Jinya hesitate and realized exactly what was up. With a roar of laughter, he said, "Aha! You're worried she might miss her chance to marry, am I right?"

The air seemed to freeze over all at once. Jinya went stiff, as did Nomari, who still wore an embarrassed smile on her face.

In Edo times, the marriageable age for women was considered to be between fifteen and nineteen. Entering the Meiji era, it became seventeen to nineteen. In the later years of the Meiji era, a scant few who were more wary of marrying girls off too young waited until they were past their twenties, but most parents married off their daughters by the time they were twenty. Women who remained unwed past that age were seen as strange by most people. Nomari would soon reach a point where it wouldn't be unusual for her to be called a spinster.

"Akitsu-san, did you say something?" Nomari said a bit menacingly. Her lips

trembled, probably because she was self-conscious of her own age.

“Well, I was just thinkin’ you’re hitting *that* age, y’know? I figure girls are better off marrying sooner than later.” It was rude to say a thing like that, but he wasn’t entirely wrong. There were plenty of women Nomari’s age who already had children, and it was better to give birth young considering the toll it took on the body.

“As your father, I’d be sad to see you get married off. I’m happy to have you stay with me,” Jinya said. “But…”

“But not at least having a man in mind is a bit concerning, yeah?” Somegorou said what Jinya was hesitating to say.

Jinya felt like he could finally understand the feelings of Ofuu’s father and why he was always suggesting Jinya wed Ofuu. No father would want to part with the daughter he doted on, but the fear that she would miss her chance to marry was still there.

“But who would I even marry? It’s not like I have any suitable men in my life.” Nomari laughed dryly, her face stiff.

“Well, what about Heikichi there?” Somegorou said.

“M-Master?!” Heikichi exclaimed.

“What are you saying, Akitsu-san?” Nomari said, flummoxed. She didn’t shoot the idea down, though. She could trust Heikichi; the prospect of marrying him wasn’t the worst. Still, she got flustered. “You’re troubling Heikichi-san by saying things like that. Right?”

“N-no, I don’t particularly mind.”

“Huh?”

Nomari blushed bright red and, needless to say, Heikichi did as well. There was no doubt that the two of them were close, but this seemed a bit too sudden for them both. Flustered, they started talking circles around one another.

“Whoops. Looks like I’ve done it now.”

“Sure does.”

The adults left the two bumbling children to their own devices. Jinya poured some of the remaining beer-sake into his cup and drank it. Somegorou didn’t like it, but Jinya thought it was quite good. He would’ve preferred it stronger, but it had a pleasant mouthfeel.

“Oh, you’re not angry at me? I thought you’d have a thing or two to say ’bout me teasin’ your daughter.” Somegorou gave Jinya a curious look, as if it were strange for him to be drinking like nothing was up.

Jinya grinned wryly and took another sip of the beer-sake. “I know you’re just being considerate toward me.”

“Heh. Was it that obvious?”

“Just how long do you think I’ve known you?”

The matter of Nomari marrying had been weighing on Jinya’s mind, but he couldn’t bring it up because he was afraid of hurting her feelings. That was why Somegorou said everything he couldn’t say, albeit jokingly.

“Sorry. I made you play the part of the fool,” Jinya said.

“Not at all. I chose to do it myself.”

“Either way, I’m grateful.”

Somegorou was a good friend to have. Things might not have led anywhere in the end, but at least the topic had been brought up.

“I think I’ll try and talk to her myself after all.”

“Good. I think that’d be for the best.” Somegorou grinned. “But I gotta say, Nomari-chan really has grown up to be a nice woman. I don’t think you’ve got anythin’ to worry about.”

Somegorou seemed to suspect how this would all play out. In high spirits, he looked at Jinya with a teasing gaze.

That night, Jinya and Nomari lounged about their living room after dinner. She'd been the one making their dinners lately and had become quite a capable cook. She even managed the rice bran they used for pickling foods now. As the head of the household, it was completely reasonable for Jinya to sit back and let her handle dinners, but not helping out at all made him feel irresponsible. She stubbornly insisted that she had a handle on it, though, so he relented and entrusted dinners to her in the end.

"It still feels wrong having you do everything for me," he complained.

"It's fine. These kinds of domestic duties are meant for daughters to do."

She called herself his daughter and his older sister interchangeably, whichever was more convenient, and always to lessen the load on his shoulders. He thought she could stand to live a little more selfishly, but alas.

The earlier talk of Nomari being in danger of missing her chance to marry was half a lie. She was attractive and kind—and that wasn't just Jinya's bias as a father speaking. If she wanted to marry, she could probably find a good partner with ease. But she didn't want to marry, and the reason was obvious. As always, she was trying to show kindness to her unaging father.

"Hey, Nomari?"

"Yes?" She smiled gracefully at him between sips of tea. He hesitated at the sight of her tender look, but if he cared for her at all, he had to say it.

"You don't have to force yourself for my sake," he said.

Nomari was unfazed. She seemed completely calm, as if she already knew what words were coming next. Silently, she waited for him to continue.

"There's merit in thinking about marriage soon. I have a surprising number of connections. We can find someone who meets your expectations together." He didn't mind if she married someone out of love, but otherwise it was a father's duty to find a suitable suitor. "We don't really even need to look far, do we?

Utsugi has grown into a fine man. I'm sure you know that well yourself. He'd make for a good husband." Jinya prattled on without stopping, because he felt that if he stopped once then he wouldn't be able to start again. He had to get the words out while he still could, before his determination cooled off. "It'll be harder to find someone once you're past twenty. Now's the time to think about it, if ever."

"Why?" She interrupted him in a soft, feeble voice. "Why bring this up? Is my being here a problem for you, Father?"

Her flat tone made him recall the past. There'd been a time when she was too self-conscious about being an abandoned child to speak her true thoughts. She had even been afraid he'd abandon her if he ever came to hate her, but she was different now. Though saddened, she could now face her fears.

"Don't be silly. I've never once thought of you as a bother," he replied.

"Then why?"

"Because you're holding yourself back for my sake."

Her eyes went wide. "Father…"

He smiled softly at her. "I get it. I know you're trying to stay here for me so the two of us can still be a family. I really am happy about it. But I've indulged in your kindness for far too long."

The life of a demon could stretch past a thousand years, but fifty was about the limit for humans. No matter how much Nomari tried, the time they could spend together as a family would pass in the blink of an eye. And it was precisely because their time with each other was so short that he wanted her to live as happy a life as possible.

She had given him the happiness of knowing he had a family, but it was time for her to find her own happiness now.

"Even if we live apart, we will never stop being family. So you don't need to force yourself for me. Find a man you like, have children, and live a good life.

Such a happiness, as ordinary as it may be, is available to you, Nomari.” He pretended not to notice the sense of emptiness flaring in his chest and kept his tone soft.

Nomari hung her head, her shoulders trembling, but she soon lifted her face and looked at him. He thought she might have been crying, but it appeared that wasn’t the case. Though her eyes were moist, there was determination to be found in them.

“Father, I…I am not a child anymore.” All the heart packed into her words could be felt through the trembling of her voice. She was clearly trying to show her strength. “I’m mature enough to make my own decisions now. Or do you disagree?”

“Of course not.”

“Right. I am your daughter, but I swear I will become your mother one day. That’s something I’ve decided myself. So please don’t say there is no happiness to be found in my choice, or that it is wrong.” She smiled awkwardly and puffed her chest up with pride.

He was happy to see such strength from her, but a bit saddened as well.

“I *am* thinking of the future,” she said. “So please, let me have my way like this just a little longer.”

“I’m sorry. I was being inconsiderate.”

“It’s okay. I know you’re just looking out for me. You really do dote on me too much, huh?”

The two of them smiled slightly over the joke.

Truth be told, he wished she had decided to marry someone and spend a peaceful life aging happily somewhere—especially since Magatsume was so close in sight now. He wanted Nomari to choose a normal life because that was something he’d failed to do. Unfortunately, she chose otherwise, but he felt pride in his daughter from the bottom of his heart regardless.

But right there in his heart, the ever-present hatred also remained.

Tomorrow, he would set foot into the abandoned mansion. His reencounter with Magatsume was on the horizon.

2

AFTER MEETING UP at the abandoned temple, Heikichi walked around town with Azumagiku. The streets were busy since it was just past noon. As Azumagiku had changed out of her shrine maiden clothes and into a plain kimono robe, the two blended into the crowds with ease.

“No faaaair. Why are you the only one who gets to do fun things?” She complained like a child and glared at him with envious eyes.

“How’s it my fault? It’s not like I could’ve just invited you along. I bet you’re only mad you missed out on hotpot, anyway.” He sighed in exasperation.

It’d been two years since he first met her, but they still hadn’t found the person she was after. Heikichi glanced at her face from the side. He knew her to be cheerful and a bit of a glutton, but the fact that her appearance hadn’t changed in the slightest really drove home her true nature as a demon.

That wasn’t to say nothing had changed at all. For some reason, she wasn’t as invested in her search anymore. At this point, most of their search attempts ended with them just walking around town aimlessly.

“Hey… Have ya given up on your search or something?” he asked.

Instead of answering, she blatantly changed the topic. “That soba guy you ate with—you talk about him a lot, huh?”

“I do? I guess so. He’s an alright guy. He’s the one who gave Nomari red bean bread its name, by the way.”

“Is that so? I kinda want to meet him. Come to think of it, you haven’t introduced me to any of your friends yet.”

“For good reason. Just imagine the fuss they’d make if they found out I knew the Shrine Maiden of Healing.” He lied without thinking, not wanting to reveal his real reason for hiding her from them. Since she was a demon, he couldn’t trust her enough to introduce her to Jinya and Somegorou. Or at least, that had been the case at first. He knew her well enough now to be sure she wasn’t a threat, but he still couldn’t introduce her to everybody. He dreaded what the more experienced demon hunters would think if they found out he was *still* working on Azumagiku’s case with no progress to show for it.

Of course, he also didn’t want Nomari to find out he was friendly with another woman.

“I feel like I’m walking a tightrope,” he muttered.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, no, just thinkin’ to myself. I gotta be careful or a certain guy’ll make mincemeat of me.”

Azumagiku laughed at that, but this was a matter of life and death for Heikichi. Jinya wasn’t a joking man. If he said he would do something, then he would do it. If he even so much as *thought* Heikichi was two-timing Nomari, then Heikichi would be a dead man. It was better for him to avoid Demon Soba while he was with Azumagiku.

“I haven’t had Nomari red bean bread in a while. Let’s pop by Mihashiya.”

“N-no, let’s not for today.”

“What? Why? We hardly ever go. C’mon.” She grabbed his arm and dragged him down Sanjyou Street. She may have looked like a weak young woman, but she was still a superior demon. He couldn’t quite shake off her grip.

“Ah jeez, fine. I’ll go buy it for you, so stay far away outside.” He felt exasperated at how easily he’d caved. He didn’t want to go, but it was hard to stop her when she smiled like that. The best he could do was get in and out as fast as possible and pray Jinya wouldn’t spot him.

“Hee hee. Thank you. You’re so kind, Utsugi-san.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just let go of me already.”

“You’re so cold!”

They joked around as they walked down the street. Heikichi could hardly believe he had grown able to do something like this. It wasn’t so long ago that he loathed demons.

“You’re really something, aren’t you, Master?” he murmured, unaware of the smile forming on his face.

There’d been a time when Heikichi doubted whether someone like himself who hated demons was worthy of the Akitsu Somegorou name. But now, he understood what his master had tried so hard to teach him. Though they may have been of different species, life spans, and ways of life, they could find an understanding so long as they could see eye to eye like this.

“C’mon, let’s hurry over,” he said.

He walked among the crowd of people, a demon by his side. Some might call this improper for one who hunted spirits, but he felt proud of the person he had become.

His steps were light underneath the afternoon sun, but a soft exclamation from Azumagiku made him pause in his tracks.

“Oh…” Azumagiku stopped and stared ahead, wide-eyed. He followed her gaze and saw the owner of Mihashiya, Mihashi Toyoshige, standing in front of Demon Soba. Nomari and Jinya were there with him, all three chatting about something. They were too far away to notice Heikichi and Azumagiku yet. Given Azumagiku’s expression, one might’ve assumed the world was at its end.

“What’s wrong?” Heikichi asked. Her expression was too lukewarm to call shock, but it wasn’t quite fear of a demon hunter or anything of that sort either.

After a few moments, she seemed to regain her senses, then smiled stiffly. “… Utsugi-san, I’ll be going home for the day.”

He didn't have time to stop her. She turned on her heel and ran before he could even get a word in. He reached out to try and grab her, but she was lost among the crowds and out of sight in only a moment.

"Hey…! What the hell?" The only thing he could do was curse. The words she murmured as she ran away didn't reach him.

"Finally, I've found you…" Her chilling voice was lost in the din of the crowds, and the fever in her words reached no one.

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Feeling like something was off, Jinya looked down the street. The restaurant was in a lull now that it was past noon, but the street was chock-full of people.

Seeing him stare, Nomari tilted her head slightly to the side. "Father, is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing." He thought he had felt someone look his way, but he couldn't see any such person as he scanned the area now. Perhaps he was overthinking it, or perhaps they had run off. Either way, there was nobody looking at him now. "Just my imagination, it seems."

"You feelin' tired or somethin', Kadono-san? Your face is lookin' a tad older than usual," Toyoshige joked about the few extra folds in Jinya's brow. "But sorry for all the trouble, you two."

"Not at all," Nomari said. "We're always looking forward to this."

"Ha ha, I'm happy to hear that. Guess I shouldn't be feelin' too apologetic, then." He handed over a paper package filled with sweets he'd made. Ever since they helped him make Nomari red bean bread, he occasionally came over like this and asked them to taste-test new things for him. His wife Saku didn't even need to pester him into action these days—he was fully immersed in inventing new recipes. It was hard to believe the man who'd complained so much about working could become so devoted to his craft.

"Well, that's all from me. Let me get outta yer hair." He gave a light wave in

lieu of any other parting words and left.

Jinya and Nomari returned to the restaurant. In the corner sat an old man who was sipping tea and loafing around like he owned the place.

“Done already?” Somegorou laughed.

There were no customers in the establishment. Tonight, Jinya was headed for the mansion that Magatsume might be waiting in, so he had closed the restaurant early. It would be no laughing matter if he died at the hands of his mortal enemy because he was tired from work, after all.

“Still weird seein’ ya like this, though,” Somegorou said as he stared hard at Jinya. What he saw was a Jinya who looked to be well into his thirties.

Jinya closed his eyes, and all at once his form reverted back to normal—that is, back to the appearance he’d had since he was eighteen. “Rude. I put a lot of effort into mastering this. Overlapping *Falsehood* over my body isn’t easy. *Falsehood* relies on my own memories, so I have to keep a clear mental image of what my older self would look like or it’ll fall apart—and that’s all while doing my normal work.”

“Heh, what a silly way to use a demon ability.” Somegorou grinned in exasperated amusement.

It may have seemed like a silly use of a demon’s power, but it was necessary for Jinya. It would draw too much attention if he didn’t age, so he was gradually amplifying the creases in his brow over time to look older. He needed to maintain the illusion of aging if he wanted to continue his life with Nomari here at the restaurant.

He didn’t maintain the illusion all the time, though. He reverted to his normal appearance in places where he didn’t expect to encounter anyone he knew. But whenever the restaurant was open, he had to keep up the guise.

“That’s a convenient ability, though. Can ya disguise yourself as other people with it?” asked Somegorou, stroking his chin. It was common for demons to

impersonate humans in folklore and such, but Jinya himself hadn't tried anything like that yet.

"Good question." He gave it a go with *Falsehood*. He looked at Somegorou's face as a nearby example, committed it to memory, and then overlapped the illusion onto himself. He felt his memories take shape on his face. Since the illusion had to move in tandem with his own face's motion, precision was needed. Slowly and deliberately, the illusion was molded into form.

After finishing, he looked at Nomari and Somegorou for feedback.

"Gross. The face looks like me, but the body is a total mismatch!" Somegorou exclaimed.

"Yeah, the top and bottom don't pair well at all, do they?" Nomari said.

Jinya had become a muscular Akitsu Somegorou, standing nearly six shaku[3] tall. Needless to say, it was an uncanny sight. "I can't go as far as changing my body with *Falsehood*, so it looks like disguising myself as others is a no-go. Too bad."

"Best leave that to the foxes and tanuki," Somegorou said.

Jinya undid his illusion, and Nomari breathed a sigh of relief when she saw him return to his usual self. "You know, I think I like your normal appearance the best."

"So do I. Now then, how about some lunch?" Jinya said.

"Sure, I'll make it right away. Would you like to join us as well, Akitsu-san?" Somegorou had no wife and neither he nor Heikichi could cook, which was why Nomari made the offer.

The three sat around the table and ate. The father and daughter had a guest for once, but that only made their meal even livelier. Anyone looking in would think they were the very image of a happy family.

Night came, and Jinya headed for the mansion. The night winds of May carried a strange warmth within, and the mugginess made his skin crawl.

"Kadono-dono…" Kaneomi said.

"Yes?"

"You seem tense."

Now that she mentioned it, his body and mind did feel on edge.

"Of course I'm tense. I'm finally meeting *her*."

"Oh dear. You wish to see her so badly, eh? I can't help but be envious," she joked. She was trying to lighten the mood for him. For what it was worth, it worked: Some of the tension released from his shoulders.

"Please. I wouldn't dream of cheating on my wife." He joked back to show his gratitude and envisioned her smiling in response.

Thin clouds like diluted ink covered the night sky, making the moon and stars indistinct. He left Sanjyou Street and walked for some time, eventually coming across a slope with a garden running along it and what remained of a long-abandoned mansion. Back when Tokyo was still known as Edo, Kyoto had hosted many rest homes and villas owned by samurai. This mansion was one of those, built to house a samurai after their retirement. But the arrival of the Meiji era brought with it the end of the samurai, and so the mansion crumbled into ruins and was forgotten by time.

Jinya stepped into the garden and continued down a bamboo-lined path. At the end, he found a young girl waiting for him in the darkness.

"I've been waiting for you, Uncle." Himawari gave him a bright smile that felt out of place in the night.

He wasn't surprised to see her. He knew that the fake Snow's Memory had been a tool to lure him here and this mansion was nothing but a convenient location to draw him to. Ambushes and traps were to be expected.

"Pardon my late visit," he said. "Is the lady of the house in?"

“So formal. I’d rather you speak freely with me.” She puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“I’m afraid that’s a little beyond me right now.”

She sighed, then smiled brilliantly like a blooming flower again. “I see. Then allow me to take you to my mother right away.” She led him down a corridor as dark as his own heart was now.

Finally, it’s time, he thought with excitement. He had spent so many years ignorant about the purpose of all this, but now he was finally going to meet her. Was the fever in his chest elation, or was it simply the hatred he’d never managed to erase? He decided not to think too deeply about it and followed Himawari down the long corridor.

“Go right ahead, Uncle.” She slid open a screen door and gestured for him to enter. He did so, entering a formal tatami-matted room where a woman sitting slack awaited, her gaze wandering through empty space. Her hair was a billowing gold that glistened bewitchingly in the night. She wore a hazy black robe that seemed cut from miasma itself. The aura she exuded was sharp like a blade. Her gaze turned listlessly toward him.

The moment he saw the red of her eyes, hatred welled up inside him against his wishes. “It’s been a while, Suzune.”

Forty-three years, in fact.

Long before the foretold time, Jinya had reencountered his beloved, detested younger sister once more.

3

THE AIR WAS WARM, but Jinya felt a chill. Suzune slowly rose and fixed her gaze on him. She had a strange, manic glint in her eyes. Was it anger, hatred, or something else entirely?

He tried to feign calmness, but dark emotions stirred within him. He thought he had managed to change at least a little bit, but he was wrong. He still remembered that distant rainy night when he swore to remain her brother, but hatred just kept welling up inside him. His demon body screamed out—*Make her pay for all she took from you. Tear her flesh, snap her bones, gouge her innards. Pulverize her until not even the soul remains.*

"I thought I might as well pop by, seeing as you went to the effort of making your little invitation," he spat. He felt as though he would lunge at her if he let his focus slip, but he forced his expression to be as stiff as steel regardless.

Her reaction was muted. She stared at him with questioning eyes as time fruitlessly passed them by in silence.

Who can say how long that moment lingered? Eventually, she opened her mouth to speak without breaking her listless air. Her first words were a mixture of disdain and mockery. **"Did you have fun playing house with that girl?"**

"Is that a joke?"

"The only joke here is you. You abandoned your own kin but took in a human child to create a pretend family with? Hilarious."

He wasn't so green as to fall for such cheap provocations. He held his deepening hatred in check and sharpened his glare on her.

"Did you want to distract yourself from your loneliness? Or did you think being with a human would make you forget you were a demon? What a pathetic thing you are."

The blithe, innocent younger sister he'd known was long gone—and so was the brother who'd loved her. It was because of his mistake that she had become the demon she was now, but it was her actions that made him the demon he was. Therefore, the two of them both were to blame, and they both were deserving of the other's hate.

So hate one another they did.

“Pathetic, huh? I might be, but Nomari has given me something nobody else could. My time with her has not been a waste.”

“Oh, spare me. If all you wanted was a family…” She grimaced, her expression mirroring that of a ghoulish fiend from hell as she glared at him.

“I answered your question; now you will answer mine. Suzune, do you still say you wish to bring ruin to everything?”

“What do you think?” she scoffed. Her eyes seemed to add: *Who do you think put me on this path in the first place?*

The air turned cold and stiff like ice. A chill ran down his spine. Every time he heard her voice, irritation flared in him. He had to grit his teeth out of sheer bitterness just listening to her, but he forced himself to continue anyway.

“You could live away from humanity. Dwell in isolation and have nothing to do with mankind.”

He wanted to find a way through this that didn’t involve killing her if possible. He had sworn this to his village chief as he left Kadono so long ago, and he was too weak not to cling to that faint hope.

But there was one thing he needed to know before he could spare her.

“Now that I’m meeting you again, I understand that I really can’t help but loathe you. All the happiness I experienced did nothing to ease my hatred for you.”

Even if he couldn’t part from his hatred, the fact that he’d once loved his sister was the undeniable truth. He could at least bring himself to overlook her presence.

“That’s why I will gladly put an end to you if you still plan to bring ruin to mankind. But if you swear you won’t harm anyone instead, then I promise I won’t give chase. We can end this without needing to fight. What do you say?”

He was willing to live with his hatred and die without achieving his purpose—so long as she gave up all her plans and made herself scarce. He knew his offer

was unreasonable, but this was the greatest concession he could possibly make.

“Yeah, no. That’s just not *fair*.” Her shapely face grimaced slightly. **“In my time apart from you, I’ve realized something. Even now, you are my everything. So long as you loved me, I could accept this world no matter how unbearable it became. That’s why I will bring ruin to everything… Ruin to everything…and then…”** Her bitter words overflowed with no clear meaning.

In truth, part of him knew she would decline his offer. She’d created Himawari and Jishibari, who claimed to have formed from the discarded, unnecessary parts of her heart. If she were a more refined version of herself, freed from excess, then it would make sense that her hatred was even greater than Jinya’s.

“I see. That’s a shame.”

There was no point in any further discussion. Conflict was the only resolution to be found. Jinya drew Yarai and Yatonomori Kaneomi, took a loose stance, and glared fiercely at Suzune.

“You sure don’t look disappointed.”

He realized then that he had been grinning. Unable to hold back his swelling emotions, he took on the face of a savage.

In the end, he was nothing more than a pathetic excuse for a man. Since his offer had been refused, the only option left was to kill…and that *pleased* him. Now he could slay his mortal enemy and tell himself he had no other choice.

“Ha. You’re right.”

For him, hatred was less an emotion and more a natural bodily function. His demon body rejoiced, trembling with joy at the thought of killing his beloved, detested younger sister.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for tonight, Suzune. I’ll make you pay for everything you took from me—Shirayuki and the rest. It ends here.”

Without hesitation, he would kill the demon who took his happiness from

him.

“Hmph.” She sniffed at him, then narrowed her eyes. Her voice filled with a cold malice that couldn’t fully be described as loathing or disdain. **“You haven’t changed one bit.”**

Those words signaled the start of their battle. The two closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye.

Suzune merely walked. There was no technique or grace to her movement, but even then, she was still far faster than the battle-hardened Jinya.

The air roared as she raised an arm and swung it down with full force. He parried her nails, sharp as daggers, by scooping upward with the flats of his blades. Stepping in with his right leg, he swung Yatonomori Kaneomi at Suzune’s neck, but she dodged with ease.

Her movements were as rough as before, but her speed remained just as astounding as well. She pulled back, escaping his range. He was different than he’d been last time, however. With *Dart*, he closed the gap between them in one go.

“I’ll have you know I’ve become stronger over the years.”

His movements were sharper than they’d been the last time they fought. His dash flowed uninterrupted into a horizontal sweep, but she was still faster. She leapt over Yarai and swung her nails down at his head. Her strike seemed like it would land against his unguarded skull, but he hardened his body with *Indomitable* just in time.

With her all-out attack blocked, she was left at a temporary halt. He took the opportunity to undo *Indomitable*, step in toward her flank, and slash diagonally against her chest. She dodged this too, but her expression turned stiff. His strength was greater than she had anticipated.

The reverse was also true, however—*her* strength was greater than *he* had anticipated. On that night long ago, he’d only been able to land a blow on her

after risking his life by letting her land a strike on him first. Since then, he'd trained greatly and devoured the powers of many demons. He may still have been weaker as a demon, but he considered himself more than capable as a martial artist.

But she, too, had spent the years growing stronger. She still had many openings, a sign of inexperience in combat, but she remained more powerful than he. That was precisely why he kept pressing the attack, all while she stared at him with icy eyes.

He slashed diagonally across, thrusted, twisted his body aside while striking diagonally upward, and stepped in to stab at her flank—and she avoided each of his attacks unscathed in turn. In terms of pure ability, she was far superior. He couldn't let his guard down for even a moment.

As she dodged one of his strikes, she lifted her arm up overhead. Three demons appeared out of nothingness as if responding to her call. They were hideous things with flesh and muscle laid bare, likely crafted from corpses. They moved between Suzune and Jinya, but the likes of three demons would hardly be a hindrance to him. He dodged to the side as one of them struck at him, lopping off its arms as he did so. He then stepped in close to its chest and sliced across it, shoulder to waist.

"Begone."

After the first demon was felled, one of the remaining creatures swung a fist at Jinya without missing a beat. Pulling back only to have to get close again would be too much work, so instead he chose to meet the attack head-on. Okada Kiichi's swordplay came to mind: no excess strength or unnecessary movement. Jinya calmed his heart as the demon neared and moved one of his swords forward, letting his body drift weightlessly. He rested the flat of his blade against the demon's arm and adjusted its trajectory just enough so he could step in with his right foot, bring a sword down, and slash across the demon's body.

Keeping his stance low, he turned to face the final demon. It was too slow to even react. Jinya slid his right foot far forward and cut the demon's elbow, sending it falling. His left foot followed quickly behind, and he used the force of its landing to strike the demon's bare neck and send its head rolling.

With no great effort needed, he'd taken care of all three demons, but that had been enough for Suzune to make space between them. She had already leapt out into the garden with Himawari, who had been watching their fight, in her arms.

"Damn." Jinya quickly gave chase and stepped out into the garden, but more demons appeared. Though they were all small fry, there were more than a dozen of them. Suzune watched him at a distance from behind them.

"You really haven't changed one bit." She seemed to be holding back tears for some reason. The way she made herself look so weak enraged him. **"You were like this that night as well. You went off to fight a demon in the forest, not caring about what would happen to me."** The look in her eyes seemed closer to sadness than disappointment or disdain. She probably meant to glare, but it seemed more like she was forcing herself to smile through tears than anything. **"You never stop to think about the ones you leave behind."**

"What are you trying to say?" he said curtly.

