



Sword of the Demon Hunter

KUIN
GENTOSHŌ

BOOK 5

BY Motoo Nakanishi

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Character List

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

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

AKITSU SOMEGOROU The third to inherit the name of master metalworker Akitsu Somegorou.
THE THIRD: An artifact spirit user.

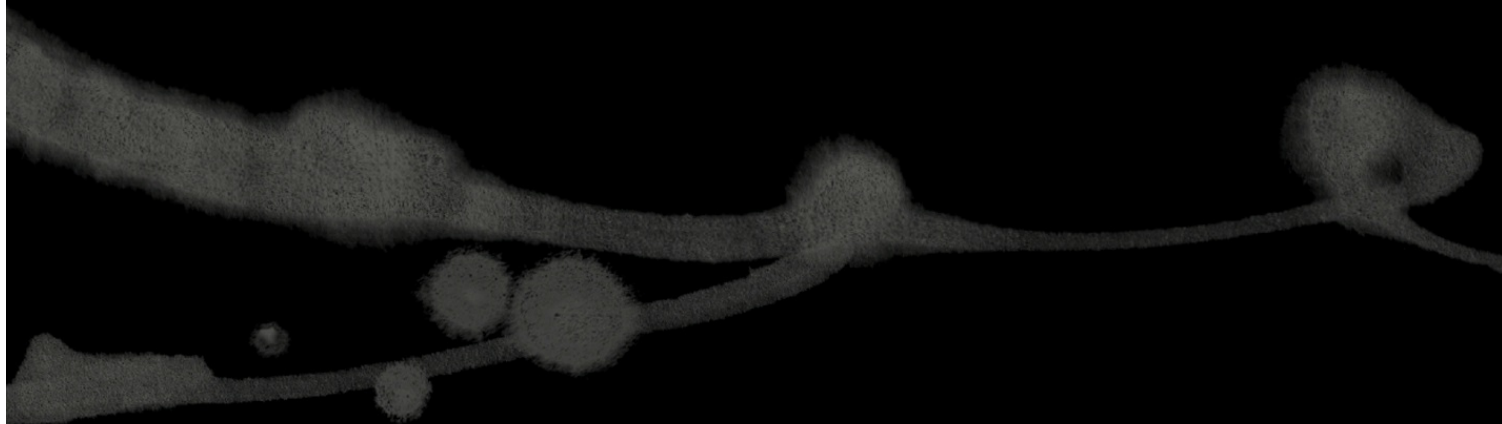
UTSUGI HEIKICHI: Somegorou's disciple. Loathes demons.

MIURA NAOTSUGU: Eldest son of the Miura family, who are retainers of the shogunate. Worked as a secretary in Edo Castle but left for Kyoto after losing faith in the shogunate.

KINU: Wife of Naotsugu, who fell in love with her at first sight. Used to be the daughter of a samurai family but became a street prostitute after the family was ruined by poverty.

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

Meiji Arc



Twin Shizuka

1

IF ONE WANDERS OFF the thoroughfare of Nishioji Shijo, they'll find the gorgeous world of Kyoto suddenly giving way to an inconspicuous and quiet narrow alley. Light doesn't reach this alley, so when night falls it becomes too dark to make out the faces of passersby. In other words, a spirit could easily lurk there unnoticed. Kyoto, known as one of the greatest cities in Japan, is also famous for being a den of such creatures. Though a new era has arrived, the spirits of old remain.

Three demons were standing in the narrow alley now. *Mine. I need it. Give me.* With sharp nails on full display and words muttered unintelligibly, they surrounded a young girl.

The demons closed in a step further when a voice as cold as iron called out. "They don't call Kyoto the City of Spirits for nothing. Demons just pour out of the woodwork night after night..."

The demons turned to see a man who was a towering six shaku¹ in height, a tachi sword at his hip.

"Before we begin, would any of you be willing to tell me your names?"

The demons lacked the intelligence to respond and simply glared while the man stood completely composed. That was fine with the man, who hadn't expected a response to begin with. With practiced movements, he placed his left hand on his scabbard and popped the blade out. That made the demons recognize him as an enemy. Gazing coldly, they distanced themselves from the young girl and approached him.

Their movements were sloppy, but their speed was inhuman. One demon slashed its razor-sharp nails—like those of birds of prey—at the man, but he calmly stepped forward in a diagonal motion. Having dodged the demon's

charge, he then drew his blade as he slipped past.

One. He sliced horizontally through the demon's side in the same motion, leaving it bisected on his left side. He then pushed off his left leg to twist his body and strike vertically upward.

Two. Now the demon on his right lay on the ground.

The third demon may have been lacking in wits, but it apparently had just enough to sense danger. It hesitantly drew back before turning around and fleeing.

But it was too late.

The man swung his sword through empty space. A transparent slash of different density than the surrounding atmosphere emerged from the tip of his blade, audibly slicing the air. The impossible strike flew onward and effortlessly struck the fleeing demon in the back.

“Maga...tsume...”

The demon let out a groan as it collapsed to the earth, a white vapor rising from its body soon after.

That made three. In just a dozen seconds and three strikes, the man had dispatched all the demons.

Not one to let his guard down, the man checked his surroundings and sensed no would-be attackers. Only then did he swing the blood off his blade and slowly return it to its scabbard.

He'd slain the demons without much trouble at all, but he felt neither elation nor pity in his victory. The only thing of any interest at all was what the third demon had said as it died. The man, Kadono Jinya, muttered the word over to himself.

“Magatsume...?”

He hadn't a clue what it could mean, but it persisted in his mind.

It was April in year five of the Meiji era (1872 AD).

Imperial rule had been restored to Emperor Meiji in what is known as the Meiji Restoration. With it, the Edo period came to a close and a new era was ushered in.

The Edo shogunate was dissolved and replaced by the Meiji government, which outlined a new form of local administration in their Seitaisho administrative code. Known as the Fu-han-ken tripartite governance system, it involved feudal lords being appointed to govern their original domains, effectively continuing the feudal system under the new central government for some time. Eventually, in July of year four of the Meiji era, the Satsuma-Choshu alliance gathered enough military strength to convince the feudal lords to concede their domains to the Emperor, and a prefectural system was formally established.

And so, the vestiges of the past ebbed away. The shogunate's feudal system was undone in its entirety, and the samurai met their end. Some samurai—namely the feudal lords—persisted as the new nobility class in the new government and reaped the privileges the position brought, but the majority were relegated to the warrior class, which granted only a few privileges beyond the commoner class (the lowest of the three social ranks). That was to say, most samurai were effectively stripped bare of their prior high status. What's more, the new government forbade commoners from wearing swords in year three of the Meiji era, then dissuaded the nobility and warrior classes from maintaining stringent samurai hairstyles and carrying swords wherever they went, effectively declaring such things to be behind them. Hatakeyama Yasuhide's prediction had proved true: *The new world that invades us will have no need for samurai or the sword.*

The samurai, who had both upheld a long-standing era of peace and ushered in the new world, found themselves shunned by the new Meiji government they'd helped establish.

“Are you all right?” After dispatching all the demons, Jinya walked over to the young girl and flatly called out to her.

“Oh... By chance, did you save me just now?” The young girl lisped her words, speaking politely but unable to enunciate well due to her youth. She looked up at Jinya in confusion, seemingly unsure of what was going on.

“I would believe so.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, you have my sincere thanks.”

Her soft, wavy hair was chestnut brown, perhaps indicative of some foreign blood in her. Her stature was short, and her slender face was not quite cute; instead, it was well proportioned in a wholesome, prim way. Her blue kimono had a flower design and gold threads. With all that and her manner of speech in mind, she could very well hail from a family of the newly formed nobility class.

“I apologize, I seem to have forgotten to introduce myself,” she said. “I am Himawari.”

“That’s a nice name, if a bit rare.”

“Thank you. My mother gave it to me and said it suited me. I quite like the name myself as well, so please do call me by it.”

Himawari was the Japanese word for sunflower. Sunflowers were considered low-class by some due to their large size, but they were a hardy flower. The girl’s smile, blooming with adoration for her mother as she spoke, certainly did resemble the resplendent summer flower.

“You’re awfully polite for your age,” Jinya said.