With an icy smile, she answered, **"That you took the bait just as easily as you did that night long ago."**

His body stiffened coldly. Back then, Jinya—*Jinta* had thought the demons would be after Byakuya, or maybe the village treasure, Yarai. But no, their real goal had been to find Suzune and set the stage for the birth of the Demon God. The demon with *Superhuman Strength* was simply meant to decoy Jinta into Irazu Forest so the other demon could reach Suzune.

And that same Suzune claimed he was repeating his mistake now.

"…Nomari."

“Took you long enough. That’s why I said you haven’t changed. You’re still making the same mistake even after all this time.”

Suppose for an instant that Jinya hadn’t left Suzune alone that day long ago. Would she still have gone to the shrine and killed Shirayuki then? He didn’t know. He couldn’t imagine what might have changed for them, but Suzune clearly believed things would be different now if he had only stayed behind that day.

Perhaps that was why she was targeting Nomari: to make him understand that *he* brought about this reality in which they hated one another.

“You’ve chosen wrong yet again.” She spoke arrogantly, yet her voice sounded pained.

More and more demons appeared, as if they were springing out from the ground. Their purpose was obviously to slow him down.

“You underestimate me.” Jinya felt no panic.

Suzune seemed surprised by his indifferent response, as though she had half expected him to furiously attack the demons instead.

“When I said I became stronger, I meant it in more ways than one.”

She seemed to think for a moment. Then she jumped up onto the roof with Himawari, turned around, and left abruptly.

“You’re running away?”

“Go ahead and play with the demons there all you like. It’ll all be over soon enough.”

It sounded like Nomari was being attacked by demons at this very moment. Jinya gritted his teeth, feeling unbridled anger.

“Why be so roundabout? If it’s me you hate, then why not fight me directly?” he taunted. Of course, he knew she was coming for his daughter specifically because she wanted to torment him.

Suzune looked back over her shoulder at him. **“I just want to know: When the time comes, what will you choose?”**

He was about to demand she explain what that meant, but then Himawari spoke up with a smile. “Farewell, Uncle. Let’s chat over tea next time.”

“Be quiet, Himawari.”

He tried to give chase, but the numerous demons blocked his path. Keeping the rising heat of his emotions in check, he called out one last time to Suzune. “Suzune, why make your move now of all times?”

When she made enough demons to form a night parade, Himawari had told him it was all so she could learn how to make a heart. But then what was this all for? Why had she gone through the effort of luring Jinya out and attacking Nomari?

Suzune stopped in her tracks and hung her head. **“Is it not obvious? It’s because things just aren’t *fair* the way they are.”**

Leaving behind an incomprehensible answer, she departed.

The frustration of finding his mortal enemy but not being able to do a thing to stop her made Jinya’s head feel red hot. His heart raced, and his vision blurred from rage.

“Kadono-dono,” Kaneomi warned.

“I know.” He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Getting heated here would only slow him down. If he cared about Nomari, then he needed to remain calm. He didn’t know what Suzune was trying to do, but for now his priority had to be clearing away the demons around him.

“Sorry, but I’m going to need you all to get out of my way.”

He sharpened his focus like a blade, took up a stance, and then lunged at the demons.

***

With night's arrival, silence had returned to Sanjyou Street. A suspicious figure walked along—a broad-shouldered man who seemed rather affluent. It was the street's liquor dealer, the one who had introduced Heikichi to the Shrine Maiden of Healing.

The man walked down the dark street with weight behind each step. His face was ghastly pale, but his eyes were a shocking, cold red. If one really thought about it, the man had been suspicious from the beginning. He had known the location of the Shrine Maiden of Healing, and with the shrine maiden's true identity in mind, it wasn't hard to guess whose influence he worked under.

Ahead of him was the soba restaurant. Its entrance curtains were, of course, down for the day to show the business was closed. The man grinned eerily.

"Maga…tsume…"

His ability to think had been taken from him. His sole remaining thought was of attacking the residents of Demon Soba. His muscles creaked as his body contorted into a hideous figure. By the time he reached the restaurant, he had completely taken a demon form. With an unearthly groan, he stretched a dark red hand toward the door.

"Skulls."

A flurry of skulls descended on the demon like an avalanche. The sound of chattering teeth drowned out his cries.

"Sorry, but this restaurant's closed. I can't have you comin' in." A young man with three rings of prayer beads around his left wrist walked out of the restaurant. He seemed unsurprised by the demon's presence, as if he had expected it to come.

The demon glared sharply at the man, but the man simply maintained an air of aloofness and smiled, saying, "Keep it down, would ya? Nomari-san's tryin' to sleep, and I'd rather not wake her up."

The man's name was Utsugi Heikichi. He was Akitsu Somegorou the Third's

top disciple and was set to succeed his master. Jinya's words to Magatsume hadn't been an empty bluff: Jinya may have fallen for bait tonight like he did that day long ago, but he didn't fight alone anymore. He had found new sources of strength in other people. He knowingly took Magatsume's bait because there were others he knew he could count on. He was weaker now than he'd been when he could devote himself wholeheartedly to his purpose and nothing else, but the things he'd found along his journey were far from worthless.

"Huh. You're sturdier than ya look."

The skull artifact spirit was Heikichi's strongest, but the demon remained standing after taking the brunt of the attack. Heikichi wasn't deterred, however. He remembered Jinya's request: *"I don't know what Magatsume might do, so I want you to take care of Nomari for me, just in case."*

Jinya loved his daughter more than anything, and yet he'd been willing to entrust her to another. The immense trust the man was putting in him was not lost on Heikichi. He swore to himself that he would prove Jinya had chosen the right man for the job.

"But it doesn't really matter. You're probably nothin' more than riffraff anyway." With his left arm extended forward, Heikichi grinned challengingly. Right now, he felt like he could take on any demon that came his way.

***

Magatsume walked down the slope of Higashiyama District after leaving the mansion behind. In her arms she held Himawari, who puffed her cheeks out.

"I wanted to talk to Uncle more."

Magatsume didn't respond, but her grip on Himawari was tender.

The gentle dip of the slope continued underneath soft, dark clouds. None of the faint starlight or moonlight reached the tree-lined lane on which she walked. The path ahead was pitch-black, even to the eyes of a demon.

Magatsume had succeeded in her goal. She'd disseminated rumors of Snow's

Memory just so she could lure Jinya out and keep him preoccupied. Himawari had been happy to see him act just as her mother planned, but Magatsume was beyond mere happiness. Her long-awaited reunion with her brother had brought hatred and yearning, elation and sorrow—more emotions than she could count became one jumbled, wild mess inside her.

To Magatsume, Jinya was everything. Even after she became a demon and forsook the world of man, that was the one thing that didn't change. And as Magatsume's eldest daughter, Himawari could comprehend her mother's feelings. As the part of her heart Suzune first discarded so she could become Magatsume and stand against her brother, Himawari's essence was very close to Magatsume's true self.

"Mother, are we going where Nomari-san is now?"

Magatsume didn't respond, instead gently running her fingers through Himawari's hair and staring into the darkness. She seemed to think for a while, but then her gaze suddenly became fierce.

"Nice night we've got here," a voice said nonchalantly. Magatsume stopped dead in her tracks. "The clouds are coverin' up the moon and stars just right. Really sets the mood."

An easygoing old man stood blocking the path ahead with a forced smile on his face. Magatsume went on guard.

"Long time no see, Himawari-chan. I'm guessin' this here's yer mother, Magatsume? She's quite the beauty. Hard to believe she has kids of her own." The old man maintained his nonchalant tone, intent on playing the fool even though he was aware of Magatsume's true identity.

But Magatsume knew who the man was as well.

"…Akitsu Somegorou."

"Oh, ya know me? Gosh, looks like I've turned into quite the celebrity."

The old man's joking, aloof nature made him seem slightly detached from

reality, almost as if *he* were the otherworldly being rather than Magatsume. His smile was like papier-mâché—outwardly genuine but hollow on the inside. A great deal of hostility hid behind the kind exterior.

"Jinya figured out that all the rumors goin' around about Snow's Memory were an invitation to visit your place, but he didn't think far enough about *why* the invitation was made. Just hated ya too intensely to give it proper thought, I s'pose." Somegorou reached into his clothes and pulled out a dagger. He showed no openings even as he talked, remaining cautious and making minute adjustments to the distance between the two.

Magatsume put Himawari down and hid her behind the trees. Her expression softened briefly before quickly turning harsh once more.

"Jinya's usually coolheaded, but he can get a bit heated from time to time. The moment he realized yer around, all other thoughts left his mind. Well, he remembered to talk to us, though, so I guess he's grown somewhat."

Magatsume grimaced with displeasure. She lowered her weight, leaving herself ready to move at any moment.

"Things won't go the way you planned. Nomari-chan's got Heikichi lookin' after her, and I'm here to put a stop to you. Sorry to say it, but this is the end of the road," he declared. Fearless, the man known as Akitsu Somegorou pointed his dagger at her.

***

The trees groaned eerily as a gust blew through them. Somegorou confronted Magatsume underneath a night sky of thin clouds. He had come across more spirits than he could count over the course of his career, but the demon before him now was unlike anything he had seen before. Her face was expressionless like a Noh mask, but she exuded a dense, sickening aura. As demons were nothing more than thoughts given form, the intensity of their emotions was directly connected to their strength. Just how far did her strength go?

"Why do you stand in my way?" she asked with an icy glare. She seemed to

imply he was an outsider to their affairs. The average person would have frozen up just from that look, but Somegorou took it in stride.

“You’re really askin’ why? Ha ha, you must not have many friends.”

Her question was a silly one. Somegorou had known Jinya for many years. They’d grumbled over drinks together, aged together, and even raised a daughter and a disciple side by side. Jinya’s battle was Somegorou’s battle too.

“Jinya’s my pal. Why wouldn’t I fight when he needs me?”

Somegorou knew the bond that lay between Jinya and Nomari better than anyone. Even if they weren’t blood-related or even both human, the two of them had proved themselves to be a real family. Somegorou wouldn’t let Magatsume get between the two. He wouldn’t have the right to call himself a friend if he didn’t try to stop her.

Somegorou’s heart was set. He would *kill* Magatsume. Not only did he desire to protect Jinya’s relationship with his daughter, but he wanted to prevent Jinya from having to kill his own younger sister if possible. That sin only needed to be shouldered by one person. When the time came, he planned to tell Jinya that Magatsume fled because she couldn’t beat him and that she probably would never bother anyone again.

“I figure I might as well ask… What is it you’re after, Magatsume?”

“I seek to bring *ruin*.” The sinister aura she exuded intensified. It was a bold statement, but Somegorou felt she had the power to back it up.

“Ruin, huh? And ’ere I thought demons couldn’t lie. What you’ve been doin’ seems to me like the exact opposite: turnin’ humans into demons, creatin’ abilities, and makin’ hearts. Now, I wonder, just what might that all be for?” Somegorou had a strong suspicion: He believed Magatsume was experimenting with the heart to learn something, something that might bring her and her brother together again.

With a goading tone, he said, “Let me rephrase my question. What are ya

bloodyin' your hands so much to *create*?"

Magatsume didn't reply or even stir in the slightest, but Somegorou wasn't disappointed. He hadn't expected a response to begin with. With this, the need for dialogue was over. Only one thing remained to be done.

"All right. Shall we begin?"

The dagger Akitsu Somegorou held was his trump card. He planned to go all out from the start this time, since his opponent's strength was unknown and he had no reason to play fair. He was aiming to kill with the first strike, before his opponent had a chance to use her full strength.

Magatsume stood without taking a stance, her arms loose at her sides. But the hostility in her eyes made it clear that she intended to fight.

"Earlier, you said I was after Nomari. But no, that disgusting little brat isn't my target. My target is you."

"Huh? Me?"

"You want to know what I'm after? I'll tell you, so you, too, can understand just how *unfair* it all is." The corners of her mouth rose in a twisted, scornful grin. **"Jinta is everything to me, but I am not everything to him. He once was willing to sacrifice all else to kill me, but now he's surrounded by hindrances."**

What she was revealing to him wasn't the broader picture—the reason behind her plotting and what Somegorou suspected she was creating. No, she was merely explaining why she acted against them now.

In an instant, his icy impression of her vanished. She was a zealot. A zealot delirious with fever. Any semblance of sanity had long since abandoned her.

"Huh? But aren't ya tryin' to kill him?"

"Only because I can't go on otherwise. My dream cannot be granted without bringing ruin to the world."

The incongruity of her words and the eerie yearning in her voice sent a shiver down his spine.

“There is comfort in being hated by him. Watching him suffer in his search for power brings me joy sweeter than any honey. He is everything to me, so it is only right that I be the same to him. But…that is no longer the case, is it? That is why I must make things right. Make him hate me again. Hurt him so much that all else loses meaning, so he’ll have eyes for me alone once more.” Her visage warped with heartfelt delight. **“And so, tonight I shall take everything from him.”**

4

AZUMAGIKU STOOD in the darkness of the abandoned

temple. She had found the one she was looking for and, consequently, had recalled the role she was given.

“I… I must…”

I must go there…

***

An aura of insatiability oozed from Magatsume. Somegorou shivered against his will—more out of disgust than fear. Goosebumps rose on his skin. Much as one couldn’t see the depths of darkness, he could not make out the extent of Magatsume’s obsession, and that unnerved him.

“What a mess.”

Magatsume loathed Jinya—there was no doubting that. But at the same time, she was obsessed with him. She had not moved on from her attachment to her brother. Whether that resulted from human nature or the nature of demons was unclear, but it was a fact that she had a conflicting mixture of love and hate for her brother.

“I get you want Jinya to look at ya so badly you’ll target Nomari-chan and me, but why take your sweet time and wait until now?”

Magatsume's actions and words didn't line up. She claimed to be obsessed with Jinya, wanting them to mean everything to each other, but her methods so far didn't reflect that. Everything she'd done had been roundabout. If she were truly so obsessed with Jinya, then why did she wait until now to act against him directly? Why did she choose to lurk in the shadows for so long?

Perhaps her other goal was unrelated to what was happening now. Maybe her obsession had reached a boiling point that made her lash out, but behind the scenes she was calmly continuing her experiments for another purpose. If that were true, then her staying alive posed a problem. Somegorou now had another reason to make sure he killed her.

"Because it doesn't matter when I act, so long as it all ends the same way." Her shapely face turned expressionless again, like a Noh mask.

Trying to at least glean something about her inner thoughts, Somegorou said, "Just what are ya tryin' to *be* to Jinya?"

After a few moments of silence, she disinterestedly spat, **"What's the point in telling a dead man?"**

Despite her general willingness to speak so far, she clammed up on that one topic. Somegorou couldn't read what her aims were, but he had a guess. "Guess I can't force ya to talk, but I can't let you run wild any longer either. Not as Jinya's friend, and not as Akitsu Somegorou."

If she were left alone, Magatsume would harm not just Jinya but also those around him. She might even bring actual ruin to the world like she promised.

"Sorry, but I'll see that you're slain here." The glare of Somegorou's narrow eyes turned fierce.

The Land of the Rising Sun was home to many demon-hunting families with long histories, such as the Nagumo of the Demonic Sword and the Kukami of the Magatama. The Akitsu were different, however: They were a line rather than a family and more craftsmen than demon hunters. That was why Somegorou could overlook demons that posed no harm. Of course, Magatsume

was a demon he could never possibly ignore. If left alone, she could potentially become a calamity to the world. He strengthened his hand holding the dagger and made it clear that he intended to fight.

“Don’t make me laugh, old coot.” Undeterred, Magatsume made her move. Her body blurred as if it were an incorporeal ghost, a captivating sight when combined with her beauty. But Somegorou had no time to be awed. With but a single step, she was in range and swinging her nails down at his skull. She had moved at a speed he could barely register—a speed no human could imitate.

“I may be an old man…” Somegorou was unfazed. A massive, bearded demon with fierce eyes appeared to block the strike. It wore the gold-embroidered clothes of a civil servant and held a sword of the same design as Somegorou’s dagger—it was the plague-quelling, demon-slaying demon god Shouki, Somegorou’s strongest artifact spirit. “But I’m not about to lose to some snot-nosed brat.”

Shouki swept his blade, sending Magatsume flying back, but she landed gently on her feet. Though Somegorou’s counterattack had little effect, the look on his face remained confident.

Magatsume was far and away the strongest demon he’d ever fought, but she really only had speed and strength on her side. Even Somegorou, who was many levels below Jinya in terms of martial arts, could manage to block her strikes. Her attacks simply lacked technique and were far too linear, which left her with many openings he could take advantage of.

“After you’re dead and gone, I’ll tell Jinya that ya ran away because ya couldn’t beat me, and ya won’t be causin’ problems anymore. He doesn’t need to know the truth.”

This was how Akitsu Somegorou the Third, a man who had slain countless demons throughout his life, fought.

“Go, dog spirits.” He pulled out some papier-mâché hariko dolls from his clothes and threw them Magatsume’s way. They emitted a black mist, gradually

forming an outline, then fully became dogs while traveling through the air. Magatsume swiped them away with her arm, scattering them all into small bits.

Unlike Jinya, Somegorou was human and would likely die if Magatsume so much as grazed him. That in mind, he wanted to keep her at a distance if possible, but it didn't seem like anything except Shouki could land a fatal blow against her. Since Shouki's maximum range was one ken,[4] he would have to eventually take the plunge and get closer to her.

"I'm not done yet. Come out, tiger." Next, he pulled out a papier-mâché hariko tiger doll, one of his larger artifact spirits. A bestial roar shook the night as a tiger sprang forth and attacked Magatsume. It leapt off the ground with a thud, gaping its maw wide and cutting the wind as it rushed forward. However, not a single one of its fingers or nails reached her as she shredded its body with ease.

But it served its purpose well as a distraction. Somegorou took the opportunity to close the distance, approaching Magatsume from the left and swinging his dagger down. Shouki mimicked the action, pulling back his blade to prepare a vertical swing straight down at her skull.

Magatsume had already turned in his direction, however. She hadn't read Somegorou's movements or anything; she was simply fast enough to dispatch the tiger with a swing of the arm, notice Somegorou at the edge of her vision, and then turn to face him. The gap between their physical abilities was just that great. Even if he used a decoy for a surprise attack, her strike would land first.

Unimpressed, she looked down at him from above and stepped close before Shouki could begin his swing. The distance between them vanished as she thrust her dainty, pale fingers forward. Her hand blurred and pierced Somegorou's body.

"Sorry, but that ain't me."

But her strike only landed on an illusion.

In the Qing dynasty (later China), mirages were thought to be the breath of

large clams. It made sense, then, that an awasegai shell artifact spirit would be able to create mirages. What Magatsume thought she pierced was no more than such a mirage. The genuine Somegorou was behind her, making his real strike.

Sensing his presence, Magatsume tried to turn around, but this time she was too slow. With full intent to kill, Somegorou unleashed his strike and landed it on her shoulder just as she turned to face him. Shouki's blade cut into her spotless skin, causing blood to spray forth. She glared, her face still without expression.

"…Is that all?"

Even when caught off guard, she was still fast enough to dodge the brunt of the blow. Only her flesh had been cut—the attack hadn't reached bone.

Still as expressionless as a Noh mask, she reached out and grabbed Shouki's blade with her left hand. It cut into her palm, showing how much strength she was putting into her grip. Slowly, she began to move her right arm.

"What on earth…?" Somegorou's eyes went wide.

Her right arm began to wriggle, an unsettling squelch sounding from it. Then it started to change shape as if it possessed a life of its own.

Somegorou was speechless from the bizarreness of it all. The perfect porcelain skin of her arm turned dark green and grotesque like the skin of a caterpillar, then split apart to reveal an exoskeleton similar to the leg of an arthropod. Disgust washed over him as he realized her arm had cocooned into the appendage of an insect. However, the ominous aura he sensed from the appendage exceeded his disgust. Instinctively, he understood that the thing was dangerous—he had to get away.

As soon as that thought struck his mind, he tried to make distance, forcibly pulling Shouki's sword away and cutting off Magatsume's fingers as he retreated.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kiddin’ me…”

But he wasn’t given even a moment to breathe. Magatsume didn’t need to move a step while her newly grown insectile arm elongated and attacked.

He fixed his posture and tried to slice the arm away with Shouki, but it wouldn’t cut. Though Shouki’s blade dug into the arm, its strange elasticity prevented it from going deep.

“Ngh, gah!” He did his utmost to dodge the arm’s trajectory, narrowly avoiding the strike with gritted teeth. In contrast, Magatsume gazed off into nothingness, paying no mind to his desperate struggle. She even seemed at peace, and that flustered him greatly.

“Huh, now ain’t that strange.” His lips felt dry, and he was covered in cold sweat. He smiled slightly, trying to hide how unnerved he was. “I coulda swore I cut ya earlier.”

He was *certain* he’d felt his strike land. There was still blood on Shouki’s blade, and the fingers he’d severed off her hand were right there on the ground.

And yet, Magatsume was unharmed and unfazed. Not a single wound was on her; even her clothes were uncut.

A demon’s healing factor was far greater than that of a human, but this went beyond even that. This could only be the result of her demon ability, whatever it was. Demons gained a unique power after a hundred years of life, but there were some who achieved theirs even sooner. A demon’s ability wasn’t inborn, but a manifestation of the unmet desires of the heart. An ability awakening sooner than normal meant one had a great longing for their unmet desires.

“What’s wrong? I thought you said you would slay me?” There was no mockery or boastfulness in her voice; her tone remained flat throughout. She was a hideous thing, now part insect, but she had a sense of forlornness that was just as strong. Despite the overwhelming strength she displayed, she seemed as helpless as a lost child.

“Heh. Oh, you’ve said it now.” He couldn’t attack her recklessly. Striking would be pointless unless he could figure out how her healing worked, and he had difficulty enough just evading her insectile arm. His plan for now was to maintain distance, using his artifact spirits to keep her in check—but before he could do anything, her insectile arm writhed and lashed out at him. It made a repulsive crinkling sound as it moved, but he didn’t dare take his eyes off it for even a second.

“Leave us, Himawari. Return to the mansion and check on things for me,” Magatsume called out to her daughter in a disheartened tone.

“But…”

“A child has no need to witness this fight.” Though it was indirect, a mother’s love could be felt in her words. **“Just go. I doubt that man would do anything to hurt you even if he did catch you.”**

“I understand, Mother. I shall wait for Uncle at a safe location.” Though she had been hesitant to leave, Himawari quickly became willing when Jinya was mentioned. Even in this kind of situation, she looked forward to seeing him with a broad smile on her face.

Somegorou sighed and called out to the girl just before she could leave. “You really like Jinya, huh?”

“Huh? But of course.” She seemed bewildered by the comment, much like a child as young as she looked might be.

“Aha ha. How cute.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Not at all. I’m sure Jinya’s just as fond of ya as you are of him.” He chatted with Himawari, keeping his eyes on Magatsume all the while.

“Really?” Himawari gave a brimming smile, unable to hide her joy. Though she was Magatsume’s child, Himawari truly adored Jinya. Somegorou had suspected that was the case from their previous interaction, but he’d held off on telling

Jinya anything—both because he wasn't certain and because he had hoped he was wrong.

"That's enough idle chatter."

"Forgive me. I'll be leaving, then, Mother. Farewell, Akitsu-san." After bowing, Himawari departed. The night felt all the darker without her bright smile. The reason Magatsume had sent her away was obvious: She intended to kill Somegorou here.

Somegorou wasn't flustered by that. This was a fight to the death, and he'd come knowing defeat was a possibility. His mind focused less on the coming exchange of blows and more on Magatsume's plans.

"What a sweet girl you've got. Looks to me like yer quite fond of her yerself."

He raised his left arm as he spoke, causing dog spirits to attack Magatsume from all directions. She easily swatted them away with her arm, making them fall dead to the ground. His attack was mainly to buy thinking time, however. He deployed dog spirits again, but they simply added to the corpses at their feet.

"That hideous arm of yours is pretty strong. I assume it's a product of your experiments?"

She froze. She didn't reply, but her stiff expression implied that he was somewhat on the mark. Paying close attention to her reaction, he tried to throw her off.

"Your goal was to make a heart, if memory serves. Makin' a liquor that turns people into demons and puttin' together a whole parade of demons was only a part of that. It makes sense to think that arm is also related."

Magatsume first made a liquor that turned humans into demons, then began experimenting on corpses to make the night parade, consequently learning a method to freely create demon abilities. The body was merely a container for the heart, so if one's heart became mired in hatred, then the container would assume the appropriate demonic form. In that same vein, if one could make a

heart as they pleased, they could manipulate its container any way they wanted as well.

“Humans are made demons by the emotions of their own hearts. If you could make a heart however you please, then you’d have free rein on shaping the heart’s body as well.”

In essence, the art of making hearts culminated in the total freedom to create life as one saw fit.

“Is that what yer after? To create life as ya please? Hmph. The very idea makes me sick to my stomach.”

Magatsume furrowed her brow. Based on her reaction, it seemed he was close to the truth.

To Somegorou, a human, her goal seemed even more repulsive than her insectile arm—it was an affront to life itself.

“Is that arm there a result of toyin’ with your own heart, then?”

“No,” she replied without hesitation. She shook her head slowly, still apparently in low spirits. It was as though she were still a little child underneath her mature appearance. **“This is my heart at its truest. I’ve discarded and replaced so much of my heart, but this alone would never fade.”**

She seemed lost in her own world, looking vulnerable and tragic. Somegorou recalled what Himawari had said on that night he fought the demon night parade.

The daughters of Magatsume were born from discarded fragments of her heart. It made sense to think that Himawari—the first daughter—sprang from Magatsume’s love for her brother, the part she needed to rid herself of to stand against him. That explained why Himawari adored Jinya so unconditionally.

Having thought that far, Somegorou finally understood what was going on. “Oh. I had it backward.”

He’d first assumed that she’d tried to make herself a new demon power with

her ability to craft hearts, but something had gone wrong. Perhaps the heart she created was of poor quality, causing it to take the form of a hideous insectile arm. But the truth was the opposite. Magatsume most likely used the hearts she created to fill the gaps left in her own heart after she discarded fragments of it, thereby retaining a sense of self—but there was a part of her old heart that she couldn't get rid of, the part of her that had been Jinya's sister. *That* was the insectile arm. She longed to replace her old heart by making replacement parts, but as she replaced more and more of herself, the part she couldn't remove turned increasingly twisted and ugly. Affection and hatred lost meaning as she repeatedly tore away and replaced pieces of her heart, losing her foundation and twisting her heart into a warped shape. And because the heart shaped its container, Magatsume could no longer be called human or demon now—she was something else entirely.

"Oh dear. I think I've figured out what you're trying to do." Somegorou made an unpleasant grimace and gripped his fist tightly, having realized the twisted nature of the thing in front of him. "Magatsume… You would go so far for somethin' like that?"

"I told you, didn't I? He is everything to me." Unable to contain what rose up within her, she trembled. **"Nothing changes. No matter how much of myself I cut away, he remains so dear to me. But this hatred I feel won't fade either. I despise him for forsaking me like he did. All I wanted was to stay by his side, for him to pat my head from time to time and hold my hand. Was that so wrong of me?"**

The brother turned into a demon out of hatred for his sister. Forsaken, the sister came to hate everything and was fated to become a Demon God. The parts of them that still loved each other remained, but they'd chosen the path of hatred for themselves—and so long as they were demons, they would have to continue down that path.

But Magatsume didn't accept that.

"I've decided to make a new heart. I don't need one mired in hatred

anymore. I'll make a heart free of filth, one that doesn't hate or envy, one better than my old one in every fashion. That way…I can be with my brother again."

She planned to remake her heart entirely and rid herself of her current defective one.

"You really like Jinya, huh?"

In the end, her love for Jinya was all she had. After she lost him, perhaps it was only a matter of time until she crumbled away like this.

"But d'ya really think any of what you're doing will mean anythin' if ya have to destroy so much to achieve it?"

"I do. I truly believe it will all be worth it."

The faint possibility of rediscovering happiness was enough reason for her to do so many deplorable things. She only saw what awaited beyond the destruction.

Her foolishness was sickening, but Somegorou still felt pity for her. He quickly shook his head to erase such thoughts. "Looks like I really can't let ya live after all."

Part of him had hoped he would figure out her aims and find some compromise to be had. He wished he could mend her broken relationship with her brother and let things end on a happy note. But, of course, things wouldn't be that easy.

It would be one thing if Magatsume were trying to achieve something so grand that she was willing to bring ruin to the world, but that wasn't the case. She simply didn't care about anything but her goal. The only thing on her mind was returning to her brother's side. She would bring ruin to the world of man without a second thought, as if she were merely trampling weeds on the side of the road.

Jinya was trying his hardest to forgive her, but there was no hope for finding

any compromise with her.

“If I leave ya be, you’ll become a calamity in the truest sense one day. What’s more, what you’re doing is an insult to Jinya…no, to all of mankind.”

“Why should I care? I am a demon. I can only do what I must.”

“You, a demon? No, that’s not quite right. You’re no longer a human or a demon.”

Humans were turned into demons by the emotions of the heart. By that logic, a demon who had discarded their emotions could not be called anything. She was simply a monster causing indiscriminate harm on her way to becoming a Demon God.

“This world has no place for you anymore, so at least let me send you to rest in hell.” Somegorou readied Shouki’s dagger and sharpened his focus.

He began by releasing his paper swallow artifact spirit. It gained speed and cut through the air like a blade, rapidly approaching Magatsume, but she knocked it down with her insectile arm before it could reach her. Seeing an opening, he threw out more dog spirits, but those were easily dealt with as well. None of her attacks were reaching him either, though. Her insectile arm was a threat, but she lacked the experience with it to break through Shouki’s defenses. Each of them was unable to gain ground on the other.

Exhaling, Somegorou swept Shouki’s dagger to block her insectile arm once more. The arm wriggled with life of its own, pointing sharp nails his way. He dodged for what felt like the umpteenth time, sweat lining his brow.

The situation looked decent for him, but in fact it was far from favorable. Shouki could easily block Magatsume’s attacks, and the insectile arm and Magatsume herself were far from invincible. But as their stalemate continued, Somegorou felt a creeping sense of unease.

“Enough already!” Shouki’s blade sliced through the air and hit the insectile arm squarely. He wasn’t lacking in power. Shouki, or rather Akitsu Somegorou,

was in no way inferior to Magatsume. But as the repetitive exchange of offense and defense continued, the scales slowly tipped.

"Damn… Guess there's no beatin' old age…" he grumbled. His shoulders rose and fell with each heavy breath.

He didn't lack power or speed. Magatsume was no more than an amateur when it came to fighting. In a drawn-out battle, he was sure to eventually find an opening that would lead to victory. But with each move he made, he found himself more and more on the defensive. What he lacked was stamina. At his advanced age, Somegorou simply didn't have the energy for a prolonged battle.

"Is this the limit of your human body?" Her flat tone made her voice sound depressed.

Somegorou gritted his teeth hard. She was right. As things stood, he would run out of stamina and be killed. If he were a demon instead of a human, he wouldn't have aged like he had…

He scoffed as soon as the thought came to mind. "Ha. I haven't given up yet."

While he envied the unaging, youthful bodies of demons, he did not for a moment wish to *be* a demon. Yes, humans were far more brittle than demons, and perhaps the life of the former passed in the blink of an eye to the latter, but he understood humans' strength. It was because their lives were so short that they passed on what they had. Technique and lineage, heart and emotion—from one generation to the next, they were inherited to form an unbroken chain. That was how humans created everything they had now, a feat which was only possible precisely because their lives were so brittle and fleeting.

"Humans are weak, I'll admit it. But there are things bein' weak allows us to do."

Somegorou saw something special in being human. That was why he could accept the disadvantage brought on by his nature as a human. The moment he challenged Magatsume with his life on the line, he had resolved himself for whatever outcome might result.

“Go, tiger.” While dodging a strike, he threw out a papier-mâché hariko tiger doll. He followed closely behind as the tiger sped forth, but Magatsume made no effort to dodge. Even a charging beast that was so feared by humans meant nothing to her.

Intuitively, Somegorou understood that mankind could never reach the heights where Magatsume stood. No matter how much humans trained, they just couldn’t ever hope to match her. They were simply inferior as creatures. The divide was absolute and unbridgeable.

“Oh, I forgot to mention…”

Magatsume watched the approaching tiger and Somegorou with cold eyes, paying no heed to his words. All she had to do was simply swat her arm in his general direction and his life would be snuffed out. Hence, what he had to say was entirely without merit. He was as insignificant as one of those mosquitos that buzzed around at the height of summer—annoying and nothing more. She dropped her guard entirely, giving him the opening he needed.

“My dog spirits have the ability to regenerate.”

Reacting to his voice, the corpses of the black dogs scattered around Magatsume immediately began taking shape again. They encircled her from all directions and attacked without hesitation.

Magatsume froze for a moment—not because the dog spirits posed any meaningful threat, but simply out of plain surprise.

All of this was as Somegorou had planned. He didn’t need a proper attack, just something unexpected. Despite her power, Magatsume was an amateur when it came to fighting, and the surprise factor of the dog spirits abruptly regenerating was enough to split her focus and confuse her. He had unloaded all his artifact spirits, knowing they wouldn’t get through, all for this one moment.

Good, now just stay stunned like that…

She counterattacked the dog spirits and sent them scattering again, but Somegorou took the chance to close the distance. Already, she was moving to make a second strike. His tiger was torn apart like scrap paper, but this, too, was in line with his plans. He was finally within lethal striking range.

He held his dagger up high. Her demon ability had something to do with regenerating or reconstructing herself, he figured. That left him with only one option: end her in a single strike, before she had a chance to use her ability. After she cut the tiger down, she left herself wide open. An opportunity like this would not come again. If he couldn't end things here, it would all be over.

With a rush of wind, Shouki matched Somegorou's motion, the two swinging down their blades in tandem. A white afterimage was left in the night air as Shouki's sword ripped through. Somegorou aimed for Magatsume's head, intending to pulverize it without leaving any chance for her to use her ability.

Magatsume couldn't move fast enough to save herself at this point. It was too late to dodge or block. The sword neared, fast approaching her from above.

"Jishibari."

But his all-or-nothing attack failed to reach its mark. Chains appeared out of nowhere to bind his legs and arms.

No—not chains, but insects yet again. Massive centipedes of abnormal length coiled around his skin. His bones creaked from the sudden constriction. Although only parts of his arms and legs were bound, he couldn't move even a single finger. It was as though his ability to move itself had been tied up.

"You… How?" Somegorou recognized the ability. He had seen Jinya use it before in their training together.

Since Jishibari was Magatsume's child, it was perhaps understandable that Magatsume would also have this ability because Jishibari was sourced from her. The change from chains to insects was likely attributable to Magatsume discarding her true emotions and retaining only her hideous, twisted obsession with Jinya.

Somegorou had made a critical blunder. Magatsume stared with a cold gaze at her opponent, who was left unable to move. Her eyes showed no interest in the least. He was less than a fly to her. With no hesitation or emotion at all, she stabbed him with her insectile arm in the same indifferent way one would squash a bug.

“Argh!”

Shouki vanished into thin air as Somegorou was sent flying back. Magatsume watched with displeasure as he tumbled across the ground. Her strike should have been lethal, yet he somehow still lived.

“Gugh, ah… Lucky sparrow…”

The lucky sparrow artifact spirit in his pocket had protected him. It had kept him alive, but his bones were broken and his organs were crushed. His life had only been prolonged. He was still dead regardless.

“Shoot… Looks like…I slipped up.”

Somegorou had wanted to defeat Magatsume himself if possible. Despite his stony face and feigned composure, Jinya was more fragile than he let on. Somegorou didn’t want to see him suffer any more than he already had, but he had failed.

“…Doesn’t seem like I can move much anymore… Maybe got one more artifact spirit in me before I kick the bucket…”

There were no moves left to make. Despite all his gusto, he had failed, and in such a laughable manner too. All he could do was smile dryly over it all.

Magatsume stepped closer, intending to kill him once and for all. He forced life into his failing body and stood up on his feet. The one who bore the name Akitsu couldn’t simply watch as his death approached.

“One last artifact spirit. Better make it count.”

His whole body ached. It wouldn’t be a surprise if he fainted from the pain, but he gritted his teeth and bore it. Even in the face of death, his will was firm.

He had gambled his life for his friend's sake. It was a shame he had failed, but he would still be stubborn until the bitter end.

Akitsu Somegorou the Third reached his left hand into his clothes, then unleashed his final artifact spirit.

"Dog spirit!"

Here, at the very end of it all, he chose to summon not Shouki but a humble dog spirit.

Magatsume frowned in confusion. Among all of Somegorou's artifact spirits, only Shouki had been able to trade blows with her. She couldn't see a reason for summoning such a weak artifact spirit now. **"How pointless."**

"Pointless? I disagree." This was the last option available to him, his final act of human stubbornness. "This is me fighting until my end."

He grinned, then took the dagger in his hand and stabbed it into his guts. Piercing skin and cutting into his innards, the blade was dyed red with blood. But he didn't let out a single pained groan; instead, he pulled the dagger out with a fearless grin still on his face.

"This dagger is full of my spirit and my lifeforce. It contains the will of Akitsu Somegorou." He handed the bloody weapon over to the dog spirit. After confirming it was firmly held in its mouth, he yelled with what life he had left in him, "Go forth, dog spirit! Run to Heikichi and hand this to 'im!"

Magatsume did nothing as the dog spirit dashed off. Perhaps she saw no meaning in Somegorou's actions, or perhaps she had reasons to let things be. Either way, the dog spirit left. The dagger carried within it Somegorou's thoughts and will. He believed Heikichi was sure to receive it.

"I may have failed to beat ya…" He looked fiercely at Magatsume, his legs stiff as lead. In his eyes was not animosity but determination. Even in the face of her unreasonable strength, he did not cave. He was a man who fought the odds until the end. "But Akitsu Somegorou will never be defeated. Humans are

tougher than you'd think. We may not be as long-lived as you demons, but *we* are undying." Blood dribbled from his mouth. He didn't have much more time left. Even so, he wrung out his last drops of life to make one final declaration. "Many years from now, when ya become a Demon God or what-have-you, I swear I—Akitsu Somegorou—will be there to stand against you. I'll be right there, fightin' alongside Jinya."

For that purpose, he would make sure to pass on Shouki to the next Akitsu Somegorou. He was certain that his will would be carried on by Heikichi and that a fifth and a sixth Akitsu would take up the mantle one day after him. That was why this was not defeat. Perhaps he was retiring here, but *Akitsu Somegorou* would return to oppose Magatsume once more.

"I'm lookin' forward to meetin' again in Kadono." He coughed up blood, then let out a roar of laughter.

Magatsume didn't say a word. Not even the dying will of Somegorou meant anything to her. With cold eyes, she simply…

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A dog howled in the distance.

"Yep. Ended up being nothin' but small fry."

The demon that attacked Demon Soba was easily defeated. Heikichi made a big show of how simple the fight was, putting on airs as the young were apt to do. At any rate, he had repelled the demon that was pursuing Nomari.

Finally able to take a breather, he stretched himself out. "Whew, all done! There's no way the other two would lose, so I guess that's that."

All the moving around had made him hungry. He thought about asking Jinya to make him a late-night meal when he returned, then looked over at the storefront of Demon Soba.

"Shoot, I wrecked the door…"

Heikichi had crushed the entrance as well as the demon when he used his

skulls. He worried Jinya might make him pay for the damage, but surely Jinya would overlook things like that since he'd protected Nomari, right?

He groaned as he pondered the matter. Then he saw a black figure running at the edge of his vision, and he recognized it as it neared. It was one of his master's favorite artifact spirits, the first one he had taught to Heikichi.

"A dog spirit…?"

He recognized the dagger it held in its mouth as well. It was the one that summoned Shouki, Somegorou the Third's trump card.

He was about to voice a question, but then the dog spirit began to lose its shape and turn back into black mist. As it completely faded, the dagger fell with a clink at his feet.

"…Master?" His dry murmur was lost to the night, fading away to who-knew-where.

5

HEIKICHI UNDERSTOOD everything the moment the dagger reached him. He recalled his conversation with his master earlier that evening. Heikichi had been gearing up and resting to make sure he was ready to fight Magatsume's demons. Jinya had tasked him with protecting Nomari, which Heikichi proudly took as a sign that Jinya recognized his growth.

"Heya, Heikichi. Before we head out, there's somethin' I need to tell ya."

In Somegorou's hand was the dagger that summoned Shouki, the artifact spirit that had been with him for most of his life. He gripped it tightly as if making sure it was truly there and looked softly at Heikichi.

"Yeah?"

"Well, two things, really. First…" The shaky light of the paper lantern bathed them both in orange. The mood stiffened ever so slightly. Somegorou

thoughtfully nodded, then gave him a soft and content smile. *“If somethin’ happens to me, yer the next Akitsu Somegorou.”*

Heikichi was stunned. He wasn’t a kid anymore. He understood what his master was trying to do, and why he chose to do it now of all times. *“M-Master?!”*

“’Course, I’m not plannin’ on kickin’ the bucket that easily. But Magatsume’s the ringleader of a bunch of demons and is s’posed to turn into a Demon God or somethin’ ridiculous one day. Anything can happen.” Somegorou knew death was on the table and was hoping to challenge Magatsume anyway.

Heikichi couldn’t picture his master losing. Akitsu Somegorou the Third was a peerless artifact user. How could a demon ever hope to beat him?

“Master, please. I seriously doubt there’s any demon out there ya can’t beat, ’specially when you’re workin’ with Jinya-san.” Heikichi meant what he said: Jinya was just as ridiculously strong as his master. There was no way Magatsume could defeat the two, no matter how strong she might be.

“Heh, I appreciate the vote of confidence. I’ll be fightin’ to win out there, so don’t worry yourself too much. I just figured I oughta cover my bases.” Somegorou’s words were playful, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. He was just that wary of Magatsume, and Heikichi did not enjoy seeing the master he revered act this timid.

“Just coverin’ your bases, huh? All right, if you say so.”

“Anyway, Magatsume aside, you’re the only one I’ll recognize as the fourth Akitsu, ya hear? I’m proud of ya, Heikichi. I’d be fine passin’ along the Akitsu Somegorou name right now, even.” Somegorou seemed completely relaxed, and Heikichi wondered if maybe his master really had just been covering his bases.

“Naw, I’m much too green to be inheritin’ the Akitsu name.”

“Aha ha, no need to be so modest. I’d like to keep the name at least until

tonight's fight is over, though…" Somegorou's gaze dropped to the paper lantern. He stared at its shaky, indistinct flame and chuckled wryly. *"Jinya's a good friend of mine. I'd like to do one last thing for 'im while I still bear the name Akitsu Somegorou."*

To Heikichi, who'd lost his parents to a demon, Somegorou was something of a father. When Heikichi was younger he would complain about Jinya a lot, but he grew up seeing his father figure be friends with Jinya, even watching them pour drinks for one another. He grew to respect the bond they forged that overcame their differences as human and demon. That was precisely why he, too, was willing to fight with all he had for the stubborn, awkward demon man.

"That's the first thing out of the way. As for the second, I want ya to pass along a message for me."

"A message…?"

Somegorou nodded with a faraway look in his eyes. *"One of these days, tell this to Jinya for me…"*

And so, Akitsu Somegorou the Third entrusted a few brief words to Heikichi. Heikichi saw no particular significance to the message, but Somegorou claimed he enjoyed knowing the eternally stone-faced man would grimace when the time came. He looked very much like a child setting up a prank.

Looking back on it now, his master had probably already foreseen his coming death by that time.

Heikichi bent over and picked up the dagger at his feet. The smell of fresh blood made his heart clench. He grasped the handle tightly and felt a force flowing into him.

"Master… I have received your will."

Shouki and the will contained in its dagger had been passed down from one generation to the next.

A single tear streamed down Heikichi's cheek. A man his age shouldn't cry, he thought, but he made no effort to wipe the tear away. From today forward, he would be Akitsu Somegorou. This would be his last time shedding tears as Heikichi, so he allowed himself to mourn—mourn while he was still the same cheeky little brat who had sought to follow in his master's footsteps.

He closed his eyes and allowed the last of the tears to fall. Nostalgic memories rose to mind. He stood there in a daze, basking in the recollections of eventful days gone by.

There was no telling how long he remained that way.

"Utsugi-san."

But eventually, a refreshingly clear voice made him look up. His eyes opened wide with surprise. He saw a face with which he had grown deeply familiar over the past two years. "…Azumagiku?"

The demon woman with the long black hair smiled wearily back at him.

He wondered why she was here. It was all too sudden for his mind to process. She walked closer to him. Normally he would have bashfully stepped away, but he did not do so now.

"Your eyes are red. Were you crying?" With an upturned gaze, she expressed worry for him. She herself looked near tears, so he didn't think to move away.

"Wait, why…?" She was acting *too* normal. The aftermath of his fight with the demon could be seen around them; the entrance of Demon Soba was smashed down and the demon's corpse still hadn't faded away completely, but she didn't react to any of that at all. Her inexplicable behavior led him to one unwelcome possibility. *No. You couldn't be…*

He put himself on guard, but he couldn't bring himself to step away or attack. He had plenty of time to do so, but the thought of her being an enemy was too much. He recalled her acts as the Shrine Maiden of Healing, how they'd chatted as they walked side by side through town, and he wavered. But most damning

of all was the look in her eyes—so caring, so genuine. This was the Azumagiku he knew, kind and gentle. And so he hesitated.

Seizing the opportunity, she reached out her dainty fingers.

“Forgive me.”

She touched his cheek softly, and his memory ended there.

***

Some moments earlier, Jinya was still fighting the demons back at the mansion. He stepped in and removed a head from its neck with a horizontal swipe. The corpses of the demons he killed faded, but their spilled blood remained. The tatami-matted room was dyed red, and the thick, ironlike scent of blood wafted through it. Demon blood was identical to a human’s—perhaps there was no great difference between demon and man after all.

Jinya shook off the sentimental thought with a swing of the blade, followed by a stab through a demon’s heart and a split of a skull.

“How many does that make?” Kaneomi asked as he cut another down. His extended arm leapt unnaturally, speeding back the direction it came through impossible means to cut down another demon. This was *Spirit*, the demonic blade Yatonomori Kaneomi’s power to puppet flesh. Jinya used it to remove the openings that came up when he was fighting at such a disadvantage in numbers.

“No idea.” He had stopped counting kills after he reached twenty. These demons were likely the result of Suzune’s fiddling with corpses. There was a huge crowd of them, and they were stronger than the average demon. No matter how many he slaughtered, they stayed undeterred and continued to block his way. He knew they were only here to stall him, but he couldn’t shake them off. He had already tried and failed using *Dart* and *Invisibility* to escape. Some of the many demons had abnormal speed, and others could sense him without sight. He suspected the demons gathered here had all been created with his abilities in mind to better detain him.

He focused on nothing but swinging his blade and killing as many as he could. He was anxious to give chase to Suzune, but he didn't let that cloud his judgment. He was stronger now in more ways than one. He had certainly honed finer techniques and devoured abilities from other demons, but he had even greater things to rely on than that. He knew people willing to lend a hand to him, a fool trapped by his own hatred. He believed in the master-disciple pair, and that allowed him to focus on overcoming his own predicament.

"Sorry for forcing you into my mess, Kaneomi."

"Not at all. It's a wife's duty to support her husband's antics."

"Heh. Sure." The corners of his lips curled upward into a grin.

He slid up close to a demon and used all his weight to slam his left shoulder into its chest. The demon winced, giving him an opening to thrust Yatonomori Kaneomi through one of its eyes. Wasting no time, he pulled the blade out with a flourish and cut down another demon. By the time he noticed something was off, even the neglected garden was stained red with blood.

"Jinya-dono…"

"I know."

Up until now, the demons had collapsed upon him like an avalanche, but now their movements were dull, as if they were hesitating to attack. They would fight back if he came at them, but something was unmistakably different.

He watched as one demon fled, then another. The pack quickly thinned away until eventually they had all left, leaving him alone on the estate. He remained confused, but he had no time to waste. He left the place behind at once and continued down a dim path until he encountered a small figure.

"Hello, Uncle. I've been waiting for you."

"Himawari…"

She bowed her head politely, then smiled and waved at him. She looked like nothing more than a young child. Even though he knew she was a demon, it

would be hard for him to bring himself to fight her. He gave her a look that questioned what she was doing here.

“I came to check on you,” she said with a smile.

“I see. I’m sorry to disappoint, but I’m still alive and kicking.”

“I never said I wanted you dead.” She puffed out her cheeks and pouted, giving her a shadow of resemblance to a face from his past. Talking to her brought him a strange comfort, likely because she so greatly resembled the Suzune he once knew.

She stepped aside and cleared the path. He gave her a look, but she maintained her relaxed, graceful air.

“Please, go on ahead.” She heaved a deep sigh, then softly smiled. Her smile wasn’t that of a vibrant summer flower, but more subdued like the hues of autumn.

Since he had somewhat anticipated an ambush, her actions came off as strange. Growing even warier, he questioned her. “What’s the meaning of this? Were you the one who sent those demons away as well?”

She averted her gaze, taking on a troubled look. Her smile had an underlying shadow to it. He felt something more was going on.

“I did, because there was no point any longer.” Her words were no more than a soft murmur. They almost didn’t register in his mind, but his whole body went tense when they did.

“My name is Himawari, and my power is called *Himawari* too. It gives me the abilities of remote viewing and clairvoyance.” Her true age aside, Himawari looked like nothing more than an eight-year-old child. But right now, she was veiled in a gloom much too mature for her appearance. “That’s why, even from here, I know it is done. Everything my mother has planned has already come to pass.”

Jinya had deduced that Suzune was after Nomari; that was why he had asked

Somegorou and Heikichi to protect her. But if Suzune had *still* somehow succeeded…

His expression remained flat, but he was far from calm on the inside.

“I love my mother,” Himawari said. “I want to see her wish granted if I can. That’s why I will not apologize for what is done. But please, know that I adore you despite it all.”

She smiled, seemingly near tears. He felt his heart clench. He could not see what Suzune’s end goals were, but Himawari had to know her mother’s plans lay in opposition to his peace. That was why she was so conflicted, her eyes full of grief.

“Nomari-san is safe. Her life was never in danger at all. But I’m afraid the same can’t be said for Akitsu-san.” She forced a smile. Perhaps she was trying to lessen the blow, but it didn’t work. “My mother fought Akitsu-san just ahead of here. You might be able to talk to him before he passes away if you leave now.”

That was all Jinya needed to hear. He forgot all about the danger of a demon ambush and sprinted ahead.

***

The night was cold. Or was it just the blood loss that made it feel that way? At any rate, Akitsu Somegorou felt the approach of death. He leaned against a thick tree in a dense grove. No miracle would happen. There was no doubt in his mind that he was living his last moments.

“Well, it’s not like I thought I’d go out easy.”

Hunting demons wasn’t the sole way he made his living, but he did it nonetheless, and someone who took life from others couldn’t expect a peaceful passing. That was why he never married. He believed someone like him should live alone and die alone.

“Still, it’s a tad lonely.”

A line of blood dribbled out of the corner of his mouth. His innards were a

crushed mess. His mouth tasted like nothing but iron from having coughed up so much blood.

But he couldn't complain. He'd killed demons in far crueler manners before. He was grateful enough just to leave a corpse behind. He had already long since accepted his death. The only thing he worried about now was others, namely his disciple Heikichi. Was he safe? Did the dog spirit reach him? Did Somegorou's will get through? If so, then his lonely death here wasn't meaningless. Though he had his share of lingering regrets, he could pass on in peace.

Ahh… Slowly, his body grew heavier. His eyelids gradually drooped shut, but he tried his damnedest to keep them open. He knew if he closed his eyes here, he would never open them again. He wanted to gaze at the world just a little longer.

Not a single star dotted the night sky. The clouds parted ever so slightly to reveal a hazy moon peering down. The murmurs of rustling leaves only amplified the stillness.

Through blurry eyes, he stared dimly out at empty space. He was at his limit. All feeling had left his body.

Welp, that's that, then, he thought. He'd lived a pretty good life, all things considered—not perfect, perhaps, but passable. Starting a family wasn't in the cards, but he had been able to raise a darling little disciple like his own son. He'd even made a close friend he could grumble with over drinks. By no means had his life been a disappointing one.

His life as both a craftsman and a demon hunter had kept him busy. Surely he deserved a little rest? Slowly, he allowed his eyelids to close.

"Somegorou…"

He reconsidered when he heard that voice. Perhaps his rest could wait a little longer yet.

In the end, Magatsume hadn't delivered the killing blow. Perhaps she figured there was no point when he was already at death's door, perhaps she had something planned, or perhaps it was a simple whim to leave him be. Regardless, Somegorou was thankful now. Thanks to her sparing him, he could see his friend's face here as everything came to an end.

"Oh, Jinya. Aha ha, sorry. I messed up a bit."

Jinya just stood there without saying a word. His face was locked in a slight, guilty frown. One would think from his expression that he had killed Somegorou himself.

"She was an amateur when it came to fightin', but she was strong. Her ability involves healin', and…I ain't quite sure what it was, but she had this insect arm. She can't be called human or demon anymore at this point; she's seriously tryin' to become a Demon God."

Jinya didn't try to pick him up, get help, or anything like that. At one glance, he already understood that Somegorou was beyond help, and that paralyzed him. He couldn't budge from where he stood.

"I'm sorry, Somegorou." His voice was pained. He clenched his teeth hard, trying to hide the emotion welling up inside himself. His words lacked the strength they usually carried. "I…I dragged you into my mess."

Somegorou laughed, despite being fully aware of the gravity of the situation. He felt sorry but also grateful to see his friend was so down. He had a friend who would miss him, one so reluctant to see him go that he was frozen in place.

"Why… Why can't I ever protect the people important to me?" Jinya said.

"Don't be stupid. I decided on my own to fight, and I lost. How is that supposed to be your fault?"

"But, I… Somegorou, I'm so sor—"

"*Don't*. Don't you dare apologize." Somegorou used what remained of his strength to cut Jinya off. His strong tone made Jinya finally look up and face

him. “Look, I may have come up a bit short in the end, but I did what I did for a friend and I’m proud of that. Don’t take that from me.” He smiled softly, as if to say that Jinya didn’t need to burden himself with some old man’s death. “Go ahead and be off now. You don’t have time to waste standin’ here, d’ya?”

Even though Nomari might have been in danger, Jinya made no move to leave. His face was wrought with grief.

“Ha ha, so even demons can cry, eh?” Somegorou meant to laugh, but the muscles of his face could hardly move at this point. It took great effort for him to speak at all, and what came out was raspy and weak.

“I’m not crying.”

“Like hell you’re not. You’re cryin’ like a kid. Are you that scared of bein’ left alone?”

Jinya’s shoulders trembled softly. He, who had killed countless monstrosities with his swords, was frozen in place out of fear. The death of one single man terrified him.

But that was precisely why he had to wipe his tears away now.

“Hey, Jinya… Humans are stronger than ya think.” Despite his failing body, Somegorou put on a tough act. “I may be retirin’ here, but I’ll still be leavin’ some things behind. I’ve done my part. I’m satisfied.”

He wondered just how his last moments looked through the eyes of a demon. It would be nice if his death were a splendid one, one that would remain in his friend’s memory for a long time.

“So ya can spare me the waterworks. Instead, go do *your* part. I don’t need anyone seein’ me off in my last moments or anythin’.” He tried his hardest to move his stiffened cheeks. He couldn’t quite smile the way he wanted, but he had a feeling the sentiment got through.

With his head down, Jinya turned around to face away from Somegorou. Then he lifted his gaze and looked firmly at the path ahead.

“Hey, Somegorou.” His firm, ironlike voice was soft to Somegorou’s ears. Even without seeing his face, Somegorou could feel the determination Jinya was trying to show him.

Somegorou fought to hold on to the strands of his fading consciousness and quipped back lightheartedly, “What is it, my friend?”