“I’m already eight years old. I’m not a little child anymore, so I need to act like it or else I’ll bring shame to my mother.”

Himawari was younger than Jinya’s own daughter, Nomari, but one wouldn’t think it from her well-mannered behavior. Her upbringing must have been relatively strict. Jinya wondered if he ought to be a little firmer with his own

daughter.

Noticing Jinya's attention wander, Himawari gave him a quizzical look, cocking her head to the side. "Is something the matter?"

"No, I was just thinking. I have a daughter myself, you see. She's just a year older than you."

The young girl made a face. Jinya's appearance hadn't changed since he was eighteen, and he certainly didn't seem likely to have a daughter. She asked, "I apologize, but may I ask how old you are?"

"I turned fifty this year."

"You don't look it."

"I get that a lot. Anyway, the streets are dangerous at night. Let me see you home. Were you alone?"

"No, I was with my mother, but we seem to have become separated."

Jinya had thought it strange that a child was allowed to wander outside alone, so it made sense to hear she had merely split off from her parent. He was wondering what he should do next when the young girl made a suggestion.

"My mother might be thinking I already returned home on my own. I know the way back home from Nishioji, so could I trouble you to accompany me until there?"

The girl really was well-mannered. Jinya nodded, and a brilliant smile blossomed on her face like a sunflower.

"Then let us be off," she said. She reached for his hand almost immediately. She had a childish innocence, perhaps alarmingly so as she was too trusting of a stranger. It was odd to think that she could come from such a good background but be so unguarded.

Jinya was a little surprised, but he wasn't about to swat her hand away or anything. He let her hold his hand, and together they headed toward Nishioji.

The two walked hand in hand under the dim moonlight. Something about it all felt nostalgic to Jinya.

“Thank you for walking me back, Uncle.”

She’d slightly changed her way of addressing him, likely because she’d learned he was fifty. It felt a bit strange to be called “Uncle,” given that he looked far younger than the title would usually warrant, but it was such a rare thing for him to be treated befitting his true age that he didn’t mind.

“Is this far enough?” he asked.

“Yes, I can walk the rest myself.”

“I don’t mind walking you all the way if you’d like.”

“No, I couldn’t impose. My home is not at all far from here, and you’ve done enough for me already.”

The street of Nishioji still had pedestrians walking along it. There was little risk of a demon attacking her again, but that didn’t necessarily mean she was safe from other humans.

“Really, I’ll be all right from here,” she insisted once more. If she didn’t wish for his help, then that was that.

With a resigned sigh, he conceded, “All right. Take care on your way back.”

“I will. Let us meet again someday, Uncle.” She bowed, then once again showed him a bright, innocent smile resembling a sunflower before disappearing into the dim darkness.

In Kyoto, the gateway leading to the Tokaido highway is known as the Awataguchi Gate, named after the nearby Awata Shrine. Revered as the chief gods of that shrine are Susanoo-no-Mikoto and Onamuchi-no-Mikoto, deities of repelling evil and disease. Since the days of old, the shrine’s convenient location has made it a popular place to visit for the many travelers of the Tokaido highway. Those embarking would pray for safe travels, and those arriving would

pay respects to the gods for granting them a safe journey. In this way, the chief gods of the Awata Shrine inadvertently became worshipped as gods of travel.

Now, if one made their way past Awataguchi Gate and over Shirokawabashi Bridge, then crossed the Higashiojitori Main Street that spanned north to south, they would eventually arrive at Sanjyou Street. This road, located north of Awata Shrine, included a soba restaurant that had been established in year one of the Meiji era. It was there that Jinya lived.

“Father!”

When he returned to the restaurant, Jinya was greeted with a smile by a small girl with long, black hair that was packed into a bun. Little Nomari was nine years old already, but she seemed much more youthful than Himawari from moments ago. But perhaps it was in a parent’s nature to forever see their child as just that—a child.

While the fact that Jinya hunted demons for the sake of his goal hadn’t changed even after moving to Kyoto, some things had. In the new era, commoners were allowed to have family names, so Jinya took the name of the village that raised him and became Kadono Jinya. He also used the soba-making skills he’d learned from the owner of Kihee to start his own soba restaurant. Business was poor at first, but he slowly earned his customers. Now in its fifth year, his restaurant was doing fairly well.

The restaurant, Demon Soba, also doubled as his and Nomari’s home. While they weren’t related by blood, the two were known to be a close father-daughter pair. Jinya was teased daily by his regular customers for how overly doting he was.

“No problems?” she asked.

“I’m unharmed.”

“No, I mean with that.” She pointed at his sword. Commoners had been barred from publicly wearing swords in year three of the Meiji era. If he were caught with one, he could very well be arrested. Nomari was more anxious

about that than the possibility of a demon hurting him.

“Oh. Nobody saw, I suppose.”

“Okay, but be careful...”

“I’m trying, but there’s only so much I can do.”

Being caught with a sword would be a problem, but he couldn’t very well *not* carry one. It would be a different story if he had Tsuchiura’s proficiency in martial arts, but there was no way he could deal with a superior demon barehanded. Perhaps he’d better think something up, though.

“There’ve been a lot of demons lately...” Nomari said with a touch of sadness.

“Yeah...” That fact had been weighing on Jinya’s mind as well. Sticking his neck into demon business was nothing new for him, but the frequency of demon sightings had skyrocketed in the past year. In fact, three demons (albeit only lesser ones) had appeared on tonight’s job alone. He would be paid fairly for it, so he wasn’t worried on that front, but the sheer number of demons was concerning. Even if Kyoto was called the City of Spirits, having *this* many spirits abound was absurd. The word spoken by one of the demons he slew also nagged at him: *Magatsume*. He hadn’t a clue what it meant, but he suspected it had something to do with the reason why there were so many demons about.

“Father?”

“Sorry. I’m all right.”

“...Okay.”

His expression had turned severe as his mind wandered, causing her eyes to moisten with worry. He patted her head and smiled to try and cheer her up, but it didn’t do much. He didn’t know the best way to reassure his daughter, and that vexed him.

Her worry for him was as clear as day. He wasn’t related to her by blood—in fact, he wasn’t even human—but she loved him like a true father. He was happy to have her, but he worried greatly at the same time. What if something were

to happen to her? What if he couldn't be by her side when she needed him? The possibility gnawed at him, but he forced the thought out of his mind and said, "It's late. You should get to sleep."

"What about you?"

"I'll join you soon. Go ahead and get ready first." He hid his inner turmoil as he urged Nomari to bed. She still seemed in low spirits, but some cheer had returned to her. She trotted over to the tatami-matted bedroom further back in the restaurant.

"Yuunagi, am I being a good father?" Quietly, he questioned his left arm.

Jinya's mother had passed away when he was too young to remember, and his father hurt his younger sister so badly that Jinya impulsively ran away from home with her. He found a second father and mother in Kadono, the village he'd drifted to, but Yokaze lived in the shrine and Motoharu died fighting a demon. Because of that, Jinya wasn't quite sure what it meant to be a parent. He wasn't confident he was fulfilling the role of a father correctly.

Even so, he wanted to raise and protect her as long as someone like him could be allowed to do so. He had devoted everything to revenge, and he'd led an immoral life. But along his journey, he had found a rare, rare warmth.

At the very least, he wanted to remain Nomari's father until she could stand on her own two feet as an adult.

2

MORNINGS BEGAN EARLY at the restaurant. Jinya woke just as the sky began to lighten and took care of the prep work for the day. When the ingredients were just about ready, he began sweeping in front of the restaurant.

Getting up so early had been rough at first, but it became routine after a while. At this point, he naturally woke at just the right time without any

difficulties. Jinya had grown accustomed to running his soba restaurant.

“Oh, Kadono-san.”

“Good morning.”

Next to Demon Soba was Mihashiya, a confectionery store that had opened the previous year. Its young owner, twenty-year-old Mihashi Toyoshige, greeted Jinya now. The two cleaned the front of their respective businesses around the same time in the morning, so they bumped into one another like this quite often. From Toyoshige’s sleepy face, Jinya could tell he was also not a morning person.

“Nice weather we’re havin’ ourselves, eh? The only thing that could make this morning better’d be some actual customers. Now wouldn’t that be nice?”