“Thank you. Those times we drank together weren’t half-bad.”

“Heh. I feel the same way.”

Not even Jinya knew what he was saying thanks for. Perhaps he had always wanted to thank his friend but was stopped by his tough-guy act. He felt a little proud at managing to express himself properly here.

After a brief silence, Jinya stepped forward. “Farewell. It was nice knowing you.”

“Idiot. Yer supposed to say ‘let’s meet again someday’ at times like this.”

Without facing one another, they shared a chuckle.

The dirt crunched as Jinya walked briskly away. Not a single trace of sorrow over their parting could be heard in his footsteps anymore.

As for Somegorou, he felt just the tiniest bit of regret. His awkward friend had a long path ahead of him, but Somegorou couldn’t walk it with him any longer. But even if Somegorou had survived here, their life spans as human and demon would have remained different. Somegorou couldn’t have stayed by Jinya’s side forever in any case. Still, it hurt to think he could no longer be there for his friend when things got rough for him.

“Humans are tougher than ya think, so…this ain’t goodbye…”

He made a pledge to his departing friend, a one-sided promise to meet again in the far, far future. Jinya could not see where his path would lead, just as Akitsu Somegorou could not envision what was to come. Even so, he prayed the future would be one in which they could laugh together again. The one by his friend’s side might not be *him* then, at least not exactly. But that would be

amusing in its own right.

Imagine if Jinya reached the end of his journey and happened to encounter someone who introduced themselves as Akitsu Somegorou. Just what kind of face would he make? One of shock? Doubt? Or perhaps joy? Maybe he would even be overwhelmed to the point of tears.

Somegorou smiled to himself as he imagined such a small miracle.

His head bobbed. He was tired. He'd exerted himself too much. He used all his remaining strength to lift his face.

He could no longer see his friend's back. Jinya had walked on without stopping in his tracks. Even so, the two of them were sure to meet again. So long as Jinya continued to walk on and the Akitsu Somegorou line continued unbroken, their paths were bound to cross once more. Looking forward to that day, Somegorou softly let his eyelids fall.

The wind blew with a soft whisper. Underneath a pitch-black night sky, Somegorou sat with his weight against a tree trunk. He looked at peace, as if he were taking a nap to enjoy the pleasant breeze. Only this would be a nap he would never wake from.

Akitsu Somegorou breathed his last amid a dream of the far-off, unknowable future. Behind closed eyelids he saw the day of their reunion. His face, while not quite able to smile, looked joyful all the same.

***

Around the time the sky began to brighten, Jinya finally made it back to Demon Soba. From a distance, he saw the restaurant's entrance was destroyed and rushed over in a panic, only to be taken aback by what he saw there.

"Oh, there ya are." Heikichi was sitting in front of the broken entrance. He stood up and yawned tiredly, then stretched his stiff limbs. "Only one demon ended up coming. Nomari-san's still sleepin' inside."

Jinya had feared the worst, but Nomari was apparently safe. He was about to thank Heikichi, but he took one look at the young man's face and clammed up. Heikichi was trying to smile, but his eyes were a little red and his right hand tightly gripped Shouki's dagger. He knew about his master's death but was trying to act like nothing was wrong.

"Just wanted to say I don't blame ya or anythin'," Heikichi said, averting his gaze. "My master chose to fight knowin' this would happen. I'd be a fool to make this your fault." He had to be pained by his master's passing, but he didn't blame Jinya for what happened. Still, he couldn't meet Jinya's eyes. "That said, I'm not completely over it, so…give me some time." That was the greatest concession he could make. Without another word, he turned his back to Jinya.

Jinya understood Heikichi didn't resent him; he simply had no proper outlet for his anger. So he let the matter be, partially because he felt responsible for what happened. Neither of them had quite come around to accepting Somegorou's death yet. "I understand."

Wordlessly, they entered the restaurant. Only the entrance was smashed up; the interior itself was fine. Jinya checked on things as he made his way toward the back, then quietly opened a paper sliding door.

Nomari was fast asleep, unaware of any commotion that had happened outside. Jinya wanted to watch her sleeping face for a while, but he would feel bad if he woke her up, so instead he gently slid the door closed and returned to the restaurant. Without missing a beat, he bowed his head to Heikichi. "Thank you for protecting Nomari."

"Wh-what? Jeez, cut that out. I don't need to be thanked or anythin'. Puts me on the spot. And it's not like I didn't have my own reasons to stand watch." A big part of why Heikichi agreed to help out was that it was for Nomari's benefit. He couldn't simply do nothing when the woman he had fallen for was in danger.

But as a father, Jinya didn't care what Heikichi's reasons for helping might have been. He was simply grateful the young man had risked his life for his

daughter's sake.

"…What?" Heikichi said.

"Nothing, just… I was thinking I'm really glad I decided to rely on you and your master after all."

"Wh-what? Jeez, how can ya say somethin' so embarrasin' with a straight face?!"

Seeing Heikichi snap back in his usual way, Jinya finally released the tension in his shoulders. They met one another's eyes and smiled awkwardly. There were still some reservations between them, but not to the same extent as before.

They heard a noise from further inside. It seemed like Nomari was awake.

"Oh, here she comes," Heikichi said, suddenly becoming cheerful. His affection for her was painfully obvious, and yet he still hadn't managed to tell her how he felt directly. It was a real shame too, because Jinya was perfectly ready to give the two his blessing.

Nomari slid her door open and peered out at them, hugging her shoulders because of the morning chill.

"Hey." Heikichi gave her a wave, trying to act as normally as he could. Jinya sighed, having seen the young man's excitement just a moment ago.

"Oh, Heikichi-san?" Nomari still hadn't changed out of her sleepwear. She seemed acutely uncomfortable, likely self-conscious of how lightly dressed she was. Jinya had told her that he wouldn't be back last night and Heikichi would be watching the place while he was out. All in all, it should have been an ordinary night for her. She probably didn't even know a demon had shown up.

"Sorry, were we talkin' too loud? Look who's back, though." Heikichi pointed at Jinya.

"Huh?"

Nomari's eyes widened, making Jinya smile slightly. It had been a while since he'd seen her act so unashamedly happy about his return. Glad to see his

daughter was fine, he breathed a sigh of relief and said, “Hey. I’m home, Nomari.”

“Um… And who might you be?”

As the evening twilight passes, night comes once more.

Thoughts of You

1

JINYA FROZE, his mouth hanging wide open. What Nomari said didn't properly register in his mind. The way she looked at him with a slight apprehension in her eyes, however, was worth a thousand words. She had never given him such a look before, not even once.

"N-Nomari-san?" Heikichi spoke up while Jinya was still too stunned to react. Heikichi seemed just as disbelieving of what he had heard. "Even with your own father, don't you think that's a bit much for a joke?"

"My…father?" she said, sounding like she was in a daze. It was as if this were all news to her. She didn't seem to be putting on an act.

Jinya had seen more supernatural phenomena than he could bother to list. He knew spirits were capable of bizarre things, and that was exactly why worry flared up in him now.

"I… I don't…" Dizzy, she staggered slightly.

"Nomari!" Jinya immediately stepped forward to catch her just before she fell. He was afraid she might object to him touching her, but he moved anyway. Thankfully, she didn't seem bothered.

She looked up at him with unfocused eyes, her lips quivering. "…Oh. Father."

The recognition in her voice made him breathe a sigh of relief, and his tense muscles relaxed. She still looked a bit under the weather, but she knew who he was.

"I-I'm sorry. I just got confused for a minute and—"

"It's all right. You don't need to force yourself to talk. You can rest a bit more if you're not feeling well."

“I’m… I’m fine. I’ll make breakfast for us.” She smiled awkwardly and slipped out of his arms. She seemed able to walk normally again now, but her face was still pale. He wanted her to rest, truth be told, but he knew she could be stubborn when she wanted to.

“All right. But let me know if anything happens.”

“I’ll be fine, Father. You don’t need to fret so much.”

Jinya was relieved to see she was okay, but it was hard to write off what happened as her simply being half-asleep. He looked to his side to see Heikichi staring at Nomari with a complicated frown on his face.

“Something wrong?” Jinya asked.

“Huh?” Heikichi jumped slightly, caught off guard. His gaze wandered until he was looking outside. With a grin, he said, “Naw, it’s nothin’. Just thinkin’ it might rain soon.”

He was obviously just trying to dodge the question. Jinya figured Heikichi wouldn’t hide anything from him maliciously, so he let it go. With nothing more to be said, he headed over toward the living room.

Alone, Heikichi muttered to himself. “…She didn’t forget his *name*, did she…? No, no way.”

By the time breakfast was done, it had begun raining. The three ate around the table, leaving the damaged entrance to be dealt with later. They stuffed their cheeks with pickled vegetables and white rice, alongside tofu miso soup and some cooked beans. It was a simple but well-rounded meal.

“Whew, that was delicious,” Heikichi said with a sigh as he plopped his teacup down.

Jinya was glad to be able to fill his stomach, having remained high-strung since last night. Things weren’t over yet, but it was a great comfort to take a breather while knowing Nomari was safe at least.

“Maybe the food tastes so good ’cause of the workout I got last night. B-but then again, your food always tastes good, Nomari-san!” Heikichi blushed red, the mere act of complimenting Nomari greatly embarrassing him. Jinya thought it was a bit heartwarming to know that aspect of the once-young boy hadn’t changed. The realization that Somegorou wasn’t there to share the moment with them was a bit disheartening, though.

“I’m glad you liked it. Here, have some more tea,” Nomari said.

“Oh, thank you.”

Somegorou’s absence might also have explained why Heikichi was forcing himself to be so cheerful. They’d told Nomari that Somegorou was out on business to avoid worrying her, and Heikichi was pretending he was fine to keep up the lie.

“Here, you too, Father.”

“Thanks.” Jinya saw through Heikichi’s clumsy act, but he didn’t say a word. He wasn’t one to preach about hiding one’s true feelings.

“But man, you’ve really gotten good at cookin’, Nomari-san.”

“Hee hee. Thank you. I’ve been practicing hard.” She stuck her tongue out and smiled bashfully. Though she was twenty years old already, she still retained some of her childishness. “Of course, I learned it all from…”

Before she could finish, she tottered unsteadily. Jinya reached out to catch her again, but this time he couldn’t bring himself to do it. The brief look of fear she directed at him made him stop.

“I… I learned it from *somebody*. I know I did. I…” She muttered to herself on the ground, looking more fatigued than he had ever seen her before.

“I think you need some rest after all.” He didn’t care if she was afraid of him. He picked her up and headed for her bedroom. She allowed herself to be carried, more out of exhaustion than anything. She entrusted her weight to him entirely but didn’t stop trembling the whole way.

“F-Father…” Her face was pale, her eyes were filled with fear, and her voice was weak. He felt as though she might slip through his fingers like sand right then and there. She reached out with her thin, pale fingers, but trembled as she grabbed empty air. “You… You *are* my father, right? The one I’ve lived with all this time? The one who taught me to cook and so many other things?”

Despite being right there in his arms, she felt terribly distant from him. Hoping to put her at ease, he made his voice as soft as he could manage. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I’ve lived with you all this time, but I—*I can’t even remember your name!*” Her emotions swelled like a dam bursting, and he said nothing in response. He had hoped things would eventually settle down, but she was even worse off than she’d been after she had just woken up. “What’s happening to me? I’m scared, Father.”

“Let’s just calm down for now.”

“But—”

He hugged her tight against his chest to stop her from protesting. Of course, he was scared and confused as well. There was no way he could be truly calm when his beloved daughter was experiencing something like this, but he forced himself to be as calm as he could anyway. “Rest for now. Then we’ll talk.”

“…Okay.” Despite clear reluctance, she relented. It would likely be somewhat difficult for her to sleep again since she had only just woken up, but she got in bed and pulled the blanket over her head anyway as though to run from reality.

“Is there anything else you can’t remember?” he asked. No reply came. She was in no state to think calmly. The question was fairly meaningless anyway, since she wouldn’t be able to recall something if she had forgotten it. The only sure thing was that she wasn’t simply experiencing a bout of confusion—her memories were truly slipping away from her.

He asked her several things afterward, but she only replied with meaningless mutterings or silence. Seeing there was no information to be gained, he

stopped asking questions and began to gently stroke her head. “Go ahead and rest.”

She nodded and undid the ribbon tying her hair. When she saw it in her hands, she came to a halt. “This ribbon…” she murmured nostalgically, the fear fading from her face. “You bought this for me…right?”

The desperate look in her eyes was painful to him. He clenched his teeth, frustrated at his own powerlessness. But his many years of experience stifling emotions kept things from showing on his face, something he was thankful for now. It was better for him to at least appear calm so he could set her at ease.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Thank goodness. I remember… I remember…” She gazed lovingly at the small piece of memory in her hands. She looked so happy, but that only made her next words cut him even more deeply. “You bought this for me when Asagao-san was here, back when we went shopping for a yukata robe.”

No. The ribbon she had now was one they had bought after Asagao left, to replace the old ribbon. Nomari was losing her most recent memories first, and it looked like he had less time to act than he’d thought.

Unable to bring himself to say a word, Jinya waited for her to fall asleep, then left.

The rain had grown heavy. The sound reached Jinya’s ears, but its rhythmic pitter-patter did nothing to soothe his heart.

Jinya returned to the restaurant to see Heikichi sitting down, bouncing his knee restlessly. When he noticed Jinya, he dashed over. “H-how’s Nomari-san?”

The young man was clearly quite worried. Jinya felt a bit of happiness as a father, but unfortunately, he had no good news to bring. “She’s forgotten more than just my name. There are other bits of memories missing.”

“I-I see… Oh! L-Let’s call a doctor! Maybe they can…” Heikichi’s voice trailed

off, a bitter frown forming on his face as he realized himself how pointless it would be partway through his speech. Though he had grown a lot, he was still green. The thought of someone dear to him being under threat had him panicking.

“There’d be no point,” Jinya said.

“Yeah, I figured…”

A human doctor couldn’t do a thing to combat something like this.

Jinya’s beloved, detested younger sister rose to mind. Suzune had said she was targeting Nomari. It wasn’t unthinkable for one of her underlings or daughters to have a memory-erasing ability.

“Nomari’s forgotten more than she had earlier this morning. She’ll eventually forget everything…everything to do with me, at least. This is quite the sadist we’re dealing with.”

“So it’s like that after all, huh?” From the sound of things, Heikichi had pieced together that much himself.

She could still identify Jinya as her father, which meant she still had memories of him, but she couldn’t recall his name. She had mentioned Asagao earlier and didn’t seem surprised to see Heikichi, so it made sense to think she was only losing memories of Jinya. That being the case, Magatsume wasn’t trying to ruin Nomari so much as attempting to drive Jinya into a corner. He involuntarily bit down hard on his lip. It seemed the younger sister he once knew was really gone for good.

“How can ya be so calm?” Heikichi asked.

“I have to be, for her sake. That’s something your master taught me.” He couldn’t let himself panic and make a mistake because of it. He flattened his expression as much as possible, took a deep breath, and then stated in no uncertain terms what they needed to do. “Our course of action is clear. We must find the demon with the power to erase memories.” He knew his tone was

turning cold, but he needed to save his daughter at all costs. It certainly didn't hurt that whatever demon was behind this likely had ties to Magatsume.

"Wh-what will you do when ya find it? I mean, I-I dunno if it'll be able to heal Nomari, but maybe if we talk to it, it might be willin' to?" Heikichi shivered and stammered over his words. It appeared Jinya's shift in tone had frightened him a bit.

Jinya's voice remained flat and cold. He had already decided what he would do; all that remained was to act. "No need. I can just devour it."

"…Huh?" Heikichi seemed taken aback, as if such an option were completely out of left field. It wasn't that he didn't understand what Jinya meant; he simply didn't *want* to understand. His mouth hung open as he looked blankly at Jinya.

Heikichi had probably thought defeating the demon behind this and convincing it to undo its ability on Nomari was the only way to save her, but Jinya had no need to bother with all that.

"I can take any demon's ability, so long as I kill it and then devour its corpse. That's the fastest option we have."

If he devoured a demon's body with his grotesque arm, that demon's memories and ability would become his. The only thing he had to worry about was that the ability might weaken if the demon was a daughter of Magatsume. But trying to convince it to help them would undoubtedly be meaningless, so devouring it was the only choice he had.

From the look on Heikichi's face, Jinya could tell he wanted to object, but he averted his gaze. He knew his methods were questionable, but he would dirty his hands however much he needed if it meant he could help Nomari.

After some time, Heikichi opened his mouth to say something, the air tense. But a sudden shout blew away the anxious atmosphere.

"Whoa, what the hell happened here?!"

The voice belonged to Mihashi Toyoshige, who seemed to have just stumbled

upon the smashed-up entrance of Demon Soba.

“Oh. Well, if it ain’t one of my regulars.” He looked inside the restaurant, then gave a light wave and came closer. Jinya thought he was talking to him at first, but it soon became apparent he was addressing Heikichi.

“Mihashi-dono.”

“Hm? Sorry, do I… O-oh, Kadono-san. Say, what’s up with the entrance? You get a rough customer in or somethin’?”

“Do you remember who I am?”

“Huh? Well, yeah, ’course. We’re neighbors, aren’t we? Say, is it just me or d’ya look a bit younger?”

Jinya realized then that he wasn’t using *Falsehood* to disguise himself, but there was more to worry about than just that. Even if he were missing a few folds in his brow, his appearance shouldn’t be all that different. Toyoshige hadn’t recognized him at first because he couldn’t remember him. He was starting to forget Jinya as well.

“H-hey, ain’t this kinda bad?” Heikichi said.

“It looks like I have even less time than I thought,” Jinya said.

Some things still remained unclear, though. If everyone Jinya knew lost their memory of him, he would no longer be able to continue the life he had. Hence, it was safe to say Magatsume was trying to rob her brother of the place he belonged. So then why was Heikichi unaffected?

Nomari was the person closest to Jinya, there was no doubting that. Targeting her was the best way to get at him. But the second-closest person was Heikichi. It was unlikely Magatsume didn’t know that, since she’d gone out of her way to kill Somegorou. So why didn’t Heikichi show any abnormalities?

“Huh? Everythin’ all right?” Toyoshige, having no idea what the two were talking about, scratched his head and looked at them. They didn’t reply, unable to really explain anything to the man.

“I should get goin’,” Heikichi said, breaking the silence. He feigned calmness, but he just couldn’t hide his feelings properly. “We shouldn’t waste time talkin’ when Nomari-san’s like that. I’ll swing by a few places that might turn up somethin’.”

He made what was probably meant to be a smile and ran out into the rain without looking back. It was clear how anxious he felt. Jinya didn’t say anything to stop him.

“Somethin’ happen?” asked Toyoshige once Heikichi was out of sight. He had no idea what was going on, but he could pick up on the fact that Heikichi wasn’t himself.

“…Not in particular.” Jinya stared off in the direction Heikichi had run.

“Look, I’m not gonna force ya to talk, but I’m your man if ya need help. And I swear I won’t moan and groan the whole time like I always do.” The man flashed a goofy grin. He was intentionally making his offer seem as nonchalant as possible, and the reason wasn’t lost on Jinya. Toyoshige was just that sincere. “Don’t worry, it’ll take quite a bit to surprise me. Even learnin’ what ya might really be wouldn’t faze me at this point.”

It was difficult to call the two of them close friends, and Toyoshige knew nothing of Jinya’s circumstances, but even after seeing Jinya’s real, unaltered face, he was undeterred. Jinya knew Toyoshige enough to trust him, even though he was just an ordinary man. After a brief moment of thought, Jinya looked him straight in the eye and said, “Mihashi-dono, you once said you would repay us a favor, right?”

Toyoshige once came to Demon Soba seeking help with making red bean bread. Feeling indebted, he said he would return the favor one day.

Toyoshige firmly nodded his head without hesitation, showing he remembered his promise well. “I did.”

“Then please look after Nomari for me. She’s a bit under the weather and I have to step out.”

Toyoshige's eyes widened. Jinya was famously devoted to his daughter. Entrusting her safety to another person spoke volumes. "Are ya sure? I mean, I don't mind, but are ya okay with me lookin' after her?"

"I trust you well enough."

"Heh, just 'well enough,' eh?"

Jinya knew Toyoshige was more sincere than he initially looked. Jinya had helped the man out in the Sai-no-kami child incident a while back, but even if he hadn't, Toyoshige would probably be just as good of a neighbor to him and Nomari. The man remembered even the tiny promise to repay a favor he had made a long time ago. Jinya could trust him.

"Shucks, I'll do it. Mihashiya will be on holiday for the day, though I'm sure the missus will chew me out for it later!" joked Toyoshige.

Jinya bowed deeply to him and firmly said, "Thank you. I leave Nomari in your hands."

A foreboding thought crossed Jinya's mind: Hopefully the two of them wouldn't be strangers when they next met.

***

Heikichi ran straight ahead through the pouring rain. The woman he loved was losing memories to an unnatural force, and that panicked him. Jinya seemed to think this was just the work of one of Magatsume's underlings, but Heikichi had a stronger guess as to who was behind this, even if he couldn't see what the bigger picture might be. He happened to personally know a demon whose ability allowed her to erase and alter memories.

"Please, let me be wrong. I'm sure she wouldn't do such a thing…"

Even with the situation so dire, Heikichi had avoided telling Jinya anything in the hope he was wrong. If Azumagiku were in fact behind this, Jinya would likely kill her on sight with no questions asked and no thoughts spared for her or her motives. She would simply be killed and devoured, and Heikichi would be

unable to stop Jinya—he'd be forced to place Nomari's life first.

That was why he ran. He had to reach Azumagiku before Jinya, and then—if she was indeed behind all this—try to convince her to save Nomari. That was the only way Azumagiku would live to see tomorrow, and Heikichi had grown too close to her to simply let her die.

His destination lay east of Shijyou Street. There, a little off the thoroughfare, was an abandoned temple he was intimately familiar with by now.

Whenever he brought Nomari red bean bread as a snack, Azumagiku would turn gleeful like a child. Her eeriness creeped him out a bit at first, but he eventually came to talk to her like a normal person. They'd walked around town and talked about the most meaningless things so many times by then, completely forgetting the job she hired him for. They'd probably even chatted before on the very street he was running down.

The rain was a small blessing. In it, nobody could see his tears.

Heikichi ran past the weed-ridden shrine grounds, beelining for the main temple. He ran on the wooden floorboards without removing his footwear, leaving wet footprints behind in the process. He had no time for decorum. He took ragged breaths and set his gaze straight ahead.

Sitting in a tatami-matted room was the Shrine Maiden of Healing. He felt none of the closeness the two had fostered over the years. She was the way she'd been on the day he first met her.

"Hey, Azumagiku."

She wore the red hakama of a shrine maiden along with a white haori, and gold trinkets adorned her body. The fact that she was fully dressed up told him she had been waiting for someone.

"Sorry, I didn't bring any snacks this time." He gave her a smooth wave, trying to act as casual as he could. He wanted her to reply the way she always did. Then he could sit down, and the two could banter as usual. He wasn't asking for

much, just for her to be the Azumagiku he knew.

“Utsugi-san…”

But in truth, he already knew it was too late to go back to what they had before.

“So you’re the one to arrive first. I’m a bit jealous. You both love that girl so much.”

There was no denying anything anymore. Her lifeless words made him want to cry.

“I found the one I was looking for, Utsugi-san. I was born to seek out the girl named Nomari.”

He didn’t want to hear another word, but he left his ears uncovered. His vision blurred for some reason; he couldn’t make out her face very well.

“Erasing her memory was the duty given to me by Suzu-chan, my mother.”

“Why… Just why?”

“Because that girl means everything to Jinta, and that made my mother wonder something.” Even after hearing his question, she retained the same indifferent, dry tone. He felt like he was being slowly driven into a corner. “But…I think part of her didn’t want to know the truth. That’s why she made it so my memories would only return if I found her. She left it to chance. My mother would’ve been fine even if I never found her.”

“I don’t give a damn about all that! Why you? You’re… You’re different from *them*!” Even though he crammed so much emotion into his voice, none of it reached her.

She gave a tired sigh and said, “I *am* one of them. Yes, my body is made from my mother’s emotions, but most of all, I wanted to know for myself as well. I followed my mother’s orders out of my own free will.”

Azumagiku had a faraway look in her eyes. Heikichi couldn’t bring himself to say a word. Having erased Nomari’s memory, she was undeniably a demon who

brought harm to humans. But she looked so terribly forlorn and weak, as if one wrong word would send her shattering.

“I… *We* wish to know. What will he choose?”

Azumagiku’s smile was as transient as snow in spring. Her clear voice was lost to the rain.

2

KSHHHHHHH.

I heard a soft cacophony endlessly drilling in my mind. Rain, perhaps.

Kshhhhhhh.

It continued to no end, making me feel sick. Every now and then it would bring me pain, but then it would pass, leaving me feeling like a weight had been taken off my shoulders. But right there alongside the comfort was a sadness that was hard to describe. As I lay in my bed, a single tear streamed down the side of my face.

“Nomari.”

My father came up to my bedside and gently tousled my hair. His hands were rough and calloused, probably because he was always fighting with his sword. His hand was warm, though. I always loved it when he patted my head like this.

Kshhhhhhh.

Why, then, did I feel less happy about his touch today?

“…Father?”

“Sorry, I’ll be stepping out for a bit. I’ll leave Mihashi-dono to look after you. Let him know if you need anything.”

My heart clenched with anxiety. I shook my head fiercely, not wanting him to leave. “No!” The moment I spoke, I felt a pang of regret. Though I couldn’t see

his face, I knew I was troubling him. But I was too afraid of the strange sound echoing in my head. “Don’t leave me alone…”

I thought back on the mirage the lucky sparrow had shown me. I knew my father thought of me as a true daughter, but even so, I—*Kshhhhhhh.*

…But I was scared. Just what did my father think of me?

“I won’t be gone long.” He ran his fingers through my hair, then left.

I watched him as he went. How many times had I seen him go like this? I was used to it, yet today I couldn’t help but reach out for him. I felt as though something important would be lost if I just watched him walk away, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

I heard the sound of the sliding door slamming shut, and I felt something else draw closed along with it.

***

Reluctantly, Jinya outfitted himself and left the restaurant. On his hip were Yarai and Yatonomori Kaneomi. He ran a finger across them as if to make sure they were there. Their familiar weight brought comfort, but he still remained uneasy. Sensing as much, Kaneomi spoke up worriedly.

“Kadono-dono…”

Nomari was getting worse. She was losing more and more of her memories as time passed. Jinya would eventually become nothing more than a stranger to her, and the time they spent together would be just as meaningless as Suzune claimed it was.

“I won’t lie. I’m worried.” With nobody else around, he didn’t mind saying something so unusual for him. In times like these, Somegorou had always been by his side to lighten him up with a joke. He would be there to chide him too whenever Jinya let his emotions get to him and made a slip. Jinya had depended on the man for more than his prowess with artifact spirits. “But I have no time to waste on worrying. Let’s go.”

“Go where? We have no leads.”

Jinya wasn’t so distressed as to forget something like that. Calmly, he said, “We may not, but Heikichi seems to. I had one of my *Dog Spirits* follow him.” He spoke more calmly than he himself had expected. Perhaps he had his old friend’s influence to thank for that. “I have a feeling he suspects the Shrine Maiden of Healing he’s been getting so close to.”

Jinya had been wary of the shrine maiden, since he’d investigated her himself and hadn’t even come close to finding her. But he trusted Heikichi’s decision to leave her alone. That was why he would not fault the young man for anything, even if the shrine maiden ended up being behind all this. It had been Jinya’s own choice to trust him.

“Everything I said about devouring the culprit was intentional. I figured it would make him lead us her way.”

Similarly, Jinya did not think his own actions were wrong at this point. He would manipulate even his close friend’s disciple if it meant he could save his daughter.

He narrowed his gaze and peered through the rain. The sound of the crashing droplets stirred unease in him.

***

Heikichi faced the shrine maiden directly in the ruined temple. All noise seemed to be drowned out by the rainfall, and yet somehow her words alone sounded crystal clear. Her soft voice tickled his ears, making his skin crawl.

“Azumagiku, please. You can fix Nomari-san, right? I’m begging you. Help her.”

Did the emotions he was fighting to suppress represent his feelings for Nomari or for Azumagiku? If Azumagiku were really Magatsume’s underling, then this was meaningless. She would never help Nomari, no matter how much he begged. But he continued to plead even though he understood that. He

wanted to believe Azumagiku wasn't the kind to hurt another person. He wanted to believe she wasn't his enemy.

"My ability is called *Azumagiku*, named after the flower that lets one forget what pains their heart. In the language of flowers, azumagiku means 'brief respite' and 'short-lived love.'"

The woman before him wasn't Azumagiku, or even the Shrine Maiden of Healing she'd been when they first met. She was nothing more than a malice-bearing demon whose cruelty was apparent even in her casual tone.

"The girl's memories will be completely gone by evening. But don't worry, she won't forget about you, Utsugi-san," she joked. Naturally, she was implying Jinya would be a different matter.

Heikichi had only encountered Azumagiku through a series of coincidences; he did not think their acquaintanceship had been part of her plans. Or maybe it was. Maybe she had planned it all, even her own amnesia, all so she could get closer to her target. As he was now, Heikichi was too worked up to make sense of things. The only thing he knew was that it hurt for them to stand facing one another like this instead of side by side like always.

"Only her memories of Jinta will fade. Her daily life won't be affected," she said.

The daughter of his master's close friend was suffering because of this demon. Heikichi's duty was clear, and yet he just couldn't bring himself to carry it out.

"You have no reason to be so worried."

Not a single thing was reflected in Azumagiku's eyes. Her gaze was locked onto something unknowable in front of her, far beyond Heikichi. He felt as if he had become a complete stranger to her.

"I beg you. Please, help her," he said.

"I cannot." She made a pained smile. As a daughter of Magatsume, she could

not stray from the duty she had been given. Her mission was to erase Nomari's memory; all else held no meaning from the moment she was born. Her voice lacked any emotion, perhaps because she was resigned to the fate handed to her.

"I, too, have a wish I want to see granted." But those words alone were different. They did not carry strength, nor were they filled with any particular sense of determination. They flowed naturally out of her, but the way she spoke them was unmistakably different, somehow. But Heikichi did not have the composure to interpret her words so deeply.

"Skulls!" He thrust his left arm out and unleashed his artifact spirit. Skulls appeared from the cassod tree wood prayer beads on his arm and surrounded Azumagiku. Their teeth chattered as they drew closer, but she showed no signs of resistance. She didn't even so much as glance at the skulls, keeping her gaze locked firmly on Heikichi.

Heikichi's hopes were dashed. Not even the threat of attack swayed her. Even so, he just had to try one more time. "I won't ask ya again. Heal her, or else."

But the only one who seemed to be backed into a corner was him. His voice lacked strength, and his whole body trembled.

Azumagiku closed her eyes. He could not see the emotions she hid, but the monotone reply she gave was no surprise. "I already told you: I cannot."

Heikichi felt something snap inside him. He had admired his master's close relationship with Jinya, even though one was a demon hunter and the other a demon. When Heikichi became friends with Azumagiku, he had thought he had grown akin to the men he respected. But the truth was that no matter how much he changed, his hatred of demons remained somewhere inside him. Perhaps an end like this was only a matter of time for the two.

"Then you've left me no choice!" Heikichi yelled impulsively, but a voice as cold as steel cut him off.

"Jishibari."

Chains appeared from nowhere and lashed out, their links sharply clanking against one another as they swept at the skulls. Pieces of bone were strewn through the air, and Heikichi's strongest artifact spirit was defeated in the span of a few moments.

"Don't, Heikichi. I'm grateful you care so much about Nomari, but you don't need to go that far."

Unable to process what had just happened, Heikichi was left in a daze. He recognized the man with two swords on his hip, but he did not feel as though help had arrived.

"Only one of us needs to bloody their hands."

Heikichi swallowed. For the first time ever, he feared Jinya.

***

"How did ya know to come here?" Heikichi asked. Jinya didn't respond. He didn't want to let the young man know he'd been tailed and make him feel even worse.

Jinya locked his gaze on the shrine maiden. She had a slender face with black hair that flowed down to her hips—the mirror image of the Itsukihime he used to know. Out of surprise, he murmured, "Shirayuki."

She made a face at the name, a mixture of delight and sadness.

His heart trembled with nostalgia. He fought to keep down his rising ardor and said, "So she used the skull she stole away."

He managed to hide how shaken he was because he had expected this to a degree. Suzune had walked off with Shirayuki's head on that night long ago. He'd half anticipated something would come of it eventually.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Jinta."

The Shirayuki he knew had been forcibly turned into something different. She would never have made a superficial smile like the one she was showing him now. Her smiles came from the heart, even when things were difficult for her.

He felt as though the woman he loved was being slighted.

“You’re Azumagiku now, huh?” he said strongly, as if to clearly mark her as different. He reminded himself that the one before him was a daughter of Magatsume, but memories of better times still flitted into his mind.

He had lost everything on that rainy night in exchange for a small piece of happiness. Someone who’d helped young Jinta long ago was standing in his way now.

“Indeed. I know of you, but I am not the shrine maiden you know. I can recall the days we spent together, the promise we made, and the night sky we looked up at as one. But they are not memories of mine, simply knowledge I possess. Even so, it is all dear to me.” She seemed to accept her contradictory nature.

She recalled her time with Jinta but lived as Azumagiku. She could not stray from her mother’s designs. At her core was neither her own heart nor the way of life Shirayuki clung to—only the emotions Suzune had discarded.

“Then, do you still… No, never mind.” Jinya tried to say something, then reconsidered. There was nothing to be gained from reaching for the past now. Azumagiku was no more than a mere remnant of better times. “Are you the one who messed with Nomari’s memories?”

“I am. My ability is called *Azumagiku*. It lets me erase and alter memories. The girl’s memories of you, and only you, will be completely gone by evening.”

Just as he’d expected. “Do you have any intention of restoring her memories?”

“I’m sure you already know my answer.”

He gritted his teeth. So long as this was what Suzune wanted, Azumagiku would not reverse what she had done—his choice had been set in stone from the start. “I see.”

Suzune’s goal this whole time wasn’t to steal the memories of Nomari and the others around him. It was to make him do *this*.

“I know about that left arm of yours, Jinta,” she said.

He had no reason to make Azumagiku heal Nomari in the first place. His grotesque arm allowed him to devour demons and make their abilities his. He simply had to take Azumagiku’s ability, and it would all be over.

Put in another way, he had to devour someone who bore a resemblance to and had the memories of the woman he once loved if he wanted to save Nomari.

“I… *We* wish to know. What will you choose?”

Suzune was forcing a decision onto him.

“What do you hold dear?”

Past or present, your family or your loved one? Whom do you truly love, and what are you willing to forsake for them?

3

THE “HIME” IN ITSUKIHIME was widely understood as “princess” (hime), but in Kadono it took on the secondary meaning of “Woman of Fire” (which was also hime). This was further derived from the mythical figure Hyottoko, meaning “Man of Fire.” Though the myth changed greatly over the years, Hyottoko was originally thought to resemble a Zashiki-warashi, a spirit whose mere existence brought prosperity to a home. The role of Itsukihime was meant to be similar: Through simply existing as an object of worship, she would bring the village prosperity. For that reason, the Itsukihime could not be allowed to leave her shrine. Regardless of her actual nature, people feared the object of their good fortune setting foot out of her shrine would bring bad luck.

Byakuya had no qualms over becoming Itsukihime. Her mother had lived and died in the same role, so it was simply her turn to fulfill her duty. But from time to time, Shirayuki would dream.

The two would wake up in bed together in the morning. She would open her eyes and feel the sun's rays tickling her like a naughty child. Then she would look over and see him smiling back at her. Those were the kind of dreams she had, in which she married the man she loved and grew old together with him. She'd chosen not to be with him in reality, so it was in her dreams that she entertained the thought of a happy life with him.

"I had a dream. A nightmare, really. I dreamed you disappeared."

"And that scared you?"

"It did. A lot."

Her dream-husband Jinta would smile and say the reality in which they weren't together was the nightmare for him. The real Jinta wasn't so honest. Her dream conversations were so comforting, but something about them felt hollow.

But then she would think back to their youth, basking in the memory of their happy days as if she were entering a deep slumber. She couldn't live with her mother, but her father, Jinta, and Suzune were right there with her every day. The time she spent with them was dear to her heart, but eventually it all came to an end.

Perhaps if she had treasured those days more, then she and Jinta would have become husband and wife in reality rather than just in her dreams. The hollow feeling inside her remained. The two of them refused to diverge from the paths they chose for themselves. Things went astray and they became distant. She gripped his hand tightly here, as if to make sure he would at least stay with her in her dreams.

"No… The truth is, I always want to hold your hand."

She wished for the very same thing. But even though her feelings for him were real, her duty as the shrine maiden remained.

Her vision blurred as her eyes grew moist. She began to wake from her warm

dream just as tears started to fall. She was afraid of things coming to an end but forced herself to smile. With a sunny heart, she reached a hand out to him. *“Now go and achieve your purpose.”*

Her dream always ended there.

This was the life she desired deep in the recesses of her heart. Not a life as Itsukihime and shrine maiden guardian, but one in which they shared ordinary days and grew old together. She’d sealed away her own wish in order to protect Kadono like her mother had—but where did that get her? Many lives were lost, the man she loved became scarred, and his own younger sister lost all faith in him.

Just as Jinta blamed himself for inviting tragedy, she felt the same way because she couldn’t commit to being either Shirayuki or Byakuya. She died as a failure of a shrine maiden, but her regrets lived on in Azumagiku. And after many years, she was able to meet Jinya once again.

This meeting may have been the work of Azumagiku acting under Magatsume’s orders, but it was something Shirayuki dearly wanted for herself.

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Jinta used to hold hands with both Shirayuki and Suzune in the past. But after he took up the sword to protect what was dear to him, he only had one hand left free. So whose hand did he take? Looking back on it all, such an insignificant choice might actually have been the turning point in their lives.

Of course, he must have chosen wrong if things ended up the way they did.

“What do you hold dear?”

A dizzying amount of time had passed since his younger days. Here he was again, being made to stand at a fork in the road.

Whether willingly or not, there came a time in all people’s lives when they must make decisions with a lasting impact. Jinya had to look into his heart and choose only one thing among all those he considered important. For all he

knew, none of the choices were correct, but he could not stall his decision regardless.

“Is your revenge against Suzu-chan what’s dear to you? Or is it the life you have now? Maybe it might even be the time you spent with me?”

Shirayuki was long dead. What he saw now was nothing more than a demon with her memories. His mind understood this, but his *heart* felt differently. She had Shirayuki’s appearance, her voice—he could not say for sure that she was not the woman he had loved.

“Himawari-neesama told me about *Assimilation*, your ability to take superior demons’ abilities for your own. But there are some conditions to it, aren’t there?”

The sound of unceasing rain echoed through the temple. The air was humid, but the inside of Jinya’s mouth was dry. He couldn’t move. The choice posed to him was making the world spin around him.

“You can’t absorb a demon who still has a strong sense of will. You have to push it to the brink of death first.”

She was right. *Assimilation* allowed him to absorb other beings into himself. He could make other demon abilities his own, but not unconditionally. *Assimilation* absorbed not just the flesh of his targets but their memories and consciousness as well. However, two consciousnesses could not share one body. At worst, he would be torn apart. That was why he first had to weaken the consciousness of those whose abilities he wanted to take.

“To put it another way, unless you bring me near death, you cannot save your daughter. Now we’ll be able to see what you really hold dear.”

To spare Azumagiku was to abandon Nomari, and to save Nomari was to kill Azumagiku.

“What do you choose?”

This was what Suzune was after: If he valued his past, then he had to cut ties

with his present. If he valued his present, then he had to cut down his past with his own hands. She was forcing him, someone who had a foot in the worlds of both men and demons, to choose only one side. Azumagiku was nothing more than a pawn to force that choice.

Jinya gritted his teeth, feeling hatred swell inside him. To think Suzune would use Shirayuki's skull for such an absurd reason.

"I want to hear you say it."

Her voice shook him to his core. It didn't register as Azumagiku's, but as the nostalgic voice of the woman he adored. For him, choosing to cut her down would be no different than deciding to slay the one he loved.

"Shirayuki…" He murmured, too softly for anyone to hear.

Could he kill her? The thought alone made his body lock up. He truly did love her. He held a deep adoration for her and the way she chose to pray for the happiness of others like it was nothing.

He remembered it all, even after so many decades had passed. The days he spent with her were etched into his mind. With the arrival of the Meiji era, both swords and revenge were outlawed, but he stuck to the sword because he could still hear the voice of young Shirayuki in his ears. He had let go of so much along his journey, but he'd managed to come this far without losing his feelings for her.

And this was his reward?

"You would hurt Nomari just to make me do *this*?" he said in disbelief.

"Yes. This was the purpose I was born for, and my own dearest wish."

Jinya grabbed Yatonomori Kaneomi. He left Yarai in its sheath simply for emotional reasons. Yarai was the village treasure protected by generations of Itsukihime, and he could not bring himself to use it against her.

Azumagiku sighed softly, more out of relief than anything else. "I knew it. I knew this was how you would answer all along."

Truth be told, his decision didn't take him long at all. Even if his heart didn't accept it, Azumagiku was nothing more than a demon who brought harm to humans. What must be done was clear. All that remained was for him to steel himself. He would cut down someone he held dear to protect someone he held dearer.

"I'm sure you did. The choice wasn't hard at all." He took a firm step forward, leaving no doubt about what his decision was.

Heikichi broke his silence and blocked Jinya's path. "W-wait!"

The skulls he'd summoned earlier had been nothing but an empty threat. Even though his goal of saving Nomari aligned with Jinya's, he did not want to achieve it by killing Azumagiku.

"Y-ya don't understand! Sh-she's not—"

"Heikichi, she's a daughter of Magatsume."

"I know that! B-but she's not a bad person! I'm sure we can figure something out if we just talk things over!"

Jinya had no intention of stopping. He stepped forward, drawing closer to Heikichi. "We have no time to wait for a change of heart. I doubt she would even have one, especially if Shirayuki's skull is a part of her." He knew Shirayuki's stubbornness firsthand. The thought of abandoning her duty wouldn't even cross her mind.

"I know, but please. You're the one who showed me humans and demons can get along. I'm begging you."

Heikichi cared deeply for both Nomari and Azumagiku, and he was seeking a way for them both to be saved. Jinya felt awed by the young man. His own younger self might have shared the naivety of Heikichi's heart at one point in time. Unfortunately, time did many things to a man—Jinya could no longer blindly believe in such fairy-tale outcomes.

"Utsugi, I knew you've become friends with that girl. As your master's friend,

part of me wants to accept your request.” Jinya gave him a weak smile that was unthinkable for his usual self. “But I am a father.”

He shifted his hips and punched Heikichi in the gut. Even though he held back, his demonic strength was still enough to make Heikichi double over.

Heikichi groaned, “Why…?”

“I’m sorry. Go to sleep for the time being.” Jinya followed up with a backfist blow to the chin, knocking Heikichi unconscious. Jinya caught him before he could fall, then carried him over to the corner and laid him down. He felt bad treating Heikichi so roughly, but it was better Heikichi wasn’t awake to see what was to come.

“How awful…”

“What can I say? I’ve become someone who can do awful things.”

There was some irritation in Azumagiku’s voice. She clearly cared for Heikichi just as much as he cared for her.

“But so have you,” Jinya said.

“Yes, I suppose so. I wouldn’t have been able to be this cruel to you in the past.” Her face looked even more pained than his did.

Suzune had set up this farce to force Jinya into making a difficult choice, but that wasn’t all. She took pleasure in forcing the being who had once been Shirayuki to do all this. Azumagiku had been born out of Suzune’s desire for vengeance against the woman who had betrayed her brother. To put it another way, Azumagiku was born for the sole purpose of being Jinya’s enemy.

“Now then…” After confirming Heikichi was all right, Jinya looked back at Azumagiku. There was nobody left to get in their way. The wooden floorboards creaked as he walked, his heart pounding more with each step. The two neared each other until he was close enough to reach out and touch her.

He closed his eyes, mentally comparing his past and his present. Jinta had become Jinya, and Shirayuki had become Azumagiku. He recalled the words a

figure from his distant past once said: Nothing that exists is changeless.

Jinya made his choice.

“Shirayuki—if you’ll allow me to call you that now—I can’t tell you things haven’t changed, but I still think of you even now. The words I spoke to you under that night sky long ago were not a lie.”

He wanted to protect what he saw in her, even if that meant the two couldn’t be wed. In the end, he had failed to save her, but that didn’t mean he found no beauty in the way of life she chose.

“I see.” Azumagiku gave a small nod full of satisfaction.

He knew she was not Shirayuki, but the thought that he could reach out and grab happiness once more wrenched his heart all the same. Perhaps if he took her hand and fled with her now, the two of them could find something they had let slip away long ago.

“But Nomari has given me what nobody else could. I cannot forsake her here.”

He would do no such thing, of course. Azumagiku could not replace his first love, and he had other things in his life now.

“Is your daughter dearer to you than me?”

“I cannot possibly rank you two. You’ve given me something unique as well.”

“But you’re still going to choose her.” There was no blame in her voice. She simply wanted him to state it clearly.

“That’s right.” Out of respect, he responded without hesitation. “After I lost you, I lived mired in hatred. I know now it was the wrong way to go about things, but some good has come out of this life.”

Azumagiku smiled without reservation in front of the man who would kill her. None of her earlier resignation could be seen. Her smile was peaceful and strong, bringing to mind distant memories.

“All the things I’ve gained along the way may be excess that distracts me from my true goal, but I don’t think any of it is meaningless. That’s why I won’t take your hand now. I cannot stray from being the man I’ve become.”

“But of course. You were always someone who decided to stick to your chosen way of life instead of acting on your feelings. That’s precisely why I… No, why Shirayuki loved you.”

Though he knew it might hurt her, Jinya added one last thing. “Right. But most of all, I am a father. And from the moment I became a father, it became my duty to put my daughter before all others.”

He drew Yatonomori Kaneomi and held it high. No matter what he said, it all boiled down to one thing: He could not abandon his daughter. This ending was predetermined from the start.

“You’re no longer the Jinta I knew, are you?” she murmured in a voice full of melancholy.

The tip of his blade shook. Part of him still wavered. He loved Shirayuki that much.

But it would all come to an end now. Faster than the eye could follow, he swung his blade down diagonally across her slender body.

The memory of the girl who insisted she was his older sister despite being younger than him flitted through his mind. He forced the memory out of his head, but others took its place. He recalled how she became family to him, and how she sealed her feelings away to live for the benefit of the village. No matter how much he tried to shake the memories off, more kept welling up in their place.

Blood danced as the air took on the scent of iron. The sensation of cutting bone lingered in his fingers. He felt nauseated, even though he was so used to killing.

“Ah…” Azumagiku’s gaze was locked onto Jinya. The moment she began to

fall, he grabbed her tightly by the neck with his left hand.

“It’s over. Your power…is now mine to devour.”

He would not say he was doing it for Nomari. This was something he’d chosen, so he had to bear full responsibility for it himself.

As soon as he put strength into his left arm, the flesh began to swell. It took on a grotesque, dark red, inhuman shape. It started to pulse like a heart, and Azumagiku’s face contorted with agony.

Whenever Jinya used *Assimilation*, he would glimpse memories from the one he was devouring. That hadn’t been the case with Jishibari, which had made him wonder if the daughters of Magatsume were exceptions, but he could feel Azumagiku’s memories faintly flowing into him now.

“Ahhh…”

The amount gradually increased in volume, turning from a trickle into a stream, then finally a deluge. Overwhelmed by the feeling of a massive force flowing into him, he lost consciousness.

“Thank goodness,” she said. “With this, my wish is granted.”

But he had no fear. What he felt was warm, soft, and familiar.

He saw a dream vision. Wind caressed his cheek and formed ripples along the river. A curtain of stars hung overhead, and the trees murmured softly. From atop a small hill, he observed Modori River below, its waters just as pristine as he remembered.

“This place…” When he came to his senses, he found himself not in the ruined temple but on a hill that reminded him of old times. This was where he made a promise to Shirayuki as a child, and where he broke that same promise as an adult.

He was not bewildered by any of this. The surrounding air felt similar to the atmosphere he’d sensed when the black shadow enveloped him back in the

Inverted Alley. This was not reality, just a mere illusion brought on by emotion. But Jinya had already shaken off his lingering regrets of the past. Hence, the one who made this world was not him, but her.

“How nostalgic.”

“Azumagiku…” He looked to his side and saw her gazing up at a sky blanketed in stars. Her face in profile brought back memories that made him smile slightly. Intuitively, he understood what was going on. When he devoured Tsuchiura, Jinya had briefly glimpsed a sight the man had wished to see. What he saw now was Azumagiku’s final dream. On the precipice of being fully devoured and assimilated, her feelings were laid bare to create this world.

“No. I’m not Azumagiku anymore.” She softly shook her head. The gesture was the same one he remembered Shirayuki making. She didn’t let it show outwardly, but she…Shirayuki seemed to understand things were at an end. She smiled wryly, as if she were chiding a younger brother, and said, “My demon body is gone now, after all. And I’m no longer the Itsukihime either. I’ve lost both my body and my duty, leaving only my feelings behind. I’m no longer Azumagiku nor Byakuya…but Shirayuki, in the truest sense.”

She took a light step forward and spun around, as though dancing, to face him. With the stars as her backdrop, she made a genuine smile—pure, like the crystal-clear waters of a lake, and yet so transient.

But of course she had to have lingering regrets, enough to create this dream. There were things she wanted to tell him, so he chose to say nothing and just listen. It was his duty to hear out her last wishes.

“I… We wanted to know.”

If she were truly Shirayuki, then she would surely read his intentions like an open book. Sure enough, she gave him a thankful nod.

“What would you do if you were made to choose between the past and the present? Learning that was Suzu-chan’s wish and Azumagiku’s duty. Azumagiku was born for that purpose and has achieved it.”

In the end, Jinya chose the present; he chose Nomari. He wasn't without mixed feelings, but he was certain he'd made the right decision.

"That wish and duty have both faded away now, leaving behind my lingering regrets. What you see at this point is my heart that longed to meet you again."

It had been Magatsume's wish to know what he would choose and Azumagiku's duty to force that choice. But Shirayuki was different. She simply desired to meet him again.

Softly, she said, "The gods must be real after all. I'm sure it was Mahiru-sama who granted us this brief moment together, as a reward for all we did for Kadono."

"No," Jinya said as a sudden gust of wind blew. His voice was soft but firm. He wanted to make his feelings clear before she fully melted away into the sky. "I did it all for you, not Kadono. I took up the sword because you chose to become Itsukihime."

"Is that so?" she said with a happy laugh. She beamed, smiling unreservedly like a child.

A sad thought crossed his mind: It was his fault that she lost her ability to smile like this.

"Hey, Shirayuki?" There was something he wanted to ask. He knew it was a pointless, pathetic question, but he'd been dying to ask it. Or perhaps he just wanted to ask somebody, anybody about it. "Just where did I choose wrong?" He pleaded with all his heart for her to have the answer. He tried to smile but failed, the ends of his mouth only stiffening awkwardly. "Just what could I have done to stay by your side?"

Looking back on it all, he felt like he had done nothing but make mistake after mistake. Take his youth, for example. Whose hand was he supposed to take, Shirayuki's or Suzune's? What should he really have done when she told him she would become Itsukihime, and later, when she told him she would marry Kiyomasa? What about now, when he was forced to choose between Nomari

and Shirayuki?

People are not omniscient. There is no way of knowing where untaken paths lead. The only thing Jinya knew was that he had chosen wrong at some point. There was surely a world in which he could have stayed with Shirayuki.

“I don’t know,” she answered with a shake of her head and a troubled sigh. “I’m sure I’ve chosen wrong all my life as well, or else the two of us would be drinking tea somewhere as an elderly couple right about now.”

The what-if she spoke of long ago was left forever unfulfilled, but Jinya was certain that was his fault alone. If had just chosen better, then he wouldn’t be here now as a demon.

“Yeah. It would’ve been nice to grow old together with you. I’m sure we would’ve been happy. I wanted a life like that myself.” But by cutting her down he had denied any right he had to wish for that life.

Perhaps everything had all been wrong from the start. Maybe the only choice that mattered, his one wrong move, was his decision to take Motoharu’s hand on that rainy night long ago.

“But I *was* happy,” she corrected with a gentle smile. Her fulfilled expression clearly showed what was in her heart. Her words were the absolute truth. “So don’t make that kind of face anymore. The two of us may have chosen wrong where it mattered most, but I am truly happy to have known you.”

“But I couldn’t do a single thing for you.” He couldn’t protect her, the promise they swore, or even the way of life he had clung to. Just what could such a pathetic man have done for someone else?

“Jeez, Jinta. You’re hopeless without your big sister, huh?” Her teasing tone reached him in the depths of his heart.

Her fragrance, even sweeter than her words, tickled his nose. She reached out a hand, touching his cheek with her pale, slender fingers. She was gentle, like she was soothing a baby. She had always acted this way, as if she were his older

sister. He was flooded with nostalgia.

“When my father brought you home, you became family to me.”

He could say the same. Something in him was saved by the smile she showed him on that rainy night when they became family.

“When I said I would become Itsukihime, only you approved of my foolishness.”

He did that because of the beauty he saw in her. He respected her noble choice and swore to protect her.

“I broke the promise we made, but you still swore to protect me anyway.”

And yet he failed to protect her, even though she was so dear to him.

“You’ve given me so much: this warmth I feel now, the feeling of having my heart race, even the sadness of us being apart. All of it came from you.” She smiled at him like she used to. “So please don’t say you couldn’t do a single thing for me. I was able to live with you by my side and die in your arms. I lived a life as happy as I could possibly have. I won’t let anyone, not even you, deny that.”

Jinya felt he had no right for her to comfort him like this. No matter what she said, the fact remained that he didn’t choose her. He’d already chosen his way of life over her once before, and he’d chosen Nomari over her today. Though he claimed that he loved her, he’d been so terrible to her. So how could she smile for him like this?

“What about you?” she asked. “Did you feel the same way at all?”

“Of course. Just being able to be by your side was enough for me.”

“I see. I kinda wish you had said so back then, though.”

“You know I couldn’t do that.” Such was the life he had chosen for himself. Saying something like that would have been no different than dragging both their feelings through the mud.

“Ah, right. The two of us chose different lives.” She wouldn’t have said such a thing back then either. That side of them was precisely what made the two fall in love, and it was also what had kept them apart.

“We were always together, but we could never speak our true feelings, could we? Not even in the very end.” Both joy and sadness filled her eyes as she looked up at the sky like she used to. She met Jinya’s gaze once more and sighed. “We couldn’t have a proper farewell. I’m sure that was my greatest mistake. If only we could have parted cleanly, then I’m sure you wouldn’t have ended up hurt so badly.”

Perhaps that was why she was here. She’d obeyed Magatsume, fulfilled her duty as Azumagiku, all so she could have this brief reunion.

“Not being able to do that is the one lingering regret in my happy life.”

To tell him what she couldn’t say before.

“I had to take a rather roundabout method, but I’m finally face-to-face with you again. Now I can tell you the words I’ve been keeping in my heart.”

Her voice was perfectly clear, like water or perhaps blue skies.

“Jinta, will you accept what I have to say? Not as Itsukihime or a demon, nor as Byakuya or Azumagiku. Will you accept what I have to say as plain old Shirayuki?”

She smiled, but it was not a nostalgic smile this time. It was a kind of smile he had never seen from her before, one that spoke of the great distance she’d traveled.

“It’s time for us to have a proper farewell.”

He felt the slightest pang of sadness. Though shaken, he concealed his unrest because he knew about his own lingering attachments that had been brought to light at the Inverted Alley. He couldn’t divert from his chosen path, but thinking about the happy future he could have had still pained him from time to time.