“You’re still in your first year. Things will get rolling for you soon.”

“Sure hope so. Ah, jeez. Sweeping is such a pain.” Despite his grumbling, Toyoshige earnestly went about his task. He certainly didn’t lack motivation for his work.

Mihashiya was still a new business, so customers were few and far between. Jinya’s own soba restaurant had taken some time to get off the ground too, so he knew the man’s pain well.

“Welp, no use complainin’ about it, I guess. All right, let’s give it our best today!” With newfound optimism, Toyoshige psyched himself up and started sweeping the front of his store with exaggerated motions. A bit of a childish man, perhaps.

Jinya finished his sweeping, stowed away the broom, and then began preparing breakfast. Were it just him, he would’ve been fine with something crude as a meal, but he had Nomari to think about now, so he put in some real effort.

He prepared some miso soup with eggplant as well as a side of pickled vegetables, then made for the bedroom. There, he saw Nomari sleeping

soundly in her bed and couldn't help but smile. Softly brushing her head, he said, "Nomari, it's time to get up."

"Okay." Her eyes shot open in an instant. She apparently hadn't been sleeping, but merely resting with her eyes closed. She got up, smiling broadly even though she was just getting out of bed.

"You know, you don't need to wait for me to come wake you up every morning if you're already awake," Jinya said.

"But I *want* you to."

"Well... All right, I guess it's no trouble. Go ahead and wash your face."

"Okay."

If his daughter wanted it, then that was reason enough for Jinya to continue their meaningless morning ritual. Perhaps he was spoiling her a little, but it was hard not to when it made her so happy.

The two had breakfast. Their meal was modest, consisting only of miso soup and pickled vegetables, but Nomari was happy to eat it because her father was the one who made it.

"Make sure you chew your food well," Jinya said.

"I know, I know."

He knew he didn't need to coddle her so much at her age, but he couldn't help but treat her like she was still a toddler sometimes. He tried to watch himself, but every now and then he'd say something unnecessary. Perhaps that was just what it meant to be a parent, though.

"Here's your lunch." He handed her some rice balls and pickled vegetables wrapped together in a bamboo leaf.

"Thanks. I'll head on out."

"Right. Take care."

Nomari always left for school before the restaurant opened. Back in the Edo

period, people had believed women only needed to know how to take care of the house, so education for girls wasn't considered important. Temples held classes for children, but girls only received a very rudimentary education. Things changed with the Meiji era, however. Western values took root, and so it was deemed necessary for women to be educated as well. Facilities known as elementary schools were created to give children their basic education, and Nomari commuted to one that had been a temple classroom in the Edo period. Apparently, she had made a friend there and was greatly enjoying her school life.

"I'm a family man now, huh?" Jinya saw Nomari off in front of the restaurant and murmured to himself as he watched her walk away.

The man who fought out of hatred had changed. He lived for things beyond his one goal now, and his blade had grown impure. If it came down to it, he probably couldn't fight with the resolve to abandon all else like he once could, and yet he didn't mind that one bit. Thinking it funny how much he'd changed, he allowed himself to smile.

"All right. Time to get to work."

The weather was good. It would be a busy day.

"Thank you for eating with us."

With the sun already down, Jinya saw off his last customer in front of the restaurant. Then he took down his entrance curtains, stowed them away inside, and finally closed up for the day.

When he had no demon-hunting jobs, Jinya was just a normal soba restaurant owner. He'd even cut his hair short when he opened the restaurant to give off a more sanitary look, something customers factored in when choosing where to eat. While he lacked talent as a blacksmith, he was quite decent at making soba and earned more than enough to support himself and Nomari.

“All done, Father?”

“Yeah. Sorry for always making you wait. Let’s have dinner.”

Even though it was late, Nomari had waited for Jinya to finish closing up the restaurant so they could eat together. He was about to get some ingredients from the kitchen when he heard the door slide open.

“I’m sorry, but we’re...” Jinya stopped mid-sentence. The person at the entrance wasn’t a customer but a man he knew well.

“Closed for the day? ’Course you are. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“Oh, it’s you,” Jinya wearily said.

“Hey now, that’s no way to treat your best friend.”

The forty-something man who’d just appeared was Akitsu Somegorou, a regular at Demon Soba since the very day the restaurant opened. He was an artifact spirit user, able to turn the emotions resting in objects into demons, as well as the third to inherit the name Akitsu Somegorou and a netsuke sculpture craftsman. He often brought his disciple along to Demon Soba.

Like Jinya, Somegorou secretly hunted demons. The only difference was that Somegorou only slew those who threatened humans and left harmless spirits alone, a rare thing for a demon hunter. That was why he hadn’t done a thing to Jinya even though he knew he was a demon. It wouldn’t even be strange to say the two were friends. *Best* friends was a bit of a reach, though.

“And who exactly is this ‘best friend’ supposed to be?” Jinya said with a look.

“Is that cheek I hear? No, it couldn’t possibly be. Just who was it, I wonder, that helped you get your shop in such a prime location—indeed, get built at all?”

Jinya frowned. Having grown up in an iron-producing village, he’d never had much of an opportunity to be educated and could just barely read and write. That meant complex written documents like contracts were beyond him. When he first came to Kyoto, Somegorou had helped him with those sorts of things,

and Jinya hadn't heard the end of it since.

"All right, let's lay off the jokes. I've come with some work. I assume ya don't mind?"

Somegorou was better known as a craftsman than as a demon hunter, and he had many people's trust since the Akitsu Somegorou line had been based in Kyoto since the first generation. This put him in a position to hear many rumors, which he passed along to Jinya because he knew about his unique situation. When he came bearing such rumors, he generally appeared unannounced after the restaurant closed—like now, for instance.

"I've brought along the one making the request," he said, pointing a thumb behind him. Standing there was a woman.

"Sorry, Nomari, but could you wait a little longer?"

"...Okay," his daughter replied with a sad nod. He felt a little bad, but he couldn't put this off.

As of now, he was no longer the owner of a soba restaurant. He took off the triangular cooking bandana covering his head, removed his apron, mentally switched his gears, and then turned his gaze to the woman.

"Pardon my intrusion." The young woman Somegorou had brought entered the restaurant. She wore a casual, short-sleeved, light-purple kimono robe and looked to be around seventeen, maybe eighteen. Her height was just under five shaku, and she was thin in a graceful, healthy way. At first glance, her refined looks and pale skin gave the impression of a dainty woman.

The way she wore her attire was not so dainty, however. One of her slender, pale legs was slightly visible under her kimono robe's slit. The robe was also kept loose in the front, with a white sarashi wrap covering her chest. Her long black hair wasn't tied up, but loose, falling to the same length. It was a rather unusual hairstyle, but what really caught Jinya's eye was the object at her waist: a sword kept in a scabbard of iron.

“I have been told you undertake requests to slay demons. I have need for your services.” Though she dressed like someone far from the straight and narrow, the woman spoke politely and slowly before deeply bowing her head. It was jarring, to say the least.

“There’s no need to bow just yet. Let me hear what you have to say first.” He urged the woman to raise her head. He was hunting demons for his own purposes; he wouldn’t turn someone away at once just because they presented themselves a little oddly. “Nomari,” he said as he looked back at his daughter, who nodded in return.

“I know. I’ll be waiting in the back.” This wasn’t the first time a client had come, so she knew what to do. Nomari quickly turned her sad face away, then trotted off toward their living quarters.

Jinya seemed to cause nothing but trouble for his daughter. He swore to himself that he’d make it up to her somehow later.

“Hope ya don’t mind, but I told her *all* about you. Seems like she’s still completely on board, though,” Somegorou said. Judging by his emphasis, he had gone so far as to reveal to the woman that Jinya was a demon. Somegorou wasn’t a rash man, however. If he thought it was safe to reveal such a thing, then she must be someone worthy of his trust. That being the case, Jinya wouldn’t worry about the woman knowing his identity. He trusted Somegorou enough himself, after all. “Anyway, that’s all from me,” Somegorou said. “I’ll catch you later.”

“You’re leaving already?” Jinya asked.

“I trust you won’t pull anything strange, ha ha. This lass is an old acquaintance of mine, though. Do her a solid for me, will ya?” Despite his frivolous tone, the man’s eyes were sincere. Without waiting to hear a reply, he left the restaurant. Jinya couldn’t help but think his shoulders looked a little frail from behind as he left.

“Go ahead and take a seat,” Jinya said. As it was just the two of them now, he

poured tea for them both and sat in a random spot so they could talk comfortably. The woman chose the seat across from him, with a table sandwiched between them. She bowed slightly after she sat down.

“As you’ve probably already heard, I’m Kadono Jinya. I hunt demons for a living, though I’m sure it doesn’t look like it right now.”

The woman grinned softly. From his attire, Jinya looked like an ordinary soba restaurant owner. It was hard to imagine him as a fighter, and he knew it. That said, judging from her reaction, she didn’t seem to doubt his *true* occupation.

“What should I call you?” he asked.

Her gaze dropped briefly to the sword at her waist. With no hesitation, she answered, “Kaneomi.”

A fake name, and an obvious one at that. Apparently, “Kaneomi” had no intention of giving away her true identity.

But that was fine. Truth be told, he didn’t care in the slightest what her name was. What was important was the information on demons she possessed. It was insignificant who—and what—she was. She could be a demon waiting for a careless moment to take his head for all he cared. So long as he gained an opportunity to slay another demon, it didn’t matter.

“So it’s a Kaneomi after all, then?” Even her sword was of more interest to him than what her identity might be. The iron scabbard she carried was unembellished. He couldn’t see the blade, but the scabbard’s curve made him suspect it was a tachi blade and not an uchigatana. Perhaps most telling, however, was the presence it exuded. It resembled that of another blade he’d seen before. “A Yatonomori Kaneomi, I mean. Made by the late-Warring States period swordsmith, Kaneomi.”

Yatonomori Kaneomi was the shared name of four demonic swords that were artificially instilled with a superior demon’s power. They were forged by a married couple of differing species who wished for coexistence between their kind.

“You know of the Kaneomi blades?” Kaneomi asked.

“I suppose you can say I have ties to them.” One of the demonic swords—or, rather, its power—belonged to Jinya. There was no way he’d mistake the presence of another. “But that’s neither here nor there. We’ve wandered off topic. Sorry, but I’d like to get down to business, Kaneomi-dono. What brought you here today?”

“Yes, well... Are you familiar with Gojo Ohashi Bridge?”

Gojo Ohashi Bridge spanned the Kamogawa River. It was also known by the name Kiyomizu-bashi Bridge, as travelers crossed it on the way to the famous, ancient Kiyomizu-dera Temple. It was a historic bridge that had been moved to its current location and rebuilt in stone under the orders of feudal lord Toyotomi Hideyoshi in year seventeen of the Tensho era (1589 AD).

Kaneomi continued. “Every night, a demon by the name of Jishibari appears there. I want you to capture it.”

“Capture it? Not kill it?”

“Yes. It’s taken something important from me that I need back.” Kaneomi’s looks could easily make one believe she came from a well-to-do family. Seeing such a beautiful woman look so pained would wrench most hearts, but Jinya wasn’t so naive as to feel needless sympathy. He waited quietly, not saying a word, as the woman clenched her teeth bitterly. “Truth be told, I’ve fought and lost to Jishibari once already. That is why I’ve come seeking your aid, having heard you can slay demons in a single strike.”

As a fellow practitioner of the sword, Jinya understood just how ashamed she had to feel to make such a request.

“Would you prefer I explain myself in further detail?” She observed Jinya with an upturned gaze, reading his expression. There were many things she left in the dark: her connection to the demon named Jishibari, what it had taken from her, who she herself even was. This request was shady, and she knew it. She seemed to feel a bit guilty about keeping so many secrets.

But Jinya didn't particularly care. Somegorou had said she was an old acquaintance of his, and that was enough for Jinya to trust her.

"One's own reasons are not for others to understand. If you don't want to talk, you needn't do so."

"Thank you." She smiled slightly, then took a bundle of papers out from inside her kimono robe. "I've prepared sixty yen as an advance payment." Such an amount was enough to live comfortably for half a year without working. "Will you accept my request?"

She tossed the money in front of him like it was nothing. How such a young woman came to obtain so large an amount was of some slight interest to him, but the money itself wasn't particularly important to Jinya. More money was always better than less, of course, but he cared more about getting one thing straight now.

"There's something I'd like to confirm first," he said.

"Go ahead."

"Once you get back what this Jishibari took from you, do you care what happens to the demon?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you care whether it lives or dies?"

"Ah, I see." Her gaze dropped slightly, showing the faintest bit of hesitation. "I do not. You are free to do as you please, so long as my goal is met."

"Then you don't care what happens after I kill it either?"

"I do not."

Jinya was relieved to hear that. If this Jishibari was a superior demon, he would very much like to devour it. He told her he had no reservations about taking the request now, and she beamed.

"Really? Thank you, truly." Her words were soft, but deep gratitude

moistened her eyes.

Such a direct display of emotion made Jinya feel a bit awkward. To hide his embarrassment, he cleared his throat. “Ahem. But don’t you think this payment is a bit excessive?”

“Not at all. This is just how grateful I am to you.” She pushed the stack of money closer to Jinya. He politely accepted it and returned to business.

“Can you describe this Jishibari for me?” he asked.

“Her age is the same as mine, seventeen. Her height is just under five shaku, also the same as me.” She spoke matter-of-factly, her voice suddenly devoid of emotion. Considering her ties to this demon, it made more sense to think that she was forcing herself to be calm than that she was truly indifferent. “She has a slender body and a pale complexion, also just like me. And I do believe her looks are quite fair, as are my own.” She didn’t appear to be speaking out of vanity. Her looks were indeed quite above average, but that didn’t seem to be what she was getting at. “You can expect the demon that appears on Gojo Ohashi Bridge to look like what you see now.”

Sensing Jinya’s next question, she preemptively nodded. A tired, weary look had appeared on her face, taking shape as a self-derisive smile.

3

AFTER THE BUSY RUSH of noontime had passed, Akitsu Somegorou visited the restaurant. He didn’t seem to have any particular business this time; he was simply there to have a meal with his disciple. The two came by often for lunch or dinner, but the disciple still hadn’t warmed up to Jinya and was currently glaring at him with a scowl.

“Master, can’t we eat somewhere else?”

“What’s wrong with this place, Heikichi? It’s not like you’re paying.”

“I do appreciate you treating me, but I’d rather not eat at a restaurant run by a *demon*, if possible.”

“Hey, watch whatcha say. Never know who’s listening. Oh, I guess it *is* just us in here right now, though.”

Heikichi hurriedly looked around. “I-I was aware. I’m not that careless...”

The young boy’s name was Utsugi Heikichi. He had just turned twelve this year and was learning the trade of netsuke sculpture crafting from Somegorou. Heikichi had taken the apprenticeship because he longed to be an artifact spirit user like Somegorou, but he had yet to be taught a single aspect of that trade so far, much to his annoyance. He had it out for Jinya, thinking it wrong that a demon should be allowed to live among humans. Every time the two met, Heikichi would glare daggers at Jinya.

“We’ll take two kitsune soba. C’mon, take a seat, Heikichi,” Somegorou said, ignoring his disciple’s grumblings and proceeding to order.

Heikichi reluctantly obeyed and sat down. This whole back-and-forth of complaining and relenting was something of a routine by this point, so Jinya paid it no mind and prepared the soba without a word.

“Here you go, two orders of kitsune soba.”

“Thanks. Say, I’ve always wondered...why’s your kitsune soba come with fried tofu? Shouldn’t it be called *tanuki* soba instead?”

“The naming convention is actually more of a regional thing, so I figured I might as well go with ‘kitsune’ because foxes were worshipped back where I’m from. For good luck, you know?”

In Kadono, where Jinya grew up, they worshipped a goddess of fire known as Mahiru-sama. Remembering the legend that Mahiru-sama was originally a fox living in the local forest, Jinya named this dish kitsune soba on a whim because kitsune meant “fox.” The dish was very well received, almost as if it were blessed, and it soon became the restaurant’s best-selling item.