“Oh. I see…”

But he had preferred it that way. The pain he felt allowed him to cling to her memory. He could act like the main character of some cheap tragedy, stricken with grief and hatred, keeping himself together with her memory and hurting himself all the while. He never did get over losing her.

What was lost was lost. There was nothing to be achieved by reaching out for the past. Jinya thought he knew that well, and yet he clung to his lingering regrets. He didn’t need a proper farewell; he needed to accept that she was gone.

“I understand now,” he said. “If failing to say goodbye was your greatest mistake, then clinging to your memory was mine. The very first thing I should have done was accept you were dead.”

“Yeah, I think you might be right. So let’s have a proper farewell here. We need to bring an end to those days, because you have many more left to live.”

Fondness for the past could easily become a toxic fixation. It was okay to reminisce once in a while, as he was sure to do from here on out. But memories were to be looked back on occasionally, not clung to obsessively.

“Good grief. Even at my age, you still act more mature than me. Maybe I *am* hopeless without you, like you say,” he joked, not wanting the moment to end just yet.

“Ha ha, I wonder.”

He could feel the gloom in his heart lighten. It was time. He looked her straight in the eyes and saw Shirayuki—not Byakuya or Azumagiku, but Shirayuki and no one else. “I’m sorry. I ended up hurting you, but I was happy to have known you.”

“And I as well.”

“Thank you. I suppose it’s time, then.” He understood that this meant the end of the passion that once burned in his heart. As the years passed, he would

surely forget her voice, her touch, her warmth, and even the yearning that once made his heart race. He would find new people dear to him whom he wished to protect and would look back less often on the past. The feelings that he once thought meant everything to him would be forgotten.

But that was fine.

“Yes, it’s time.”

People cannot live on dreams alone, and memory is doomed to eventually fade. But even if much is to be lost, *something* will surely remain. The memory of her warm touch had grown distant, but his heart still brimmed with warm emotions now. Even if she wasn’t by his side, he felt no doubt that she had supported him along his journey. So perhaps it wasn’t a stretch to think that one day he could look back on all the heartrending sadness and think, “Ah, such a thing happened, didn’t it?” He truly believed he would look back and be proud that he said farewell on this day, knowing it had not been a mistake.

“Well, that’s that, then, Jinta. I’ll be going now. I’m plenty tired of seeing your face already, so you can take your time coming over to this side,” she said with a light wave. It was much too casual a parting.

“You’re not really ending things like that, are you? After dragging it out so much?”

“What? Isn’t it better than being all overly serious?”

“I was kind of hoping for something serious myself…”

“Ugh. Needy much?”

The two laughed and joked, still a bit hesitant.

“You know, I want to hear about your family the next time we meet. I want to learn about your wife and all your children and maybe laugh at the goofy, happy face you make then.”

“All right. I’ll marry a wife so beautiful you’ll be green with envy. As for children, I already have Nomari, so I’m not sure about any others.”

“There you go gushing about your daughter. You’ll never find a wife if you do that.”

“Is that right? I’ll have you know I’ve already got someone proclaiming herself to be my wife.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She kept things light. His journey would be a long one, and he didn’t need any extra baggage.

“Take care of your health,” she said. “You’re not quite as young as you used to be.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“You’re not exactly inspiring confidence…”

“Ha ha.”

The distance between them naturally grew. Neither was very hesitant any longer.

“This is one messy farewell, isn’t it?” he said.

“Heh, yeah. But I’m sure farewells are meant to be this way.” She spun around to face away from him, then looked back over her shoulder. “Oh, one last thing.”

“Yeah?”

She smiled, nostalgic and loving. Here, the last of her lingering regrets would take shape.

Shirayuki was someone who lived as a shrine maiden but failed to die as one. Her corpse was used in the schemes of another, and she was brought back against her will as a demon. She achieved nothing in either life or death. But even so, it was her choices that had led to this moment. She had lost everything, but at the very end, her feelings were able to bring about a tiny miracle. All her mistakes were what enabled her to deliver these last few words:

“Goodbye, Jinta. I truly loved you.”

That was the end.

His consciousness melted into white, and his vision blurred bright.

By recalling memories, the heart could return to the past. Shirayuki was returning to rest again, to dream under the sunlight filtering through the leaves of the trees. Surely she was traveling back to the place she desired to go after her long, long journey.

“Goodbye, Shirayuki. I loved you too.”

The words he had been unable to say soared to the distant night sky as the long dream finally reached its end.

Still basking in the dream’s memory, Jinya slowly regained consciousness.

He had devoured Azumagiku and touched Shirayuki’s heart. Even after becoming Magatsume’s daughter, she had fought to fulfill her own wish until the very end. He was sure he would never forget her.

She had given him closure, without a doubt. But the look on his face now was not a peaceful one.

“Azumagiku…” He murmured the name of the ability in a grim, stiff voice.

He knew Azumagiku had been born to torment him and Shirayuki, but he should have thought more deeply about what that meant.

“…The ability to erase memory through touch. By specifying a thing or person, memory of it alone can be erased.”

Magatsume’s goal was to learn whether Jinya valued the past or present more. The role given to Azumagiku clearly demonstrated that.

“The means to erase memories over time is unusable for you due to ability degradation. A way to restore memories or to halt a loss of memories that has already been initiated…”

But just because he was given a choice, it didn't mean either option was right. This conclusion should have been obvious from the start.

"…does not exist."

It was here that all hope was lost.

4

THE RAINFALL only grew heavier.

It was around early afternoon now. The scent of rain washed away the lingering smell of blood in the temple.

Even after Jinya had killed and devoured Azumagiku, there was no resolution to be gained. He was filled with a profound sense of despair and unease. He picked Heikichi up and returned to Demon Soba.

"O-oh!" Toyoshige was standing outside the restaurant, battered by rain. He seemed flustered, looking around worriedly. He ran over at once when he met Jinya's eyes. "There ya are! We've got a problem!"

"Let me put Utsugi down first."

"R-right."

Jinya carried the still-unconscious Heikichi inside and laid him down in a bedroom. He didn't bother setting out a futon, instead having the young man sleep on the bare floor. Surely he would understand. Once this was done, Toyoshige began to sputter.

"W-we've got a problem! Nomari-chan slipped off while I wasn't lookin'!"

Jinya's skin turned to gooseflesh. Without even waiting for the man to finish, he ran to Nomari's room and wildly slid the door open. "Nomari!"

She wasn't there. The only thing left was a messy futon where she had slept.

"I'm so sorry. I can't believe I messed up when ya trusted me so much."

The room didn't seem to have been broken into, and Nomari's sleepwear was scattered around. He didn't see the ribbon she usually wore. She'd apparently had the time to dress herself, which meant she hadn't been kidnapped. She had left of her own accord.

"I'm so, so sorry. Really." Toyoshige bowed his head repeatedly, his face creased into an apologetic grimace.

"It's fine. I'll go look for her." Jinya wasn't the slightest bit angry. If anything, he empathized with the man for feeling so guilty.

Toyoshige looked up at him in confusion. He had been ready to receive a complaint or two.

"How strange… I feel terribly calm for some reason," Jinya said.

"Huh?"

"I don't quite understand why myself. Maybe part of me knew deep down that it would end like this."

Nomari had likely left on impulse, judging from the messy state the room was left in. Her memories must have faded so much that she simply panicked. There was nothing to be done, of course. There would be no preventing the further loss of her memories. Having devoured Azumagiku's ability for himself, Jinya knew perfectly well how this would end.

Nomari's memory wasn't simply being erased; it was being altered in a way that mended all the gaps and made things consistent. Worse yet, Azumagiku had apparently used her ability on others Jinya knew as well. People he was well acquainted with would soon forget him too. He might've been able to rebuild his life here if he could simply erase the parts of people's memories that had been rewritten, but he wasn't skilled enough with the ability to try such a thing.

Jinya was checkmated. By the end of the day, he would become a complete outsider here.

“Mihashi-dono. Once again, I ask that you look after Nomari for me. If you can do that, consider your debt squared.” Jinya’s words carried a different meaning this time around. Without waiting for a reply, he turned around and ran. He couldn’t save Nomari, but he still had one last duty he needed to perform. She was somewhere out there, alone and afraid in the rain. He had to go to her.

He sped through the streets of Kyoto, battered by the rain as he ran. He was surprised his heart was so calm, but he also understood the reason why. Nothing that exists is changeless. He’d known deep down that his happy days would eventually come to an end.

“Oh! Pardon me.” He almost ran into a woman on the street—Toyoshige’s wife, Saku. She seemed flustered, with worry evident on her face. She was apparently helping look for Nomari as well. “U-um, say, have you seen a young woman out here? Around twenty, wearing a pink ribbon?”

He wasn’t terribly surprised by her question. He knew his acquaintances were already starting to forget him. He didn’t point out her error, though. There was no need to make Saku feel guilty about her mistake, especially not when she was trying to help.

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t. I’ll keep an eye out for her.” Jinya bowed his head and left. He felt even more keenly that he wouldn’t be coming back.

***

Toyoshige was waiting outside Demon Soba’s entrance when he saw his wife return. He had stayed behind in case Nomari came back while Saku searched in his stead.

“I couldn’t find her. Has she come back?” she asked.

“No luck. Switch with me; I’ll search next. That man asked me himself to look after his daughter.” Toyoshige was worried about Nomari, of course, but someone else out there worried for her even more. He wanted to hurry up and find her so he could set the man at ease.

“…Who did, dear? Our…neighbor?” Saku asked, puzzled.

Nomari was the young woman who lived next door. The couple had known her since she was a child. The two of them were childless, so they had shown her a lot of love because she was without parents herself… Was that right? Toyoshige could faintly recall her having a father. He had been a no-nonsense man, but he turned doting when it came to her. Toyoshige could’ve sworn he’d been the one who asked him to look after Nomari.

“That’s right, him…y’know…”

They met every morning when they cleaned their storefronts; Toyoshige’s days started with their brief chats. Though the man took his work so seriously, he would close his restaurant like it was nothing to spend time with his daughter. He looked unfriendly but was surprisingly personable. Toyoshige recalled how he had helped taste-test his sweets. The man spoke clumsily, but there was no doubt in Toyoshige’s mind that he loved his daughter more than anyone. But for some reason, it felt like a fog had been cast over Toyoshige’s faint memories of him.

“His name’s not comin’ to me right now for some reason, but it doesn’t matter. I’m gonna go look for Nomari.” Toyoshige scratched his head and turned his attention away from his fuzzy memories. He could think about it later. Right now, he had to find Nomari. He was sure somebody out there would be happy to see her back safe, even if he couldn’t recall exactly who it was.

***

It had been an afternoon like any other. I was eating soba next to my father at Kihee. All the people around us watched with warm smiles. I felt happy whenever the restaurant owner would call us father and daughter.

“Nomari, you got something there.”

I still couldn’t use chopsticks well back then, so my face got messy. I didn’t wipe it, though, because I knew my father would do it for me.

I've always loved my father dearly, ever since I was little.

Kshhhhhhh.

Gone.

I heard a noise in my head and felt my heart stir. With each bout of pain that came and went, something left me.

Afraid of what was happening, I fled my room. I'd already lost so much, but I didn't even know what I had lost. On unsteady feet, I continued through the rain in search of something dear to me. I felt like this was the only way I could hold on to at least some of the things slipping through my grasp.

I found my way to a kimono fabric store. Oh, how nostalgic. A memory I thought was gone resurfaced in my mind then.

"Um, a ribbon. I want you to buy me a ribbon."

My father had bought me the ribbon I was wearing now. I didn't want to be demanding, but I just couldn't help but want it. It was embarrassing to be mistaken for a couple by the shopkeeper, but our outing had been fun. I'd been able to receive a gift from my father.

Kshhhhhhh.

But this, too, faded away.

"A-ah…" I'd just been thinking how nostalgic this place was, yet I couldn't feel any familiarity from it at all now. This store had been important to me at one point in time, but I couldn't recall why.

"No…" Was it rain wetting my face, or something else? I left the kimono fabric shop behind as if I were fleeing.

Even with the rain, Sanjyou Street was crowded. Many curious gazes fell on me as I was drenched, but I paid no attention to them. Another nostalgic memory rose to mind. I'd walked this street many times with my father.

"Oh, I know. Why don't we go for a walk tomorrow? Since you can't carry a

sword anymore, won't your hands be free? We can walk holding hands."

The Sword Abolishment Edict was passed around that time. For my sake, my father stopped wearing his sword around. He looked disheartened, so I nonchalantly took his hand in mine.

Kshhhhhhh.

Something warm faded away.

Faintly, I understood what was happening. What was leaving me were memories, memories of my father. I'd lost so many memories of him already, I was sure, and I would only lose more as I recalled them.

"No… I don't want to forget…"

I was scared. I felt as though I was turning into something other than myself. The time I'd spent with my father had shaped who I was. To forget those memories was to lose my identity. If I forgot him, all the love he raised me with would become nothing. All the memories we worked to make as a family would be gone. Without them, we couldn't stay a family.

A possibility I had once feared returned to me. When I forgot it all, my father would become nothing more than a stranger.

"No. No, I still remember…" I clenched my teeth, refusing to accept the possibility. I didn't know where I was going, but my feet wouldn't stop moving. I felt as though I would collapse at any moment, but I forced myself onward in search of what lay ahead.

"We ate at a beef hotpot restaurant together. We taste-tested red bean bread together."

Deliriously, I listed out my memories…

Kshhhhhhh. Kshhhhhhh.

…But they faded away as well.

The sight of my father forcing himself to eat sweets on an already full

stomach and the two of us eating a lively lunch. Both faded away with the noise. I think I might once have pretended to be asleep in bed so he would come wake me up in the mornings, but now I couldn't be so sure.

"I have to study so I can help out with the restaurant…"

I hadn't even realized I'd been crying. Tears were spilling out together with my memories. I felt more dismayed than afraid, but I needed to keep going regardless. There was something I had to do.

"I'm going to become his mother so I can look after him like he looked after me."

It had been my wish ever since I was young to repay my father for taking me in. The idea was silly, something a child would come up with, but as I grew older, I became all the more determined to see it through.

I remembered how I once said something awful to him. He had heard rumors of a demon night parade and was leaving to go fight it. He'd had to leave for similar reasons many times, and I was always worried he might not come back.

"Nomari…"

He reached out to try and comfort me by patting my head, but I reflexively stepped away. He looked so terribly hurt by that. I'd thought he was stronger than anyone, but that night I learned of his hidden weakness.

"The two of us…could stay a family…because you worked hard to make us one."

I didn't regret what happened. It was only because I hurt him that I came to understand. My father could defeat demons with ease and had overcome many challenges, so I always thought he was strong. How silly I was, really. My younger self saw nothing beneath the surface. Even if he were skilled with the sword, and even if he had the will to beat the odds, that didn't mean he didn't feel pain. He suffered where no one could see, but he always strove to be my father despite that. I couldn't believe I missed something that obvious.

I made up my mind when I had my realization. I would make myself his mother and become the one to spoil him. I would take the childish wish I made and turn it into a reality. I would remain his family, no matter what shape that meant things would take for us. That was the best thing I could do to repay him. If I couldn't be his daughter, I would be his older sister and then his mother. My life would last for merely a blink of an eye to him, but I would spend it as his family until the end.

"That's why…it's my turn now. I'll be the one who'll work hard…to keep us a family."

But despite my wishes, I heard the noise echoing in my mind once more.

"So… So…"

Kshhhhhhh.

"Please, no… Don't leave me!"

I tried my hardest to hold on to it, but even my grand determination faded away like it had never been there.

My mind felt dim, like I had a cold. But I had to keep moving forward. I couldn't recall why I was walking in the first place, but my feet shuffled on regardless. Through the rain I saw the Aragi Inari Shrine ahead. I couldn't be sure, but I felt this was the place I was trying to reach.

It appeared to be around evening now. Because of the rain, there wasn't a single visitor in sight and everything was overcast.

This place was supposed to be special to me. We enjoyed a festival here, and I laid bare my heart to… No, nothing of the sort. This was just a shrine. I had no memories or deeper feelings regarding the place.

I wandered the shrine grounds aimlessly for a time, but eventually I collapsed from exhaustion. I put my hand out and stopped myself just before I hit the ground, however, keeping myself from falling on my face. I wound up looking as though I was begging for forgiveness on the ground.

I didn’t have the strength to stand back up. I felt pathetic and also guilty for some reason. Perhaps such a position was just right for me.

“Aaaaaah!” I raised my voice and sobbed. My hazy mind was able to understand only one thing: There was no recovering what I had lost. Cold and battered by rain, I remained unable to move from the ground and continued crying loudly.

I don’t know how much time passed. It could’ve been an eternity. It could’ve been a mere instant.

“I had a feeling you would come here.”

Out of nowhere, I heard an unfamiliar voice amid the sound of the rain. I looked up and saw a giant of a man, standing nearly six shaku in height. My heart leapt, and I stared at him blankly.

He paid my expression no mind and softly said, “We came to the festivals here a few times when you were a kid. Maybe that’s why you sought this place, or maybe it’s because you swore to stay with my family here. I don’t know.”

The man looked straight into my eyes. I didn’t know who he was, but I felt terrified. Not of him, but of being seen by him now.

“A-ah…”

“The only thing I knew was that you would probably come here.”

My mind couldn’t make sense of things, but for some reason, I wanted to cry. Though the rain grew stronger, its sound felt distant.

“I have many memories of this place too. Somegorou came to the festival with us here, as did Kaneomi and Utsugi. Chitose watched us with a smile as we went around the many stalls, hand in hand. I couldn’t say it then, but I had fun. I even managed to temporarily forget the hatred in my heart.”

The man slowly stepped forward. Gradually, he closed the distance between us.

“I remember the evening lull we saw here too. You told me you would be the

one who'd work hard next so we could stay a family. That made me happier than you can imagine. You've given me so many things nobody else could."

The man spoke with a cold look on his face of memories I didn't remember. The utter lack of movement in his expression reminded me of steel.

"And yet I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry."

"Stay… Stay away from me…"

"You were dearer to me than anything. I didn't want to ever see you cry. But in the end, it seems I'm the one who's making you cry, huh?"

I cried and I pleaded, but he did not stop. He did not seem like someone who wished me harm, but the closer he got, the more fear I felt.

"There's no way to bring back the memories, but I can erase your fear. Things will end a bit sooner than they would've, but you'll be set free."

I heard his words, but my mind didn't register them. Intuitively, though, I understood. He would take everything I'd held dear from me.

"Just let me do this one thing for you. I don't want to see you cry like this."

I caught a glimpse of sadness in his eyes that lasted just briefly enough to make me wonder if it had really ever been there at all. He was quickly emotionless again, unyielding like steel.

"Nomari…" he said. I didn't even have time to wonder how he knew my name. He fell to his knees and hugged me tightly.

"Ah…" I entrusted my weight to him. Perhaps I could've shaken him off, but I didn't want to. Something faint inside me hesitated to do it. My heart trembled from an emotion swelling inside me—not fear, but something warm that spread to every corner of my being. "Ah… You… You…"

You know something about what I've lost? I wanted to ask, but the words disappeared between my sobs.

His rough, clumsy hand patted my head. Though I was being hugged by a

stranger, I did not feel put off. If anything, it felt right. The emotion I could not identify made my body go numb.

Ah… I could feel tears fall. Our hearts overlapped and beat as one. I couldn't see his face, but I could tell from the way the air softened that he was smiling peacefully.

***

And just like that, an end came for the father-daughter pair.

Jinya brushed his fingers through Nomari's hair. He didn't know whether her body was trembling out of disgust or fear, but he didn't move his hand away. If this was his last chance to indulge in her warmth, then he wanted to do it a little longer.

"You've gotten big. It's hard to believe you were once small enough for me to carry in one arm."

He compared the memory of her as a baby against the way she was now and smiled. The heartbeat he felt from her body pressed against his told him she was real. Even if her memory was lost, he believed that at the very least this moment they were now sharing was genuine.

"Learning to change your diapers was a challenge, and you had trouble speaking for a while. Things were tough back then, but now even those memories are happy ones. I suppose they'll fade too, though."

After this moment passed, she would become a stranger to him. He wanted to stay by her side forever if he could. As her father, as family, he wanted to see her journey through to its completion. Her wish was never hers alone. It was a wish they both shared.

But their wish would have to go unfulfilled. They had worked hard to build what they possessed, so hard that it was difficult to believe it could all crumble away so fast. But crumble away it would, making it time for them to part.

"No…" she said weakly. The sound of her voice, almost drowned out by the

rain, made his heart clench tightly. She buried her face into his chest as if she had become a child again. “I… I don’t want to forget!”

She had little memory of him left to speak of. She probably didn’t even understand what she was saying.

Sorrow flared in him, but he felt joy as well. Her words made him believe that she had valued their time together just as much as he did. Though only a misunderstanding, it left him satisfied. Now all he had to regret was what would come next.

“I’m sorry. All I’ve ever done is hurt you.”

He had no way of restoring her lost memories and no way of staying in her life. Or rather, he had no more reason to stay in her life. Nomari was an adult now. She could stand on her own two feet. No, she *had* to stand on her own two feet. It didn’t really matter that Magatsume had gotten involved; Nomari had to live the rest of her life herself anyway. Being a father was a difficult thing. He couldn’t help but fret over his daughter, even though she had long since become independent. It hurt to think he wouldn’t be able to be there for her when she needed someone, though.

“…But I’ll pray for you. I doubt the gods or Buddha will want to answer the prayers of a demon, though… Oh, I know. I’ll pray to Mahiru-sama. She’s a generous goddess willing to grant even someone like me a miracle. I’m sure she’d at least be willing to hear out my wishes.”

He wouldn’t be able to be there for Nomari, but he would at least keep her in his thoughts.

The two of them had lived a life full of both ups and downs together. They had met through sheer coincidence but could proudly say they became a true family. That being the case, as her father, he would say the following words with as strong a prayer as he could put into them.

“You made my life full, so I’ll pray you can have a full life as well. May you live the life you wish to lead. May you age in peace. Both these things were beyond

me, but I wish them for you regardless.”

He didn’t care that she was going to forget him soon. It meant something to tell her now just how much their time together had meant to him.

“And one more thing: May you be happy until the end of your days.”

He was sure she would lead a life full of warmth and light. After all, there was just no way a girl so kind that she’d promise to become his mother wouldn’t have a good life.

“Thank you for being my family. I loved you.”

He hoped she could live a life full of laughter even after she forgot all about him.

“Farewell, Nomari.”

Despite all his reluctance, it was time.

The face of a young man he’d known since he was only a boy came to mind. Even with Jinya gone, his daughter would still have someone who treasured her. The young man wasn’t perfect by any means, but he was worthy of Jinya’s trust. Jinya could leave her in his hands.

For what would be the last time, Jinya softly patted Nomari’s head.

“Azumagiku.”

And that was the end of it. The two found one another through a series of coincidences and became family over many years. But the rain washed everything away, leaving them to become strangers once more.

***

My heart floated in the space between nothingness and reality. I felt as if I were dreaming in the depths of a shallow sleep. The last nostalgic sight of my heart spread out before me.

I still remember the days I spent with you.

“Hey, Father?”

“Yeah?”

Clear skies in morning, afternoons to keep busy, and the evening lull.

The sun sets for now, but look up and you will see—the stars take its place.

“You said you didn’t have a mother either?”

“That’s right.”

Like always, we link hands and walk the path home.

You squirm ticklishly at the warmth of my touch. “You’re such a child,” I laugh.

“Then I’ll become your mother!”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

My heart fills with nostalgia, but as the end draws near, the world blurs together.

“You became my father, so I’ll become your mother when I get older and pamper you all you want.”

In pursuit of the memory of those fleeting days, I think of you.

“I see. I’ll look forward to it, then.”

This was a nostalgic memory. A moment in time that represented the beginning of many things for me.

But I could no longer recall it.

…Who were you?

Like melting snow, something dear inside me faded away.

5

AFTER THEIR ENDING CAME, a new morning began.

Heikichi waited in Demon Soba for Nomari to wake up. On the table was a liquor cup he didn’t recognize. It was a Nabeshima ware with cherry blossom

petals drawn on it, something a bit too gorgeous for that alcoholic man's tastes. Heikichi flicked it with his finger, making it ring out and topple over. The only one who would drink from this cup would never come back, and that thought saddened him a bit.

It rained all day yesterday, but today was greeted with pristine, clear skies. Heikichi still felt overcast inside, though. Simply too much had happened in too little time.

"Oh, you're awake?" he said, hearing a sliding door open and turning around. He had been worried because Nomari had been out in the rain for so long, but she seemed just fine.

"Heikichi-san?" She briefly regarded him with confusion, thought for a bit, and then smiled. "Did you take care of me while I was sick? Thank you."

"Huh? Um…"

He asked for clarification on what she meant. With a nod, she explained that she'd been out with a cold for two days. She didn't have any family and the couple at Mihashiya were busy with work, so she assumed he had come to look after her.

"Sorry for the trouble," she said.

"I see. So that's the way things ended up."

"Hm?"

The girl saw nothing odd whatsoever about her situation. He didn't quite know what his expression should be, but he figured he would at least try to act cheerful so as not to make her worry.

"Oh, nothing. So, are you feeling better?"

She seemed to sense something off about him, likely because they'd known each other so long. She didn't mention it, however; that was a small kindness on her part. "Yeah. Good as new."

"Good, good."

The two of them both smiled awkwardly, knowing they were dancing around a topic.

He glanced away and saw something near her pillow. He hung his head and stiffly said, “Say, that ribbon…”

The ribbon she always wore was offhandedly tossed to the side. It had gotten dirty after being left unwashed following yesterday’s events.

“Oh, that thing? I was thinking it’s time I get it replaced,” she said. To her the ribbon wasn’t a gift from her father, but something she had no special memories of.

Wincing, Heikichi trepidatiously asked, “Ya sure? I thought it was somethin’ important to ya.”

“Not really. It’s just something I bought for myself a while back.”

Even with no memory of Jinya, she could explain away the presence of the ribbon. Her memory had been altered to erase everything connected with her father and fill in any inconsistencies left behind. Such was the power of the ability *Azumagiku*. Jinya had the ability for himself now and could use it to erase memories, but he couldn’t do finer things like alter or reconstruct them. The ability had deteriorated when it was passed to him, leaving him unable to undo Azumagiku’s actions. There would be no miracle where Nomari’s memories suddenly resurfaced—the name Kadono Jinya no longer held any significance whatsoever to her.

“…Actually, you know what? I think I’ll keep it.”

That’s why this was just a whim of hers and nothing more. Heikichi understood that, but went wide-eyed nonetheless.

“Wh-why?!”

“I’ve grown kind of fond of it. U-um, Heikichi-san? Aren’t you a little close?” She blushed as she made her reply.

Normally he would have bashfully drawn back, but not now. He drew his face

even closer, so close that their foreheads were almost touching. “Ya mean it? Ya really like that ribbon?”

“Y-yeah? I mean, I’ve been wearing it for so long. It’d feel kind of wrong to just get rid of it.”

Somegorou was dead, Nomari had forgotten her father, and Jinya was gone. In just the span of a few days, the lively Demon Soba that Heikichi had known since he was a child had disappeared. Though he never admitted it, this place was special to him. The thought of those fun-filled days being gone devastated him.

But something small remained. Nomari no longer recalled her father, but she chose to keep her ribbon anyway. To her, the decision likely meant nothing, but Heikichi was happy to see she was even the slightest bit attached to it, as if that alone was proof that Jinya and Somegorou had not lost to Magatsume.

“I… I see. I see…” He forced himself to smile, holding back the tears that were on the brink of falling.

Jinya would no longer return here. When he came back with Nomari in his arms, he’d smiled softly and told Heikichi he was leaving her in his care, then left without another word. Heikichi didn’t have it in him to stop Jinya. The man had lost his place in the world, and Heikichi hadn’t done a single thing to help. What could he even have said to stop him?