“Oh, I see,” Somegorou said. “Hey, you better eat up before your noodles get cold, Heikichi.”

“Yes, Master,” Heikichi sighed. “...It may have been made by a demon, but I suppose the food’s done no wrong.”

The young boy certainly had an attitude, but Jinya didn’t particularly mind. The rudeness of a child didn’t bother him one bit. Perhaps it was because he’d lived for a time in Edo, where people weren’t particularly kind, or perhaps he had simply mellowed out with age. Either way, Jinya could feel himself changing slightly as time passed.

“Ah, this stuff never gets old,” Somegorou remarked after taking a bite.

“It is good, but are you sure it’s okay to let a demon remain loose like this, Master?”

“If all ya want to do is kill demons, then you can go study under Nagumo of the Demonic Sword or Kukami of the Magatama. The Akitsu are artifact spirit users; we take the emotions of objects and turn ’em into demons, so it’d be shameful for us to unconditionally hate demons when we use ’em. Demons are nothing more than emotions brought to their extreme. Whether a demon is evil or not is something to be discovered, not assumed.”

“So this is about pride?”

“No, it’s a matter of respect. As people who use the power of emotions, we have a duty to respect emotion more than anyone else.”

Somegorou really looked like a proper master now as he gently chided his disciple. When Jinya first met him back in Edo, the man hadn’t been so collected; he had even warned Jinya that demons were creatures to be hunted. He too had changed with time.

“To sum up what I’m trying to say, there are good folks and bad folks among demons, just like people. You can’t go around judging others when you don’t even know what they’re like.”

“I get what you mean to say, but I still just can’t accept demons.”

“Oh dear. Well, I suppose you’ll understand in time. Hopefully sooner than later.”

Their discussion concluded there, and they resumed eating. Somegorou was generally pretty hands-off with his disciple, but seeing him actually give guidance was heartwarming. Perhaps this was what Ofuu and Naotsugu felt when they watched Jinya look after Nomari.

“Being a master must be rough,” Jinya said.

“Ha ha, you said it. I imagine being a father ain’t much easier, though.”

The two shared a wry grin, the mood peaceful. Friendship could come from the strangest places sometimes.

“Why’d you become friends with a demon, of all people?” Heikichi muttered, glaring at Jinya.

Jinya sighed and grinned wryly some more. The kid was just that, after all—a kid.

“Hey now, enough of that look already,” Somegorou chided.

“Yeah, yeah.” With a huff, Heikichi looked away and went back to slurping his noodles. Telling him off only made him grumpier, it seemed.

Jinya let him be and changed the topic to something a little more serious. “Somegorou, there’s something I’d like to ask you about Kaneomi.”

Last night, Somegorou had claimed Kaneomi was an old acquaintance of his. Jinya wanted to ask him what kind of person she was, but Somegorou gave him a look of confusion for some reason.

“Kaneomi? Who’s that?”

“The woman from yesterday.”

“Oh, so her name was Kaneomi, eh? It’d been forever since I met ’er, so I’d completely forgotten.” Somegorou nodded to himself, sipped some tea, and

then straightened his posture. “I don’t know her all that well, to tell the truth. The two of us didn’t really have much to do with one another.”

“How do you know her, then?”

“Well, I used to know her master since we were in the same trade. We fought together a number of times, but it looks like a demon got the final blow.”

That was all Jinya needed to hear to get a rough understanding of what was going on. Kaneomi had served a master strong enough to fight alongside Somegorou, but they lost their life to a demon. Now alone, she came to the only person she knew who might be able to help: her master’s old friend Somegorou. From there, she learned of Jinya and came to ask him to kill the demon named Jishibari.

“So it’s revenge she’s after.”

“Well, I suppose so. You’d probably learn more asking her than me. Just be tactful about it. That girl’s a naked blade—more brittle than you might think.”

Somegorou said nothing beyond that, and Jinya felt no need to press him further, so the conversation ended there.

When night came, Jinya made for Gojo Ohashi Bridge together with Kaneomi. Though they were a man and a woman, there was nothing romantic about their excursion. Kaneomi exuded a somber air, and Jinya had his own thoughts on his mind.

The demon that appeared every night, Jishibari, apparently looked very much like Kaneomi. Why that was, he did not know. From what Somegorou said, he could presume there was something that tied the two of them together, but he was hesitant to ask Kaneomi directly. Knowing wouldn’t change what needed to be done anyway. He would slay the demon, then devour it. That was the only reason he’d accepted this job. Rather than worry about the small details now, he should turn his focus to the coming fight.

“Are you familiar with Twin Shizuka?” Kaneomi abruptly broke her silence.

“I am,” Jinya answered. “It’s a small, white flowering plant that grows in the shade out in the wild and blooms from late spring to early summer. It resembles another flower known as Lone Shizuka but sprouts two columns of flowers instead of one, hence the name Twin Shizuka.”

A woman Jinya once knew had taught him about all kinds of flowers, which was why he could answer without a pause now. Kaneomi smiled slightly at his side and shook her head.

“You’re quite knowledgeable about flowers, but I was referring to the noh song by Zeami.”

“Oh...” While he knew a thing or two about flowers, he wasn’t very familiar with noh songs.

Still facing forward as she walked, Kaneomi said, “There was a shrine known as the Katte Shrine in a village called Yoshino. There, on the seventh of January every year, they had a custom of picking vegetables by the Natsumigawa River at the base of their mountain and dedicating them to their god...”

One day, a woman known as the Vegetable Picker made her way to the Natsumigawa River like she did every year. After she picked vegetables for a while, another woman appeared.

“If you are to return to Yoshino, then please spread the word. Gather the people and show pity for my wrongs, so that I may pass on.”

Through tears, the woman made her plea to the Vegetable Picker.

The Vegetable Picker asked for her name, but she did not answer. Instead, she vanished into thin air.

Mystified by the experience, the Vegetable Picker returned to her village and told the chief priest what had happened. But as she spoke, her expression and tone began to change. Shocked, the chief priest asked, *“Who goes there?”*

The Vegetable Picker answered, *“I am Shizuka.”*

At the Katte Shrine, it was said that Shizuka Gozen, court dancer and mistress of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, captivated the priests with her dance around the time of her capture by Yoshitsune's political opponents. In fact, the mound she was said to have danced on still remained within the shrine grounds. Familiar with the story, the chief priest realized that the spirit possessing the Vegetable Picker might be Shizuka Gozen.

"In lieu of a service, please show us your dance."

Sure in his belief, the chief priest asked the spirit to dance. The Vegetable Picker went to the shrine's treasury, where she took out a pair of splendid hakama pants and a flowing silk tunic with designs of autumnal wildflowers—the same dancing attire that Shizuka Gozen had entrusted to the shrine. She put the clothes on and danced, her movements fluid but graceful and splendidly alluring. It had to be the dance of Shizuka Gozen herself.

All present were stunned by her, but slowly they began to notice a shadow behind the dancing Vegetable Picker. Straining their eyes, they could make out the faint silhouette of another dancer. On the stage were the possessed woman and the ghost of Shizuka Gozen behind her, two Shizukas dancing as one.

"And that's the story of Twin Shizuka," Kaneomi concluded.

"Dancing with a ghost... What a strange story," Jinya remarked.

"Indeed. But what's strange about it isn't that Shizuka Gozen's ghost appears." Kaneomi's voice took on a tinge of sadness. "The Vegetable Picker was able to dance because she had been possessed by Shizuka Gozen. How, then, could she have continued to dance after Shizuka Gozen's ghost manifested itself?"

Perhaps the dance came from the Vegetable Picker herself. Perhaps it came from some memories Shizuka Gozen left in her. Or perhaps it was something else entirely, something no one could hope to know.

“Who’s to say? I’m afraid I’m not all that learned. Complicated stuff like this is a bit beyond me.” Jinya quickly threw in the towel. This was just empty talk to fill the time. There was no answer to be reached no matter how much one pondered the mystery, so he stopped thinking about it and fixed his gaze forward. “Looks like we’re out of time for chitchat anyway.”

Gojo Ohashi Bridge was now within sight. Though it was still distant, the moonlight made the scene clear enough. There was a woman standing on the bridge in plain sight. She looked young and wore a man’s haori coat and hakama pants over her kimono, her glistening red eyes able to spot him even in the darkness. While he felt some surprise and wariness at the sight of her, he was mostly filled with astonishment.

“Interesting. An audience with Shizuka Gozen herself,” he said sarcastically as he drew Yarai and pointed its tip at the demon, a fierce look in his eyes. The demon was the spitting image of Kaneomi.

“Jishibari...” With her face pulled into a grimace, Kaneomi glared at the demon. She too drew her Yatonomori Kaneomi and held it with its tip directed at her opponent. Her knowledge of swordsmanship was evident from her taut muscles and the slight shifting of her feet. “I will make you return what’s mine today.”

“Oh my. Well, you sure don’t give up, I’ll give you that.” Though the demon shared Kaneomi’s appearance, her voice was different. Jishibari’s was slightly higher, and her tone was childish. She noticeably lacked the huskiness most demons had. In both appearance and voice, she resembled a human. “You brought a boyfriend with you this time?” Speaking in a teasing tone, she narrowed her eyes and appraised Jinya with a disagreeable look.

He brought his sword to his side, the blade pointed behind him, ready to swing. “My name is Jinya. Would you be willing to tell me yours?”

Jishibari’s eyes went wide. She looked him up and down as if she were gazing at something unusual. “Oh my. I’ve heard so much about you.”

It appeared she already knew of him. Perhaps there were vicious rumors spreading among demons about the one who hunted his own kind.

“I am Jishibari. Under Magatsume-sama’s orders, I am currently hunting humans.” With forced theatrics, Jishibari politely introduced herself.

There it was again: Magatsume. Magatsume-*sama*? A person, then. Was this demon her underling?

“Is Magatsume your master?” Jinya asked.

“Huh? No, not at all.”

“Then who are they?”

“I’m sorry, did you come here to chitchat?” the demon scoffed. There was no use questioning her.

“Fair point. I’ll have my answers after I cut you down.” Her memories would belong to him once he devoured her, after all.

He focused his mind. It didn’t matter that she was a woman; he would strike her down all the same.

“Kadono-sama, Jishibari is no ordinary demon. Please do be careful,” Kaneomi said.

“Noted.” Calmly, Jinya observed Jishibari. Her figure was slender, like Kaneomi’s. From the way she stood, she didn’t seem to be trained in martial arts. She showed no sign of being about to assume a demon form, and she looked like an ordinary woman save for her men’s haori coat. Still, Kaneomi said she had lost to this demon, so there had to be *something* he should be wary of. Most likely, it was Jishibari’s unique demon ability. Without lowering his guard, he prepared to slide his feet to slowly close the distance.

“Huh?!” He stopped abruptly. Just as he was about to move forward, something came flying straight at him. Without pause, he knocked it away with his sword. “...A chain?”

Having lost momentum, a chain with a small metal ball on its end fell to the

ground.

He had no time to wonder where it might have come from, as it suddenly sprang to life and flew toward him again. He knocked it away once more, then retreated back, making space. He took a breath and glared at Jishibari, his eyes then shooting wide.

There were five—no, six—chains, including the one he'd knocked away. They swayed, surrounding the demon. Each chain was separate from the others and was attached to nothing, as though they had manifested from thin air along with their dark metal balls.

“My name is Jishibari, as is my power...” The demon gave a cocky smile and leisurely pointed a finger, first Kaneomi's way, then Jinya's. “...*Jishibari*.”

The chains moved like snakes, clinking as their metal balls raced toward their prey like fanged jaws. They aimed for both Kaneomi and Jinya.

The demon could create chains and manipulate them as she pleased. This was the first time Jinya had seen an ability like this, but he understood its strengths immediately. With such a skill, the demon could fight no matter how physically weak she herself was. It would be risky to try and dodge by a narrow margin because she directly controlled the chains, so he took a big leap to the side instead.

With a heavy clunk, a chain struck his sword. One of the chains he had dodged circled around and attacked him from behind. But he had predicted the demon might try as much, and he blocked the strike with Yarai while looking over his shoulder.

Jishibari surrounded herself with the chains again. “My. Do you have eyes on the back of your head or something?”

“And what if I do?” He had merely predicted her actions, but he had no reason to confirm that for her. He checked on Kaneomi at his side, saw she had avoided the chains as well, and then brought his gaze forward again. “This is quite the troublesome opponent.”

“Indeed. Alone, I couldn’t even manage a single strike on her,” Kaneomi said.

“It’s impressive enough that you survived fighting her at all.”

Though they were mid-combat, Kaneomi smiled slightly at his modest praise. She knew he was just letting her save face, but it was still nice.

“Do you two really have time to be standing around like that?” Jishibari said as the air roared. Two supple chains lashed out like a whip.

Jinya used *Dart* to reach his maximum speed in a single step, slipping past the chains at an inhuman pace. He closed the distance to the demon but found the remaining four chains shielding her. Cutting through them would be a challenge.

“Wh-whoops. That was a close one,” Jishibari said.

Without expression, Jinya locked his eyes on Jishibari behind her chains and saw slight fear in her expression. Perhaps this was the first time anyone had gotten so close to her. A cold sweat ran down her neck, but there was relief on her face because she’d managed to shield herself in time.

“Should *you* be standing around like that?” he said. His sword was just a distraction, allowing him to aim a kick squarely on the side of her skinny body.

“Ack!” Panic shot through her face as she stumbled back, but she did manage to block the kick with her chains.

He didn’t stop there, however. He glared and fired off a flying blade as the demon tried to put distance between them. He was tasked to capture, not kill, so he aimed for her arm.

But his strike didn’t connect. He thought he would surely take her arm with it, but two chains managed to reappear before her and block the blow.

“Ngh...” With faltering steps, Jishibari managed to distance herself from Jinya. She had defended herself, but not completely. Her proud chains had been just a little too slow, and one cuff of her kimono robe was torn alongside an acute cut on her pale skin.

Observing the abnormal speed of *Dart* and the flying blades, Kaneomi furrowed her brow. “How did you... Ah, right. You’re a demon, aren’t you?”

“That I am.”

By now, Jinya felt no aversion to revealing his demon powers. He’d been reluctant in the past, but he had since met people who accepted him as a demon. What’s more, Kaneomi had been introduced to him by Somegorou. He trusted her, even if he didn’t know her background.

He glanced at her face and saw her seemingly about to reproach him before thinking better of it. She said, “Regardless of what you are, it is a fact you are aiding me, and so I’ll place my trust in you.”

He couldn’t tell if that was genuine trust or just opportunism, but he had her agreement for the time being. Now he could focus his attention solely on Jishibari.

“Let’s pick up where we left off.” He stepped forward and glared at the still-shaken demon. He was calm on the surface, but inside he felt unsettled. The chains had proven to be troublesome. He held the advantage, but he still didn’t feel he was out of the woods. It was no wonder that Kaneomi had lost to Jishibari; she was strong enough to persist even after he had used two of his abilities against her.

Truth be told, Jishibari was not strong. She lacked Tsuchiura’s polished martial arts and the *Assimilation* demon’s strength, and she didn’t even come near Okada Kiichi’s overwhelming sheer technique. Out of all the demons Jinya had faced, he did not think Jishibari ranked particularly high, and yet she had still managed to get away from him with only a scratch.

From her movements, Jishibari obviously lacked combat experience. But if they were in more adept hands and presented with the right situation, those freely controllable chains would absolutely prove lethal. They only remained an annoyance right now due to her inexperience, but given time for mastery and an eye for opportunity, she could become a threat like no other.

Jinya's hand gripped Yarai tightly. No matter what the future might bring, he had the advantage now, in the present. He could not let this chance slip away. He would use *Dart* once more and end things. He lowered his stance, preparing to charge forth at full speed again, when he heard a familiar lisping voice and stopped.

"See? What did I tell you?"

He kept Jishibari within his field of view and searched the area, soon finding a small figure sitting on the railing of the bridge. His heart leapt at the sight of her.

"Who's that girl...?" Kaneomi muttered, but he didn't have it in him to reply.

They'd only met once, certainly not enough to grow attached. But seeing her here still perturbed him. He had met the girl, who was now wearing a blue kimono, only a few days ago. "Himawari..."