By all means, Jinya had the right to blame Heikichi for what happened. But he didn’t; instead, he still entrusted his daughter’s care to him. This time, then, Heikichi would be sure not to betray the man’s trust. He would protect the faint light that still glowed in Nomari. Utsugi Heikichi—as Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth—swore to live for that purpose.

“U-um, is everything all right?”

“Yeah. Say, Nomari-san?” He wrapped his hands around her slender fingers and hung his head as though in prayer.

“Huh?! H-Heikichi-san, are you sure you’re all right?” Nomari grew flustered. Being touched by someone like this, even someone she’d known since childhood, was embarrassing for her.

“I’m fine. Just…treasure that ribbon for me, will ya? Let something from those times stay…”

He strengthened his grip—it was still gentle, but just firm enough to hold her tightly. He wanted to become someone who could hold dear the things he loved, just like that man did.

“A-all right? Um, could you let go of my hands now?”

Finding her awkwardness funny, Heikichi wrinkled his face into a broad smile as he held back tears.

It was just the two of them in the restaurant now. He would need some more time to get used to the emptiness inside him, but he suspected things would turn out just fine.

He wished to become a man worthy of the Akitsu Somegorou name and Nomari, both of which were left to him by men he looked up to. He had used up all his tears as Utsugi Heikichi on Somegorou’s death, so he would not cry now. His eyes grew misty, but he stubbornly held back the tears and smiled.

Beyond his blurry vision was a clear blue sky as far as he could see. The blowing of a gentle breeze welcomed in a new day.

***

Sometime earlier, back on the night when everything came to an end, Jinya dropped Nomari off at Demon Soba, then returned to the ruined temple some distance off of Shijyou Street.

Violent droplets continued to pelt the earth, filling the temple with the scent of rain. On sheer intuition, he returned to the place where he devoured Azumagiku. He just had a feeling *she* would come if he waited here.

“Well done,” he murmured when he sensed a presence behind him. Despite

the dampness of the air, his words were dry. Listlessly, he turned around and saw a beautiful demon with streams of golden hair. “I’ve lost everything. You’re completely victorious.”

The surrounding sounds grew distant. He had no attention to spare on the din around him—his focus was solely on Suzune. In his heart was not the hatred that had become so natural to his body but something purer, an emotion reserved solely for those who robbed people of what they held precious.

Jinya once again thought back on his decisions and concluded he must have chosen wrong. He’d hesitated to take the path that ended in him killing Suzune out of hatred. He’d hoped to find a resolution that didn’t involve killing, in hopes he might one day find it in himself to forgive her.

Look where that got him.

If what happened with Shirayuki was a result of the choices they made, then his fate today was a result of his indecision. None of this would have happened if he had left Kadono firmly determined to kill Suzune.

“I wasn’t thinking of winning or losing anything.”

She was like the night sea—dark waters that looked calm but occasionally stirred. Peaceful on the surface but ready to swallow everything whole in an instant.

“I simply wanted to see what you would choose once Azumagiku fulfilled her purpose.”

Her voice was so clear as to be icy. He shivered as a chill slid down his spine.

“No, that’s not right. The truth is that I wanted to believe. I wanted to believe you would choose Azumagiku…choose our princess.”

That might’ve been the last true part of herself left in Suzune. She’d discarded a number of things, filling the resulting gaps with fake hearts. But there was one part of herself that she couldn’t discard: the happy days spent at Jinta’s side in her past. Though she was conflicted by it, her time in Kadono must have been

greatly fulfilling.

“I hate you, and you hate me. Such is the path we’ve chosen. We have no choice but to kill one another. But even so…”

Even if she was the first to do wrong, he, too, had done wrong by her. Each of them had destroyed what they wanted to hold dear.

“I thought you would at least still treasure the days we spent together.”

He wondered just what was going through her mind as she said those words. Only the sound of rain followed. After waiting a few moments, he addressed the thing he’d once called a sister. “Suzune…”

“No,” she quietly said. Her voice was flat, as if she were talking to herself. **“Magatsume is the name I’ve given you, and you’ve acknowledged it, so that is my name now. I will be the Demon God that brings calamity to the world, because that is the purpose I was born for.”**

“Right. I’d forgotten.”

With her words, his decision became firm. Perhaps it had only been a matter of time before things ended up this way.

“Magatsume…” he began. He went out of his way to use the name because he felt his determination would falter if he didn’t. The important choices in life always came suddenly. In this moment, Jinya decided she would be Magatsume, not Suzune.

“I’ve thrown away much of what I’ve treasured up until now, but it seems I didn’t have the resolve to discard enough.”

A sickening sound filled the air as he began to turn into a grotesque, asymmetrical demon. He drew Yarai from its sheath and lowered his hips, taking up a slightly forward-bent stance.

“The many things I’ve gained have made me who I am today. I do not regret the way I’ve spent my days, even if I’ve lost what I had. But there is one thing I am better off without.”

Even with hatred swelling inside him, he kept his heart in check and looked calmly at her. He moved his weight to his front foot and let all his muscles relax. He couldn't let himself get tense here. He needed to stay loose to move fluidly.

He sharpened his senses. Only one thought remained in his mind.

"I should have abandoned any hope I had of forgiving you from the start!"

He didn't need any emotions getting in his way. He had to focus only on slaying the demon in front of him. Like a spring, he darted forth.

What followed couldn't even be called a fight.

"Argh…"

Jinya sat with his back against the wall, barely managing to stay upright. He was covered in blood and wounds. It would be hard to find a part of him that *wasn't* injured. He had fought with everything he had, even assuming his demon form, but it hadn't been enough to even faze Magatsume.

He hadn't lost himself to rage or anything of the sort. He'd swallowed back his hatred and fought with full attention and care. His sword and fists even landed on her many times, tearing flesh and bone, but her wounds always healed in a matter of seconds. Since Jinya lacked the stamina to match her and had no means of making a meaningful attack, it was only a matter of time before the same insectile arm that killed Somegorou made quick work of him as well.

His friend had been killed, his family had been lost, his memories had been defiled, and the abilities he'd worked so hard to gain had amounted to nothing. It was in this moment that Magatsume's goal reached true fruition. Everything Jinya had believed in was gone.

"Damn…it…" he groaned. He could hardly speak at this point.

Magatsume looked overjoyed. **"I was saddened to see you choose the present over our past, but I am so happy now. Finally, you are looking my way. I'm the only thing left inside you. You hate me, don't you? You want to**

kill me? Then forget all else. The two of us only need each other."

Slowly, her lips curled into a mad smirk. He felt disgusted. Not a shadow of his younger sister's blithe smile could be seen in her. Belatedly, he understood that she had become a monster beyond any hope of understanding.

"Wait…"

"No. I'm done here. But don't worry, I'll be waiting for you in the far-off future."

A demon had once foretold they would meet again in Kadono 170 years later. He remembered, of course, and it seemed she did too. The two would fight to the death when the time came, and from there a calamity that would bring ruin to all of mankind would be born—the Demon God.

"Let's meet again in our old home. I'll wait for you as long as it takes."

Her ephemeral smile contrasted with the mood.

"I'm sure my wish will be granted then."

She turned away, before disappearing into the rainy night.

His consciousness was dim, but he at least understood that she had left him. There would be no chasing her. He couldn't even move a finger, much less stand up. It was a complete and utter defeat for him. He had been made a fool of by his mortal enemy, then spared out of pity.

"Damn…"

How pathetic. He felt a bloodcurdling rage at his weakness, but it didn't last long. He had lost too much blood and was beginning to drift off. Slowly, his eyelids drooped shut and his consciousness faded away.

Damn it…

Meiji Arc Final Chapter:
Lone Shizuka

"WHOA. What the hell?"

One morning, a young man paid a visit to the abandoned temple near Shijyou Street. The temple had been caught up in the wave of anti-Buddhist sentiment that swept the country earlier in the Meiji era, but the main building had managed to survive. Its chief priest had passed away long ago, however, so it had since been left unmaintained.

Somehow, the main building had been destroyed in the span of a single night, left riddled with holes. It had rained all day and night yesterday, but the young man found it difficult to believe that could possibly be enough to cause such devastation. With his mouth hanging open, he gawked at the ruined temple.

"Quit standing there and come inside already," the young man's mother urged.

The young man, who turned twenty-four that year, lived alone with his mother. His father, who had passed away a good while ago, used to be a direct retainer to the Tokugawa shogun and left behind a fair amount of assets, allowing them to get by well.

The young man's mother was lowborn. It was a rare thing in his parents' time for two people to marry out of love and not familial obligation. His mother loved to tell him stories over and over of how his father had obstinately tried to court her and such.

It was at his mother's request that he came to the temple. On her morning walk around the temple-shrine complex, she apparently found someone collapsed, leading her to call for him to help. His mother was a strong-willed woman. If she told him to do something, there was no arguing. He had the day off from work anyway, so he obliged and came along.

“Coming, Mom.”

“He’s over in the main building.”

He stepped into that building to find the floorboards and walls ruined. The place was a wreck. It was almost as if a wicked spirit had gone wild there.

He frowned warily, but his mother had requested his help, so he had no choice. He cautiously stepped further in, careful not to trip on the broken floorboards. In the darkness near the back, he found a man drenched in blood lying against the wall. Despite being covered in wounds, the man kept a firm grip on a sword in his right hand. It did not seem like he had been up to any good here.

“That’s a lot of blood. Think he’s dead?”

“Don’t say that; it’s bad luck,” his mother said sharply. “Look, he’s breathing just fine.”

“Oh, guess he is. I’m surprised you found him here, though. It’s a bit out of the way.”

“Enough chitchat. Hurry up and carry him already.”

“Yes, yes.” Reluctantly, he neared the man. He stopped just in front of him, though. Something was off. “…Hm?” He felt like he had seen this man before—not recently, but long ago in his past. “Oh well.” He could think about that later. For now, he picked the bloody man up and carried him home.

***

Now that he was all alone, Jinya’s consciousness swayed atop the dark surface of a lake. The sky above, devoid of moon and stars, seemed to swallow everything whole. On his mind were the same laments he’d had since bygone days.

Once again, he’d failed to protect everything dear to him.

He began his journey believing his hatred was everything, then found many other things along the way. He grew weaker each time he burdened himself

with something excessive, but the things dear to him grew in exchange. But in the end, he failed to carry out his will and was defeated. What, then, had his journey been for?

“Ngh…” A faint brightness stirred his consciousness. He shielded his eyes, then opened his eyelids with a foggy mind. “…Where am I?”

He found himself lying in an unfamiliar room, his mind still hazy. He tried to move, but his unhealed wounds ached. His muscles were stiff as well. He wouldn’t be getting up for the time being.

The tatami-matted room was kept tidy. The only furniture to speak of was a dresser and a desk, giving the place a modest impression. Based on the light seeping through the paper sliding door facing the veranda, he guessed it was around noon.

“Oh, you’re awake?”

He heard the unfamiliar voice of a man. The paper sliding door opened, and a slender man who looked to be in his early twenties came in. His hair was tidy with a part down the middle, giving him a stern look.

“The doctor said that your injuries weren’t as bad as they looked and you should be up and about in a few days. And here you had so much blood on you that I thought you were dead!” The stranger sat down next to the bed and met Jinya’s eyes. With a smile, he looked Jinya’s body over, then checked his complexion. “Looks like you’re doing fine. Do you remember what happened? We found you over in that abandoned temple.”

Jinya had been defeated without inflicting any meaningful damage on Magatsume. He had devoured many demons for their powers and polished his skill with the sword for many years, but it was all for nothing. He felt humiliation and hatred, regret and despair, all mixing into one jumble. His limbs felt heavy, and not because of his wounds. He didn’t have the will left to move.

“…Did you bring me here?” he asked.

“Yep. Well, only because my mother told me to. Go ahead and get some rest. I’ll go tell her you’ve woken up.”

The young man departed, leaving Jinya alone again. The room was far too silent, making unwanted thoughts rise to mind. He needed to assess his situation.

“Kaneomi?”

“I’m here.”

Yarai and Yatonomori Kaneomi were placed in the corner of the room. He couldn’t see their bare blades, but nothing seemed to be broken. He felt relieved.

“What happened?”

“The man from earlier brought you here like he said. A physician came to look at you, and you’ve been checked on occasionally ever since. I haven’t seen anything too suspicious. In my personal opinion, we can trust the people here for the time being.”

“I see.”

Judging by his earlier gait, Jinya didn’t think the young man was trained in any martial arts. His shoulders were narrow, and his hands were soft and unscarred. He was likely a stranger to combat. Considering he went out of his way to give Jinya medical treatment, he probably had no ulterior motives.

Jinya let his guard finally drop, breathing a soft sigh. “I feel tired.”

“Kadono-dono…”

He had slept more than enough, but his body had shed too much blood, and he had lost too much in general. Even supposing he could move, he lacked the will to do it. So he instead chose to try falling asleep again, but he heard footsteps approaching before he could.

“May I come in?” It was a woman’s voice this time. With his permission, she entered. She wore an indigo-colored kimono with an iris flower design and

looked to be in her forties. “I’m glad to see you’re awake.” Her cheekbones were visible from age, and she carried herself gracefully. She sat down by Jinya’s bed and stared intently at his face before breaking into a soft smile. “Do you still hurt anywhere?”

“Just a bit.”

“Then feel free to rest here for now. I’m sure you can manage to eat rice gruel, can’t you? I’ll bring some for you.”

She talked without pausing and then got ready to leave even though she’d only just entered the room. He found it strange that she didn’t have more things to ask him. He was a stranger to her, he’d been covered in blood, and he didn’t exactly seem like the reputable sort. She had every right to be wary of him and ask a few more pointed questions.

“No, that’s all right,” he said. “I couldn’t impose.”

“Nonsense. A young man like you needn’t act so reserved. I’ll be right back.” The woman acted as though it was only natural for her to help him. He wondered why that might be, but no answer came to mind, so he just stared blankly at her back as she left the room.

“Seems like you have an appetite. Good.”

After he finished eating the rice gruel she brought, he got a little sleepy. She left to put the dish and utensils away, and when she returned she found him on the verge of dozing off.

With a laugh she said, “Go ahead and sleep if you want. I’ll let you know when it’s dinnertime.”

Apparently, his staying was already a done deal. He couldn’t help but find her strange. Her eyes held no fear nor suspicion toward him—far from it, she seemed to deeply enjoy his presence. He was perplexed, unable to read what she was after.

“Why are you helping me?” he asked. She should have known just by looking that he was not a man on the straight and narrow.

Her expression didn’t shift in the slightest. Nonchalantly, she replied, “Does one person need a reason to help another?”

“Perhaps not to you. But *I* need a reason to accept your help. Swords are outlawed, and I was covered in blood. I find it hard to believe goodwill alone was enough for you to help me.”

“My, how stubborn.” She giggled and gave him a kind smile. She felt motherly, in the way a mother might gently admonish an overly willful child. “But I really don’t have any reason to give except that I acted out of goodwill. However, if you *really* need another reason, then I suppose it’d be that sword of yours.” She looked over at the two swords in the corner of the room, specifically Yarai. He didn’t understand what she meant to say. A bit playfully, she continued with “I think I might have known your father, you see.”

His heart began to pound, and his mind ground to a halt for a few moments. He was dumbfounded. His memories of both his biological father Jyuuzou and his foster father Motoharu left deep scars in him. His sense of wariness quickly returned.

“The previous owner of that blade was your father, I presume? Your hair is different, but I see a resemblance. You look just like him, really.”

Jinya’s wariness vanished again just as quickly. It looked like he had misunderstood. He kept his hair short and sanitary these days because he made soba noodles, but it had been long and tied back when he was in Edo. Being a demon, he hadn’t aged in the slightest since he was eighteen. This woman had probably met him at some point when he was younger and was now mistaking him for his own son.

“Oh dear, I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I?” The woman smiled with a nostalgic, distant look in her eyes. “I am Miura Kinu, an old acquaintance of your father’s. Your father used to call me ‘Streetwalker,’ of all things, if you can

believe it."

Jinya thought his heart would stop this time. The streetwalker he knew had helped him as an information broker, then later became the wife of a close friend. She was a nostalgic figure in his life, and someone he did not want to meet again if he could help it.

"I don't believe I've heard your name yet," she said as if she'd just thought of it.

Jinya's brow twitched. Giving his name would create a problem, but hesitating would draw suspicion. Without leaving too long a pause, he answered as naturally as he could. "…Jinta. Kadono Jinta is my name."

Jinta was the name he was once known by. Hence, it was not a lie.

"I see. So your father gave you half his name," she said. She smiled in just the way he remembered.

Jinya had never been able to grasp the woman known as Streetwalker. He did not hate her or anything of the sort. He didn't have any special feelings for her either, but he did at least trust her. If asked to explain what their bond was, however, he would be hard pressed for an answer.

Back in Edo, she would pass him information about demons. Perhaps that made him nothing more than a business partner or a customer to her. Then again, things weren't *that* dry between them. But they did not know each other well enough to be called friends, and there was nothing romantic at all between them either. He remained unable to categorize their bond as time passed by, and then before he knew it, she was suddenly the wife of his friend. He still remembered how flabbergasted he had been to hear the big news from the two.

"But yes, that's how it is, so don't worry about imposing or anything. Your father earned me quite a hefty sum long ago. Consider me helping you as repayment."

The folds on her face reminded him unwillingly of the passage of time, but a shadow of her old self was unmistakably there. He felt a bit ill at ease when she abruptly stood up and gave him a strong smile.

“Rest well, Jinta.”

The gracefulness of her figure as she left made his heart even more conflicted. If at all possible, he wished he could have avoided ever meeting her again. The feeling of killing her husband still lingered right there in his hands.

The morning of the second day came.

He awoke, but a hazy feeling persisted in him as if he were drifting between dream and reality. He felt dreadful.

He could now move his body to some extent, so he went to the garden. He hoped some fresh outside air would ease his discomfort, but it ultimately did nothing to clear away his gloom.

Nomari and the streetwalker came to mind. One was lost to him, and he had taken something from the other. Feeling tortured by regret, he gazed off blankly at the rabbit-ear iris planted in the garden.

The dark purple flower was said to look like a swallow taking flight, so it was also known by the alternate name “swallow flower.” Ofuu had taught him that a long time ago. He had lost everything save for some worthless tidbits of knowledge. How pathetic.

He was turning to return to his room when he happened to meet the eyes of the young man.

“Oh, you’re already well enough to get up?” He was dressed in western attire, presumably having finished breakfast and now leaving for work.

“Tadanobu-dono…” Jinya felt a bit uncomfortable around the young man, given what he had done to his father Naotsugu. It did not help that his last memory of Tadanobu was as a small boy still in early private schooling. The

thought of Tadanobu now being a grown working man was jarring.

“I gotta say, I can really see the resemblance between you and your father,” Tadanobu said.

Jinya had decided he would pass as his own son during his stay. He was hesitant to reveal the truth, as well as the fact that he killed Naotsugu.

Next Tadanobu said, “I actually knew him a bit myself, although it’s been more than fifteen years by now.” He nodded to himself with a nostalgic look in his eyes. Though he’d only been a child back then, he still remembered those days. “Oh, by the way, is your older sister Nomari-chan doing well?”

“She is.”

“That’s good to hear. Wow, that brings back memories. She must’ve grown up to be beautiful, huh? Oh, sorry. Let me get out of your hair so you can rest. Take care.” Cheerfully, he left for work.

Jinya recalled that Tadanobu had been fond of Nomari as a child. Perhaps there might’ve been a world where he was the one by her side instead of Heikichi.

The morning of the third day came.

Sitting up in bed, Jinya finished his rice gruel. His health wasn’t great, and the color hadn’t returned to his face. The streetwalker put a hand to his forehead and said, “You’re not looking all that well.”

He had no fever, and he wasn’t bleeding anywhere. His recovery progress wasn’t terrible by any means. But the idleness allowed unwanted thoughts to come to mind against his will. He thought of how he killed his father Jyuuzou, and how the owner of Kihee had tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to change his way of life. Jinya had stubbornly stuck to what he knew, fully aware of how wrong his chosen path was, and he lost both Nomari and Somegorou in the end.

Naotsugu had been the same. Unable to keep up with the changing times, he chose to be killed instead. Jinya did not think his decision to kill his friend had been wrong. But then…why did he feel so awful?

“I’m sorry,” he said guiltily.

“Nonsense. Being ill is nothing to apologize for.”

He knew how gloomy he had to look. His eyes probably looked soulless like those of a dead fish. Perhaps that was why the streetwalker treated him so kindly. He felt a bit awkward, not used to such a different reception from her.

“Do you live here alone with your son?” he asked.

“I do. We lived somewhere else before, but that place became a bit too much for just two people.” Despite her age, she appeared to be in good health. She didn’t seem to have fallen into poverty after Naotsugu passed. “My late husband was a samurai in the government’s employ.” She smiled wryly, perhaps noticing Jinya’s gaze. “He fought in battle and survived. That’s why the three of us managed to get by quite well. But men can be such foolish creatures, and my husband was stubborn like a mule. Honestly, that man…” Despite her words, the look on her face was peaceful, as if she were humming a lullaby. She conveyed no loneliness or sadness. “The new Meiji era was suffocating to a man like him. His swords were taken by the Sword Abolishment Edict, and the way of life he had known was taken from him as well. That was why he left us, saying he wanted to live as a samurai until his end.”

Jinya knew what came after. His friend wanted to live by the sword down to his final drop of blood, so he challenged Jinya to a duel and died satisfied. Jinya sincerely believed he had given his friend the death he wished for, but the pain remained nonetheless.

“You didn’t try to stop him?” he asked.

“Who would I have been to stop his will?” She made no move to joke or avoid the question. Perhaps it was because she married the frank and honest Naotsugu, or maybe it was because she had become a mother, but the woman

before Jinya now had a different allure from the Streetwalker he knew. “Others might only look at him as someone who abandoned his wife and child, but not I. I see him as a man who was able to choose the way he died. That is why I feel pride, for I am the wife of a samurai.”

Jinya saw a strong lifeforce in her. She was like the flowers of wild ginger. One had to part grass to see them because they only grew at the foot of trees, but they gave winter a much-needed gentle color. They withstood the cold and bloomed out of sight, a display of modesty and strength.

“But of course, part of me thinks he might still be here today if I’d chosen to live as just an ordinary woman instead.”

However, she showed a faint gloom as she looked away. This face, one full of sadness, was the face of the Streetwalker Jinya had known.

The night of the fourth day came.

Jinya slipped out of his room and sat alone on the veranda just outside. Stars of silver hung in the sky, and right there among them was an amber moon that gave the garden its glow.

He recalled something he had once heard from Somegorou. In the Qing dynasty (later China), they told the story of Chang’e, a goddess who lived on the moon. Jinya found it easy to imagine how such a story came to be as he admired the moon’s ethereal beauty and likened it to the graceful beauty of a goddess. If the mere radiance of the moon could reach the hearts of mankind so much, then the goddess of the moon must have been ever more peerless in beauty.

Jinya stared at the moon and entertained that insipid, meaningless thought. He had already completely recovered from his wounds, since his healing capabilities were incomparable to a human’s. His goal from here should have been clear: chase Magatsume and kill her. There was no doubt in his mind about what needed to be done.

…And yet, he remained in this place.

On his fourth day here, he did nothing but stay in bed. He did not even touch his swords, much less train. He knew it was wrong of him, but he allowed the day to pass him by idly. Before he knew it, night had fallen.

“Just what the hell am I doing…” he murmured, but there was no one to answer him. He realized then just how alone he was, and just how much company he had always had up until then. Not that realizing such a thing now meant anything.

He looked up at the moon resting beyond a crystal-clear sky and thought it looked cold all of a sudden. Time passed him by until he heard a creak from the floorboards.

“Doing some moon-watching?”

“Kinu-dono…”

“How about a drink while you look at the moon?” She held a tray with a liquor bottle and a pair of cups. She sat down next to him without waiting for a reply, forced a cup into his hands, and poured for him. With a teasing grin, she said, “I’ll bet you’re fond of liquor.”

Autumn—the peak season for drinking under the moon—was still far off, but tonight’s moon was still a good one to drink to. He nodded thankfully, then drank his cup down. A warmth glided down his throat that should certainly have felt pleasant, yet he couldn’t help but find it dull.

“…You’re not going to ask?” he murmured after drinking in silence for a while. She had clearly come over out of concern for him. The liquor was just a convenient excuse.

“I was thinking I’d wait for you to open up first.”

“I see…” he replied. He made no attempt to say anything further, though.

She grinned wryly, not out of mockery but with the gentleness of someone rebuking a child. “So that’s how it’s going to be, huh? Then how about hearing

me brag about my love life instead?" She drank down her cup and boastfully said, "I used to be a streetwalker, a common whore. I survived in Edo by selling my body to whatever man would pay me. It was around that time when I met Arimori-sama, my husband."

Miura Naotsugu Arimori had apparently been an utter dunce when it came to understanding the heart of a woman. He would take her to visit his favorite sword dealer for a date, gift her flowers and tell her facts about them that he'd clearly learned secondhand, and many other exasperating things. But he was manly when it mattered most and had even knelt on the ground to convince his mother to let him marry her. When people asked why he was willing to go so far, he replied that she simply meant that much to him. Others may have found him foolish, but he was a man she could be proud of.

"His mother relented and approved of our match, and we were wed. We had a child and lived a happy life together."

But it didn't last long. The shogunate government entered a decline with the arrival of foreign influences, and the weak suffered from the changing times. As a samurai, Naotsugu couldn't let things remain the way they were. He was determined to fight for a new world, and the streetwalker chose to come along with him to Kyoto and support him as his wife.

"Of course, I wanted to stay with him. But even more than that, I wanted to be there for him to get rid of his doubts. I'm a fairly headstrong woman, you see. I couldn't possibly sit tight and wait for him in Edo like a good, modest wife might."

After that, Naotsugu took part in the Boshin War and was turned into a demon by Magatsume. In search of a purpose to give his sword, he became a killer, ultimately challenging Jinya to a duel and losing his life.

"I heard it all. About how he had become a demon and how he was going to challenge your father. He said his blade was hollow, but it could become full again through fighting him… Truly, what a fool he was. He helped bring about a

new world in which we could be a family without any trouble, and yet he called it all worthless."

Even so, she did not try to stop him. She knew she was saying farewell to him for life, but she didn't dare deny his wish, nor the way of life he stubbornly clung to.

"Just so you know, I don't begrudge your father for anything. He used to say the same awkward things that my husband did, so I'm sure he managed to take his wish to heart and fulfill it. Even if he did kill my husband, I'd have nothing but gratitude for him."

After saying those words, she filled Jinya's empty cup. The sight of the elderly woman bathed in moonlight seemed to harbor gloom. Picking up on this, he asked, "Do you regret the choice you made?"

She drank her own cup down, then gave him a melancholy smile that evoked the image of flowers withered by winter. "Of course. I don't think I chose wrong, but I do feel regret. Sometimes I even wonder how life might be different now if I had made another choice."

He understood what she meant so well that it hurt. He had no doubts about the path he had trod, nor the one that lay ahead of him. Why, then, did he ache so much?

He cast his gaze down, as if trying to avoid looking at something. She reached out and touched his cheek, tracing a finger down to his chin.

"It's normal to feel regret even when you've made the right choices. That's what it means to be human. We are not so strong."

Her touch made him lift his face. He looked at her troubled, shy smile.

"I've cried my fair share of times. Just ask Tadanobu; he'll tell you all about what a crybaby I am. I'm always regretting the choices I made, and I'm sure you are too. Am I wrong?"

He didn't answer, too surprised to say a word.

As though seeing right through him, she said, “I don’t know what’s happened, but I can tell you’re tired.”

Come to think of it, she’d always been quick to pick up on people’s subtler inner workings thanks to her time as a streetwalker. She was one of the very few people who could read Jinya’s heart despite his usual lack of expression. He’d never been able to hide anything from her.

“I lost to someone I absolutely had to defeat,” he said, baring his heart. He saw no point in hiding anything any longer. “Over many years, I’ve gained things dear to me. I found purpose even in the misguided way of life I led, things that proved my hatred wasn’t everything. The many people I’ve met have shown me there is strength to be had in things other than power.”