"Good evening, Uncle. Thank you for your help the other day." Still sitting on the railing, the young girl smiled like a summer flower in bloom. Her ordinary, commonplace greeting felt so terribly wrong in such a moment. "I'm impressed. I didn't think you'd be able to push my little sister into a corner like this."

"...Your *little* sister?"

"Yes. Jishibari is my little sister. I may not look like it, but I'm older, really," she said lightheartedly.

For some reason, he found it easy to believe her. The scattered pieces of information all fit together. The huge number of demons, Magatsume, Magatsume's underling Jishibari, and her older sister Himawari.

"I see," he said. "The demons surrounding you that night weren't attacking you at all..." They were led by her. This girl of tender years had been commanding those demons.

"Yes, those demons were entrusted to me by my mother. But I truly was happy you helped me, even if it was a misunderstanding." She beamed joyfully,

lending credence to her words. She looked so innocent, but that only made his heart heavier.

“...Who is your mother?” He already had an idea, but he asked anyway, hoping that by some miracle he might be wrong. But reality has a habit of betraying hopes.

“Oh, I haven’t told you yet, have I?” Himawari smiled, her kind eyes resembling crimson gems. “My mother is known as Magatsume.”

4

HIMAWARI, the demon who’d proclaimed herself the daughter of Magatsume, leapt down from the railing and walked up to Jishibari. She looked like an ordinary young girl, but her movements were nimble. She clearly was not human.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Nee-san.” Having finally recovered herself, Jishibari stood. Her shapely face turned expressionless like a noh mask, and she gazed at Jinya with iris-less eyes.

Jishibari’s ability was troublesome, but she herself was not; after all, an arm scratch had been enough to make her flustered. And yet, her dim eyes had an intensity that he couldn’t quite grasp now.

“I told you, didn’t I? He’s strong,” Himawari said.

“You were right. Honestly, I’m not so sure I can capture him.”

“In that case...” Himawari beckoned Jishibari to hunch over and whispered in her ear. Though they were in the middle of a battle, the two seemed as carefree as sisters gossiping secrets to one another.

Himawari had claimed Jishibari was the younger sister, and that seemed to be

true as Jishibari obeyed her without a word.

“I see... That’s a nice idea,” Jishibari said with a nod as her lips tugged up in a nasty grin. Her face was the same as Kaneomi’s, but it gave a completely different impression. She was still beautiful, but that only made her all the more eerie.

Himawari looked over at Jinya and smiled brilliantly as the six chains began to move once more. They rattled as the heads reared themselves toward Jinya and Kaneomi.

“Uncle Jinya, do you mind if we sisters fight together?” Himawari asked.

“Do what you will,” Jinya said. He looked at Kaneomi, who nodded understandingly back.

Back to square one. Cold air filled his lungs, and he steeled his heart. No matter who his opponent was, what needed to be done had not changed. Himawari was now an enemy.

“Then let us begin.”

Himawari’s words sent the chains slithering forth. Four chains flew closer, two apiece for Jinya and Kaneomi. Jinya dodged one and knocked away the other, but they just changed trajectories and approached again. Glancing Kaneomi’s way, he saw she was similarly struggling.

Although his fundamental knowledge came from the lessons of his youth, Jinya was mainly self-taught in the ways of the sword, having polished his own style through real combat. On the other hand, Kaneomi’s footwork and strikes were orthodox, faithful to the basics throughout. Her skill wasn’t lacking, but such orthodox, human swordsmanship was not meant for facing demons.

“Ngh...”

That was why she struggled against Jishibari. The techniques she knew were meant for human opponents. Fighting a humanoid demon would be one thing, but fending off chains that moved every which way was difficult.

The same could be said for Jinya. Never had he fought an opponent quite like this. Himawari was still there, waiting behind Jishibari. Seeing as Jishibari was a superior demon, Himawari—the older sister—almost certainly was one too, with a demon ability of her own. That being the case, he couldn't let Jishibari keep them busy for long. He would have to accept some concessions in order to break out of the situation. He prepared to force his way closer to his opponent, accepting the possibility of injury.

He knocked the chains away, aiming for the brief opening provided between attacks, and took a step forward. Himawari watched, a smiling look of composure ever on her face.

“Now.”

In response to her older sister's youthful voice, Jishibari brandished her left hand. The chains that had previously been targeting Jinya returned to her before madly charging forth, rushing against the wind. They were joined by the other two chains that had been waiting, and all six chains were now aimed at Kaneomi.

Jinya's mind immediately went blank. There was no way Kaneomi could fend off all six chains.

“You're not the type who can just stand by and watch as someone gets hurt,” Himawari said. “Which is why we have no need to aim for you directly.”

She was right. Perhaps in the past he could have been so heartless, but not anymore. Living in Edo had changed him. The things he'd gained there had weakened him to the point that he could no longer abandon everything for the sake of his one true goal.

“If we just aim for that woman, you'll do the rest for us, won't you?”

Mostly by reflex, Jinya used *Dart* to move toward Kaneomi. Now standing in front of her, he faced the approaching chains head-on, knowing full well it was what the enemy wanted.

“Kadono-sama!” Kaneomi exclaimed.

He tried to knock the chains away with Yarai, but with every block came another chain that rained down on him moments after. His greatest fear had come true: Jishibari was now adapting to the situation she found herself in to make the most of her ability. After just a bit of guidance on how to use her power, she was pushing Jinya to the brink. No matter how much he dodged or parried, another chain soon followed. He didn’t know Kaneomi particularly well, but he could not bring himself to abandon her to her fate. His own stubbornness exasperated him.

One chain, two, three. He slashed at one of them only for the links to bend, then straighten back out and attack again. He tried his best to parry the attacks coming from all sides, but there was only so much he could manage.

“I’ve got you now,” Jishibari sneered.

No matter how many times he defended, it was impossible to repel the chains forever. One managed to sneak its way around his left leg, ensnaring it.

“Ngh?!”

The chain flashed hot for a moment. When he looked down to investigate, he found it had disappeared.

The attacks ceased. Jishibari stood, calm and composed, as if her earlier agitation had never happened.

“What did you do?” Jinya glared.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she replied with a cocky grin.

She didn’t follow up with an attack even though she had him snared. He didn’t know why that was, but his best guess was that it had something to do with her ability. Why else would she look so confident while he was still unharmed?

After thinking that far, he abandoned all thought entirely. Guesswork wouldn’t lead to any answers here; the only way forward was to subdue

Jishibari.

He closed the gap in one motion, then slashed diagonally downward. In the opening that followed, he swung upward, slamming Jishibari with the back of his blade. Or at least that was what he intended to do.

“Oh my. How unfortunate.”

His feet weren't moving as he wanted... No, it was *Dart*. *Dart* didn't activate.

Like a fool, he was left bewildered for a brief instant, almost failing to notice the chain approaching him.

“Damn it...” He felt like kicking himself for being careless enough to let his focus slip mid-fight. He deflected the chain that was inches away from striking his solar plexus and glared at Jishibari.

“So not even cheap shots can get you. How annoying... But at least my ability has finally taken hold.” She seemed to boast in anticipation of victory.

From her display of confidence, Jinya became certain that this was her true power. *Jishibari* wasn't an ability to control chains. The manifestation and manipulation of them was merely a secondary aspect. The ability's true nature lay in binding.

“Your speed has been bound,” Jishibari declared.

He couldn't use *Dart*. The chains attacked once more with Kaneomi still behind him. The only thing that awaited him was a repeat of last time.

“Forgive me, Kaneomi-dono. I need you to retreat.” As he rapidly parried the chains, he whispered quietly to Kaneomi.

“I apologize, but I cannot move my leg,” a vexed, remorseful voice replied.

Though slight, Jinya's reaction time faltered slightly as his attention split between parrying and Kaneomi. A chain coiled around his right arm. He hurriedly tried to fling it off but then felt it sear against his skin.

“Your flying slashes are troublesome as well. Let me restrain them too.”

This time his *Flying Blade* was bound.

Things were not looking good. At this rate, the two would be done in. He grabbed and lifted Kaneomi under his left arm, then retreated as far as he could. After making a fair amount of distance, he looked down at her in his arm and saw her face warped with vexation.