Even though his journey began for the wrong reasons, he had found valuable things along the way. Even though they were all excesses that clouded his true purpose, he could proudly say they made him who he was.

“But I failed to prove any of it had meaning. I was too weak. The choices I made were wrong. Like you say, I regret my decisions. And now I feel paralyzed.”

He couldn’t take that first step forward because his heart was afraid. He’d lost too much to hold hope for the future. He feared what might possibly await him at the end of a journey that had already brought him so much tragedy.

“Goodness, you men really are all such fools. No, I suppose it’s just you who’s a fool here.” She frowned thoughtfully, then sighed.

He was no longer bewildered by how much she’d changed. He nodded solemnly, accepting the vast time that had passed them by. “Indeed,” he said. “I am a fool. And it’s because I’m a fool that I’ve lost everything.”

“That’s not what I mean. Good grief, you don’t need to be *that* much like your father.” She shook her head. “You poor thing. Nobody’s ever told you, have they?”

“…Kinu-dono?”

Her voice lacked both the sternness of a lecture and the sincerity of consolation. She sounded almost indifferent, as if she were only tossing the words out there. “When you feel hurt, you should just say so.”

He froze upon hearing those clumsy words of comfort. They were too commonplace to mean much, and yet he felt moved, perhaps because he saw deep kindness in her eyes.

As he died, Motoharu had told Jinya to become a man who could cherish his hatred. The owner of Kihee had told him he would be able to look back fondly even on sad memories one day. But the streetwalker was the first to tell him it was okay to just admit things were hard.

“You may be strong, but there’s no need to *always* be that way. Why should you? Nobody will think badly of you if you want to cry and whine from time to time.”

His head went blank. “A-ah…”

“You’re really something, huh? Maybe you’ve shed tears before, but I doubt you’ve ever actually opened up about your problems. It’s no wonder you feel paralyzed. Well, it’s just me and the moon here. Go ahead and be as unsightly as you like.”

He cried like a child, messy tears streaming down his face. He hadn’t been this much of a wreck since Shirayuki died. He’d been unable to show weakness for many reasons up until now: he was a shrine maiden guardian; he was a father; he wanted to stubbornly insist he was strong. This was the first time he had ever let himself bare his unbecoming feelings.

“I-I couldn’t protect the things that were dear to me.” His words gushed forth like a dam breaking.

Without making a face, she heard him out. “I see. And?”

“I’ve had to kill people dear to me because I’m so weak, a-and yet I couldn’t

kill the *one* thing I needed to."

"I see."

"I couldn't accomplish a single thing."

"You've had it tough."

"I've lost everything. All of it. Everyone dear to me!"

He didn't need to put on airs and talk about pretentious things like regrets and choices. He just needed to be sad. He'd denied himself such a basic human emotion for far too long. He'd been strong enough to endure this far, but there was only so much one could bottle up.

He recalled he had said something like that to Tsuchiura, the demon that had *Indomitable*. How silly. Jinya could lecture others, but he couldn't listen to his own advice. It truly was okay to be weak.

"If you try to carry everything, then the weight won't let you move. Let go of some of your worries here, so you can walk again tomorrow."

A soft breeze blew through, and the garden remained bathed in moonlight. Even nature itself felt gentle. Perhaps the goddess of the moon was in a kind mood tonight.

"A-ahh…"

"There, there." The streetwalker patted his head soothingly. Her hand was thin and bony, being the hand of a mother who had experienced much suffering herself.

Jinya continued to cry for a while under the amber moon.

No longer did the nightmares come.

The fifth day arrived.

To replace his ruined kimono robe, the streetwalker prepared him a new one of the same design. He slid his arms through the sleeves, finally wearing

something other than sleepwear for the first time in a good while. He stretched his body and flexed his muscles, which had grown stiff. It would take quite a few days to make up for the exercise he'd missed. He affixed his swords and nodded, satisfied to feel their familiar weight once more. Things felt right again.

"Did you have a good rest, my husband?"

"Don't tease me. And, yes, I'm fine now." He had the energy to banter with Kaneomi again.

He had frozen in his tracks for quite a few days, but that was fine. He still had his sights set on what had to be done. Though he'd lost much and was full of regrets, he could still make out the path ahead of him.

"Somebody seems awfully chipper." The streetwalker came in and gave him a teasing look.

He turned to face her directly and bowed. "Thank you for last night, Kinu-dono."

"I don't recall doing anything worthy of gratitude."

"But you did. You taught me a valuable lesson. I understand now that crying isn't such a bad thing. My heart feels lighter."

"Oh, please. That's something even children know." She smiled softly, not bringing up his embarrassing display from yesterday. He truly appreciated her kindness. He felt ready to move forward again.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay here. I think it's time for me to be off, though."

"Is that so? I'm a little sad to see you go, but I suppose you couldn't stay forever, could you?"

He considered revealing his true name before he left but chose not to. She had chosen to help him as a near stranger, and that selfless gesture was something he didn't want to ruin.

When he offered to pay for their aid, she said there was no need. He tried

insisting a couple more times, but he eventually relented and made one final bow. “Farewell then, Kinu-dono. It was nice to meet you. Thank you for all your help.”

“Yes, yes. So formal, aren’t you? Oh, and I take back what I said about you looking just like your father. You look far manlier than he ever did.” She gave him a hard slap on the back and made an awfully macho-looking smile herself. “Your father was too stubborn for his own good. A real man knows how to be honest with his own feelings.”

He was happy to receive her compliment, even if his “father” was indirectly being made fun of at the same time. Her words made him feel like he had succeeded in growing a little from the way he used to be.

“Take care. Feel free to come by again if you feel like crying. I have a feeling you’ll be all right on your own, though.”

“Will do. Thank you for everything.”

After shedding plenty of tears and getting a push from behind, Jinya was stepping forward again. Now that it was all past him, what had stalled him in the first place felt terribly trivial.

He hadn’t grown stronger. If anything, he had gotten weaker, having become able to cry in front of another person. His newfound vulnerability might not have meant much next to all the things he had lost, but it was far from meaningless. Similarly, the memories of what he’d lost meant something to him as well. Those happy days had become a light that continued to glow inside him.

For now, he was simply thankful for this chance encounter he’d been granted and for that night under an amber moon.

“So, where to, then?”

“No idea. But I’m sure I’ll figure it out as I go.”

“Ha ha. I have no doubt you will.”

With even his voice now brighter, Jinya drifted once more.

A lone shizuka swayed in the wind.

The time had come to bid farewell to Kyoto.

...ON THAT NIGHT underneath an amber moon, that man had said he'd made the wrong choices. Kinu was certain that wasn't the case. Surely things must have just gone a little astray somewhere.

She did not know what choices he had made over his journey, but if there was one point where she was sure he went astray, it would be his wish to be strong. He had lived his life trying desperately to become strong enough to carry out his will, all because nobody taught him something everyone else learned as a child.

When you felt hurt, you should just say so. It was something obvious to most people, but nobody except Kinu had ever been able to tell him such a simple thing. Sometimes, being too close to another person made it hard to offer such comforts. The duty fell to Kinu precisely because their bond was so ambiguous. They were not family or close friends, and there was never any romantic passion between them. But that was precisely what let her be irresponsible enough to tell him to be vulnerable.

He was an inflexible and foolish man, but he ultimately managed to regain hope. Perhaps their undefined bond had meant something, then.

High spirits made progress effortless. Her brush flowed across the paper without pausing.

"Mom, where's Jinta-san?"

"He made a complete recovery, so he left earlier today."

"Really? Darn, I wanted to talk to him about his father and whatnot." Tadanobu, who had come home from work, sank his shoulders in disappointment. "Did he say where he lives now?"

“Come to think of it, he didn’t. I got the impression he was leaving Kyoto, though.”

Tadanobu had had feelings for Nomari since he was a child. He’d thought he might take the chance to get to know her again, but it seemed things wouldn’t be so simple. He pouted a bit, raising his lip. “Say, what’re you writing there anyway?”

“My memoirs. I’ve lived quite the eventful life.” Her past was rather colorful, but writing it all down was surprisingly enjoyable, nonetheless.

“Is that so?” he said, intrigued.

“It’s unfinished, but you can have a read if you’d like.”

Tadanobu picked up the papers and grimaced. The contents mainly centered around Naotsugu and Kinu’s love life. There were some exaggerations, but most of what she’d written was factual.

However, the depiction of Naotsugu’s close friend, Jinya the ronin, was dreadful. He was halfway decent with the sword but perpetually impoverished, relying on Naotsugu buying him soba to scrape by. In fact, he visited the soba restaurant Kihee solely out of hope that Naotsugu would be there to buy him food. Even in what should have been his limelight scene, where Kinu was being attacked by a spirit, he was a moment too late to save her and had his thunder stolen by Naotsugu instead. He had a daughter and turned into your stereotypical overly doting parent, running this way and that for her. The list went on. All the depictions of him in her memoirs painted him as some comical character.

“Hey, don’t you think your depiction of Jinya-san is a bit much?”

It need hardly be said that the real Jinya was nothing like that. While he had been a ronin, Naotsugu had also trusted him more than anyone else. He was a master with the blade known to slay demons with a single stroke, and he was leagues above Naotsugu when they sparred in the garden. Tadanobu had idolized the man when he was younger, so he was a bit put off by the depiction.

“Not at all.” Kinu cackled. She had expected her son to react like that. “This way is better. It’ll be funnier when he reads it.”

“I kind of doubt he will ever have the chance.”

“Nonsense. I already managed to meet somebody I was sure I’d never see again. Anything is possible.” She took the memoirs back from her son and resumed writing. After reaching a good stopping point, she put her brush down and smiled. “It may take ten years, twenty, or many more, but I’m sure my memoirs will find their way to him through some coincidence or other. And when he reads them, he’ll say, ‘Your memoirs aren’t half-bad… I’m not too sure I like how useless you made me look, though.’”

It was fun to tease the overly serious Jinya. She let a laugh slip out, easily envisioning him saying such a thing with a surly look on his face.

“Reminiscing doesn’t always have to be emotional or nostalgic. It’ll be good if he can look back on the past and grumble about how much grief I’ve given him. That way he can reminisce with a smile instead of tears. Heh. It’ll be all the better if he has someone with him to hear him grumble as well.”

Life was full of choices. Kinu herself had had many choices forced upon her. Her decisions led to her family being ruined, her winding up as a street prostitute, and her husband dying, but she lived by the choices she made. After all, one could not know what the right choice was—supposing there were any right ones at all—and there wasn’t a soul alive who lived life perfectly.

What really mattered wasn’t the choices a person made but the way they lived their life. One’s choices might bring hardship, but by overcoming that hardship they would eventually find someone at the end of their journey who would affirm that they hadn’t been wrong. At least, Kinu wished someone like that would one day come for Jinya.

“Don’t you worry, Ronin.”

She prayed: May these memoirs, *Streetwalker in the Rain*, find their way to him, and may he have someone by his side to laugh at his foolishness then.

She would never learn the outcome of her wish, but she continued to write anyway. She felt no special emotions toward him; she just wanted to believe that all his efforts would be rewarded one day.

“There is meaning in your existence, and it is written down right here.”

Her murmur was soft, as if it were ready to be carried away by the winds. The people of the present could not see into the far-off future. Whether her memoirs would truly reach him was something only he would ever discover. Hopefully envisioning the distant day her prank would reach him, she made the same old smile of the streetwalker.

To be continued in Sword of the Demon Hunter: Kijin Gentōshō—The Taisho Arc

Intermission:
Privileges of the Inexperienced

LIFE IS BUT PARTINGS.

That was a line from *Your Drink*, a poem written by the poet Yu Wuling. Heikichi learned it during his artifact spirit lessons from Akitsu Somegorou the Third, but the poem didn't make much of an impression on him then, likely because he didn't drink liquor himself. He was still inexperienced compared to his master, but the fact that the poem now struck a chord with him felt like proof that he wasn't as green as he used to be.

Two years had passed since all of the tragedy, and Utsugi Heikichi's life was calm again. Spirits continued to crop up around Kyoto as they always did, but rumors of Magatsume vanished into thin air. He didn't think for a second that she would continue lying low, but her success had seemingly been enough to tide her over for the time being.

After his master's passing, Heikichi struck out on his own as a hairpin craftsman. He specialized in wooden hairpins with cherry blossom motifs, among others, but would make combs and netsuke sculptures if he felt like it. It was perhaps more apt to describe him as a wood craftsman who specialized in trinkets women used. Not many craftsmen worked so broadly, but then again, he was the disciple of *the* Akitsu Somegorou the Third. His master had been a virtuoso in not just woodcraft but metalcraft as well, so it was easy for others to accept that Heikichi was versatile too.

The products of Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth were high in quality, sought after by many women. However, Heikichi himself placed more weight on the demon hunter side of Akitsu and saw his hairpin craftsman identity as nothing more than a cover.

"Breakfast is ready, dear."

“Oh, thank you, Nomari.”

A number of things had changed over the years, but one of the bigger ones was his relationship with Nomari. The two got married not long after the incident. After some remodeling, they made Akitsu Somegorou the Third’s former home into their own. Marriage was generally a matter handled by family, but since the two were both without parents, they married of their own volition instead. They were known around the neighborhood as a harmonious couple.

“More customers are asking for your cherry blossom hairpins, huh?”

“Only because they misunderstand why I made them,” he sighed. “I was just being stubborn, as a man.”

His intricately detailed cherry blossom hairpins were some of his proudest work. They sold well because of their quality, but it also helped that they had a good story to go with them.

Heikichi had originally made the cherry blossom hairpin as a gift for Nomari. Word got around that the craft was filled with a husband’s love. Deeply touched, many women requested the same item. In truth, however, the hairpin was just something he made because he wanted to outdo the man who had bought her the pink ribbon she always wore—not that he could explain all that.

“Even some well-to-do ladies have taken an interest in them. Apparently the hairpin is seen as proof the two of us are as close as two petals on the same flower.”

“As an artifact spirit user, I wish they’d say we get along like two zithers, personally.” He was happy he and Nomari looked so close in the eyes of others, but he would rather be likened to instruments than flowers.

She smiled at the sight of him fussing over such a petty thing.

He said, “Oh yeah, you mentioned you’re headin’ over to the Aragi Inari Shrine later today?”

“I am. They got their hands on some peaches they wanted to share. Why don’t you come along as well?”

“Might as well. Been a while since I’ve popped over to say hello.”

The two still kept in touch with the elderly couple who ran the shrine. They had invited the younger couple over, mentioning they’d been given some peaches they were keen to share.

“How about going window-shopping around town afterward?”

“Ooh, that sounds nice.” The thought of walking around town with Nomari was even more enticing than the lure of pricey fruits. Heikichi was absolutely smitten with his wife, far more than the rumors about his cherry blossom hairpins let on.

“Thanks for droppin’ by, you two. How can I help ya today?” Mihashi Toyoshige cheerfully welcomed the couple as they stopped by Mihashiya to pick up some sweets as a gift.

Toyoshige had known Heikichi for a good number of years now and never once treated him coldly. The man even thanked him for marrying Nomari. Toyoshige and his wife doted on her just that much.

“We were hoping to buy some manju,” Nomari answered. “We’re visiting an acquaintance, so we figured we ought to bring a small gift.”

“Gotcha. Wait here; I’ll bring ya some free of charge.”

“Won’t Saku-san have something to say about that?”

“It’s fine. I’m sure she’d find somethin’ else to nag me about anyway!”

He was so friendly with Nomari because he and his wife were practically her foster parents. Nomari used to be an abandoned child. She’d once lived with an acquaintance somewhere else but moved to Kyoto around the start of the Meiji era. Since she was still only a child then, the couple at Mihashiya often looked after her. Toyoshige sympathized with Nomari and provided her with whatever

she needed, and Saku doted on her as if she were her own child. The couple's infatuation with the girl could be seen in the naming of their most popular sweet—Nomari red bean bread, which was red bean paste filling wrapped in castella dough. Toyoshige had been the one who named the item.

After growing older, Nomari worked at a soba restaurant to make a living, but the owner of the restaurant got old and retired, so she lost both her job and her home. That was when the couple kindly invited her to come live with them at Mihashiya. Later, Utsugi Heikichi worked up the courage to act on his childhood crush and married Nomari. After a life of hardship, she had found happiness.

At least, that was the reality to everyone but Heikichi. No matter who he talked to, everyone else recounted that same story word for word. Azumagiku's ability was flawless.

Jinya never did return. He was forgotten by friends and acquaintances in addition to Nomari, so even if he did try to insist he was her father, there wouldn't be many people who would believe him. Heikichi found it a little strange that not even Jinya's many customers could recall him, but he had a few working theories there to explain that away.

Perhaps he had misjudged the strength of Azumagiku's ability; it could well have affected an expansive area from the start. Magatsume might also have strengthened it somehow. There was also the fact that Azumagiku touched many people while she was acting as the Shrine Maiden of Healing, so she might have preemptively prepared their memories to be erased.

Regardless, at the end of the day, Heikichi had been dancing in the palm of her hand. He didn't feel lied to or angry, but he did think himself pathetic for being so clueless.

"Dear?"

"Oh, sorry. Shall we go?"

With manju in hand, the two left Mihashiya behind.

Come to think of it, he hadn't bought Nomari red bean bread recently. It was probably because he couldn't help but recall a certain doting father when he saw it. It seemed it would take a little while longer before he could eat it without misgivings again.

The Aragi Inari Shrine was a special place to Heikichi. Back when the previous Akitsu Somegorou was alive, they had gotten everyone together to see the festival every year. He had happy memories of living it up with his master here. Nomari was fond of the place as well, and the two occasionally came to visit even after getting married.

The chief priest had told him that a relic known as the Fox's Mirror was enshrined here. Apparently, it had once been capable of allowing people to cross through time, but it had since lost its powers and was now an ordinary metal mirror. Heikichi didn't have any particular hope of ever using the relic, but it was still a letdown to hear it was now powerless.

"Oh, Utsugi-san. Thank ya for comin' all this way." Welcoming them when they entered the shrine grounds was the chief priest, Kunieda Koudai. Heikichi had known him for a while now, which made the man's aging feel all the more apparent.

"Welcome." Chiyo, Koudai's wife, greeted the two as well with a refined smile.

Koudai was a mild-mannered man, and Chiyo was a modest woman who supported her husband well. Heikichi secretly admired the two and the loving bond they'd continued to foster for so many years.

"I'm glad to find you both in good health," Nomari said. "Here, this is for you two."

"Oh, is this from Mihashiya? Well, thank you kindly."

Despite their difference in age, the two wives got along swimmingly. They

launched into a lively conversation after Nomari gave Chiyo the manju. Suddenly sidelined, Heikichi and Koudai shared a look and a wry smile.

"How've ya been gettin' along these days, Heikichi-san?"

"Eh, not too shabbily, I suppose."

"I heard the rumors. Apparently that cherry blossom hairpin you made for your darlin' wife is sellin' well."

"Oh, jeez…" Heikichi felt embarrassed. To think the rumors had even reached them!

Koudai smiled, kindly changing the topic. "Oh, don't let this old man keep you long. Seein' as you've come together, I'm sure you two have plans after this?"

"Ha ha, nothing grand. Just got some window-shoppin' lined up."

"In that case, let me fetch those peaches for ya right now."

The women finished their conversation just as Koudai began heading to the back of the shrine. Nomari noticed and said, "Might I come as well? To help carry the peaches, that is."

"Of course, of course. We have other things besides peaches yer welcome to take with ya too," Koudai replied.

Nomari looked a little flustered, feeling guilty that her offer to help had been flipped into a bigger imposition on the couple.

"Would you like to come inside as well, Heikichi-san?" Chiyo asked.

"Er, no, thank you. I'll just wait outside." He politely declined with a wry smile, sensing they would only be given more gifts if he joined them.

While the three of them went inside, Heikichi returned to the stone steps of the shrine and sat down.

Not a single cloud lined the sky. It was perfect weather for a stroll, and the early summer breeze was pleasant as well. He sighed and looked around. The quiet shrine would turn busy on festival day. He planned to enjoy the festival

with his wife this year as well.

Heikichi enjoyed his current life. He had married Nomari, inherited the Akitsu Somegorou name, and gained some recognition as a craftsman. He was even known as a capable demon hunter by folks in the business. Life was smooth sailing. But there were moments like these where he stopped to take a breather alone and felt sad. His heart knew happiness, and yet he felt like he had been left behind.

“Heikichi-san?” After he sat idly for some time, Chiyo came by, smiling gracefully at him. He hadn’t even noticed her approaching.

“Oh, finished already?”

“Not quite. I came back ahead of the other two. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to wait a bit for your wife.” She smiled slightly. The fact that she could tease him over how much he loved his wife proved that the couples were on quite friendly terms.

Heikichi got teased often even as an adult, but he didn’t particularly mind. The two chatted happily for some time until Chiyo grew pensive and quiet. He was wondering what she might say when she finally spoke again in a tone of casual small talk. “You seem tired. Is something troubling you?”

He stiffened for a moment but quickly smiled and replied, “Of course. Everyone has a worry or two. Those western metal ornaments are the trend right now. I’m not so sure how much further just making hairpins will get me.”

Handmade crafts were beginning to lose their allure in the Meiji era. Heikichi wanted to take woodcraft as far as he could, but it seemed like the art would fade away in favor of the flashier items of the foreign world. He didn’t know what he would do yet, but he might well have to wash his hands of his current trade and ride some newer trend eventually.

Chiyo didn’t say a word. She could tell he was being honest, but she also knew he wasn’t telling the complete truth.

Defeated, he scratched his head and looked up at the sky.

"…Say, if I asked ya to make me some isobe mochi, what would you think?" His voice faltered because the question came from a place close to the truth he was hiding.

She pretended not to notice and answered with a sad smile on her face. "I wouldn't mind, but I wouldn't be able to make it right away."

"Figures. It's not like you'd have some ready to go all the time. Not since what happened two years ago."

He had expected such an answer. Jinya simply did not exist to these people. Not to Nomari, not to the Mihashi couple, not to Kunieda Koudai, and not to Chiyo, who came from the same village as Jinya. Being reminded of that fact filled Heikichi with a sense of emptiness despite the happy life he now lived. He did not lament his new life, though. To do so would be to deny all he had been entrusted with. He had long since accepted the fact that everyone had forgotten Jinya. He was feeling melancholy for the opposite reason.

"I can't help but wonder sometimes. Why am I the only one who remembers?"

On that night two years ago, Heikichi had fought off the underling of Magatsume that attacked Demon Soba, but Nomari still lost her memories. It made sense to think, then, that Azumagiku had appeared and wiped away some of his memories on that night as well. So why did he still remember Jinya despite that?

It wasn't like her ability could only work on somebody once, and she'd had plenty of other opportunities to erase his memories. She must have deliberately chosen to have him keep his memories of Jinya, but Heikichi had been wondering for the past two years why she did it.

"I don't really understand, but are you remembering something that's painful?" Chiyo asked.

“No, it’s not like that. I’m sorry, I’m just grumbling about nothing.”

It wasn’t like anything could be done about it at this point. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder. Azumagiku was a daughter of Magatsume, a discarded piece of a powerful demon’s heart. She had no choice but to follow the will of her originator. Magatsume’s scheme was to deprive Jinya of the place he belonged, and she succeeded. The only exception was Heikichi’s memory.

A new thought came to Heikichi then. Perhaps Azumagiku had resisted Magatsume’s will as best as she could. Maybe her chats with Heikichi had been just as dear to her as they had been to him.

Of course, the only one who knew the truth was gone from this world. There was no real answer to be had here. Heikichi was sure the gloom in his heart would linger, but he wanted to at least believe that the time he spent with Azumagiku wasn’t completely worthless.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you with all that.” He straightened up and forced the topic to an end. A heartfelt smile inadvertently rose to his face.

“Not at all. I hope we could at least be of some help.”

“Uh, ‘we’? Aha, I see. Come to think of it, things did feel rather forced.” He made a face, realizing what was going on.

Everything from Nomari’s invitation to Koudai’s words to Chiyo hearing him out had been planned. Heikichi had thought he had grown up somewhat, but it seemed his feelings were as transparent as ever. Human nature did not change that easily, apparently.

Then, with perfect timing, his wife returned. He smiled awkwardly at her. Though he felt a little peeved, it felt nice to know he had others who worried about him. Especially with the knowledge that a certain man had willingly left this all behind.

“Thanks for waiting, dear.”

Even though this was all just an opportunity to give him a moment to breathe,

the elderly couple still wanted them to keep the two gifts. Nomari was carrying quite a load alongside the peaches in her arms. Not one to make his wife hold things, Heikichi took the items off her hands, then bowed his head slightly to Chiyo.

“Thanks for everything. Take care.”

His problem wasn’t one that could be solved so easily, but putting his thoughts into words had cleared some of his gloom. He thanked his meddlesome acquaintances, then left the shrine behind with his wife.

They returned to the street and found it more crowded than before. The din of activity was pleasant to the ears. Kyoto seemed livelier than usual, perhaps because festival day was near.

“Thank you too, Nomari,” he said.

“What for?” Out of kindness, she played dumb. She saw no need to make him feel indebted. She looked as happy as could be.

As unreasonable as it was, he wished she were at least a little bit sad about what they had lost. It wasn’t just his parting with Azumagiku that left a scar on Heikichi, but his parting with Jinya too.

“…Life is but partings.” He murmured a line from a poem he had been taught long ago, quietly so no one else could hear it. It meant farewells were an unavoidable part of living.

Heikichi was sad that the master he adored and the demon he looked up to were now gone, but he was also dissatisfied. He felt like more could have been done. Magatsume’s scheme to deprive Jinya of his home had been a success, but Jinya still could have stayed with Nomari if he really wanted to. He could have posed as an acquaintance of Heikichi and started over with Nomari, albeit as a stranger. But Jinya chose not to do that and fled instead. Of course, Heikichi understood this was to prevent Magatsume from ever targeting Nomari again, but it still just felt wrong. He thought the man would *at least* have contacted him somehow after he married Nomari, but no, Jinya hadn’t

even done that. It was frustrating, really.

“Is something wrong?” Nomari asked.

“Hm? Ah, naw. Just got a new goal in mind.” Heikichi smiled boldly.

Demons lived long lives. It was reasonable to assume Jinya had experienced more farewells than Heikichi. Even so, Heikichi wanted to knock some sense into the man and make him realize that life *wasn’t* nothing but partings. First, he would treasure all the things Jinya had left behind, then he would go find the idiot and teach him his bonds weren’t as fragile as he thought.

“People don’t meet just to part one day. I’ll knock some sense into that thick skull of yours, just you wait.”

Heikichi didn’t care what some great poet from the past said. Being unable to see far off into the future was the privilege of the inexperienced. So long as two people were both living, reuniting was possible for them. Partings didn’t have to be forever.

Heikichi was still lacking in many ways compared to his master and Jinya, but that was for the better right now. For the time being, he figured he might as well take his darling wife to some pricey restaurant to eat something tasty. It would be nice to have more stories to share when the time came. He checked how much money he had in his wallet and imagined the envious look he would see on that man’s face one day.

Footnotes

Walking with You (Continuation)

[1] A time measurement used only in the Edo period. One koku equals roughly two hours.

[2] While the simplified conversion of koku is accepted as roughly two hours, koku is a fractional measure of time, with daylight hours being six koku and nighttime hours another six koku. Thus, summer daylight koku are longer than winter daylight koku, while summer nighttime koku are shorter than winter nighttime koku.

Fading Faces, Evening Twilights

[3] An old Japanese unit of measurement. One shaku is equal to 0.9942 feet.

[4] An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ken is equal to 5.965 feet.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents
Copyrights and Credits
Title Page
Table of Contents Page
Character List
Meiji Arc
Walking with You (Continuation)
Fading Faces, Evening Twilights
Thoughts of You
Meiji Arc Final Chapter: Lone Shizuka
Intermission: Privileges of the Inexperienced
Footnotes
Newsletter