“Forgive me. I’ve only held you back.”

She was entirely unharmed. Under her kimono robe, however, he could see a pattern of chains tattooed onto one of her slender legs. He looked at his own right arm and saw the same tattoo pattern. He couldn’t check, but his left leg was probably the same.

“*Jishibari...*” Jinya looked back at the bridge, surrounded by all the darkness of Kyoto. The demon stood there, looking arrogantly down on the two. Around her swayed three chains. “I see. Each of your chains must be able to restrain one thing, then.”

In all likelihood, her power was able to affect anything—be it demon abilities or movement—so long as its usage fell under the definition of restraining.

“That’s right. Not that knowing that will do you any good now.” Jishibari sneered. She sure was full of herself for someone who’d lost her composure after taking one wound.

“You’re kind of stupid, huh?” Jinya said with an exasperated sigh.

“...What was that?” She fell for his provocation right away. While her power was troublesome, she herself was easy to handle. He saw an opportunity to force an opening once more.

He strolled forward as if he were nonchalantly going for a walk, paying Jishibari no heed at all. Furious, she sent her three chains racing toward him.

“Wait, don’t!” Himawari yelled, but it was too late. Kaneomi was out of range, and the chains were already headed for Jinya. He almost wanted to thank Jishibari for being so simpleminded.

Jinya swung Yarai, sweeping away the chains. Some of his powers were unavailable, but that meant there were fewer chains to deal with in turn. Jishibari also could no longer afford to leave back chains for defense during her attacks. Jinya would be at a loss as for how to attack if she had kept her chains fully back on defense, which was likely what Himawari was after. But now that they were all used for attacking, the one in trouble was Jishibari.

Invisibility—Jinya faded, melting into the scenery.

“Huh?” Jishibari blanked out. She froze in place, searching her surroundings. She was no different from an ordinary girl outside of the fact that she had a demon power. Jinya even felt a little bad for her, but that didn’t mean he would hold back. He quickly rehardened his heart and closed the distance.

“He’s right in front of you!” Himawari yelled.

He wondered how she knew, but he didn’t stop. Although the chains lashed forth, he would reach Jishibari faster. Their earlier exchanges had already made it clear that she did not have the physical ability to defend herself.

“Eek, gah...?!”

He swung at Jishibari’s abdomen using only the back of his sword, but it was still a full-powered strike that had to hurt.

She doubled over on herself, collapsing to the ground and hanging her head. He dodged the chains when they finally arrived and tried to place his sword against her neck, but the chains blocked his blade. One jutted toward his head, so he stepped back. Jishibari took the opportunity to force herself to her feet and glare at Jinya.

“Let’s retreat,” Himawari said as she approached Jishibari.

“But—”

“You’ve yet to fulfill Mother’s orders. You cannot be allowed to die here,” she said icily.

“Ngh... F-fine.” Though she was bitter, Jishibari did not argue against her

sister. She too understood that there would be no reversing the situation.

“I apologize, Uncle, but we will be taking our leave now.”

“Do you really think I’d just let you go, Himawari?” Jinya stepped forward, intending to give chase.

The chains attacked with irregular movements in an effort to impede his progress. The first came from the front, but he sidestepped and pressed past it. Another came at him diagonally, so he stooped his body low and slipped under it. The third crawled along the ground, then leapt toward his face. He halted and swatted it aside with Yarai.

Just like that, he had dodged all three chains. Now the demons had no method of defense left. He wouldn’t even need *Dart* to reach them before the chains could return. He ran as fast as he could after the two fleeing demons, but his chase was cut short.

“Behind you!” Kaneomi warned.

Before he could even spin around, a metal ball slammed into his back. “Gah?!”

Pain coursed through him. He fought to stay on his feet and knocked down the chain that had attacked from behind again.

He turned back toward Jishibari and Himawari, ready to give chase once more, but they were gone.

“...They got away.”

It was quiet atop Gojo Ohashi Bridge. Only the sound of the river flowing beneath it could be heard. He noticed no footsteps he could follow. They were gone.

“Kadono-sama...” Kaneomi said as she neared him. The tattoo on her leg had disappeared. The fourth chain that had attacked him from behind must have been the one that had bound her. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t worry about it. This was my mistake.”

Kaneomi seemed to be in low spirits, perhaps because she believed she had only held Jinya back. He placed no blame on her, though. All the anger welling up inside him now was directed at himself.

He reflected on the encounter. In terms of strength, Jishibari was far weaker than the likes of Tsuchiura and Okada Kiichi. By all appearances, she was not somebody who posed a threat. But her demon power was enough to make up for all her physical weakness, her lack of martial arts skills, and the difference in experience between them. Jinya had had many opportunities to win, but conceit had stopped him from taking them. He had been so sure he couldn’t lose to a demon like Jishibari, and for that, he deserved defeat.

“Magatsume...” After mulling over his defeat, he thought of the mastermind commanding the demons. Jishibari had claimed to be hunting humans on Magatsume’s orders. If Magatsume was someone who meant to bring harm to people, then it would likely only be a matter of time before he faced her—and Jishibari and Himawari as well.

He tightly gripped the handle of his sword and vowed not to make such foolish blunders again. However, an inexplicable pang of sadness ran through him.

“Thank you for eating with us.”

Jinya bowed as a customer left through the entrance curtains. He never so much as smiled for his customers, not even a customer-service smile, but the regulars were so used to it that they didn’t care. The restaurant’s lunchtime bustle had passed, and things were slow again. Having seen off his last customer, he would have some peace before things picked up once more in the evening.

Jinya had opened his restaurant as usual once dawn came, but his mind had

been full of the prior night's events while he worked. He just couldn't shake the thoughts of his humiliating loss.

In the end, he had failed to defeat the demon of Gojo Ohashi Bridge. Jishibari had escaped uncaptured, and his *Dart* and *Flying Blade* had been neutralized. This was a failure of dizzying magnitude with nothing to show for it.

The issue of Magatsume remained as well. Magatsume herself was almost certainly powerful, given that she was the mother of at least one strong ability-bearing demon. From what Himawari said, Magatsume had clearly given the two demons orders with an objective in mind. He didn't know what that objective could be, but it certainly wasn't anything pleasant.

"Just great." He sighed, a dark mood hanging over him. Nomari returned at that moment. Noticing something was off, she immediately ran up to him.

"Is something wrong, Father?"

"Nothing worth worrying you about. How was school today?"

"Good. We did some math and writing. I'll learn quickly so I can help out in the restaurant!"

How sweet, Jinya thought. His heavy heart had grown lighter, and he rubbed his daughter's head. "You must be tired."

"Ehe heh, no way. School's nothing."

"I see. I have a free moment right now. Want to drink some tea together?"

"Can we?" She beamed with joy, but her expression quickly clouded. Her gaze fell on a woman eating in the restaurant.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"There's still a customer left."

The woman paid them no mind and continued eating her soba. Nomari looked hesitantly at Jinya, wondering if it'd really be okay for the two of them to have tea while business was still going. He just affectionately patted her head

and said, "It's fine. She doesn't count."

The woman didn't react to his remark. His last customer had left not long ago; that was to say, this woman was no customer of his.

She finished her soba and presented the empty bowl to Jinya. "I'll have a kakiage soba next, please."

"Seconds wasn't enough, was it?" he said with exasperation. "You know, most people *pay* for their food."

"But I *have* paid. Sixty whole yen, to be exact."

"...Fair point, but you're still eating way too much. Actually, why are you even still here, anyway?"

The woman was his previous night's client, Kaneomi. For some reason, she'd remained at Demon Soba, even eating two bowls of soba and now ordering a third on his dime. Surely he had a right to complain by this point.

"Since you're a demon hunter, one can assume you will come face-to-face with Magatsume eventually. What's more, you now have a reason to actively pursue Jishibari like me, do you not?"

He did. His *Dart* and *Flying Blade* had been taken away from him by Jishibari. By defeating her, he might be able to regain his powers. He now had more reasons to pursue Jishibari than Kaneomi's request alone.

"You're right, I suppose. But that still doesn't explain why you're here," he said.

"Seeing as you're pursuing Jishibari, I would like you to allow me to live with you. By doing so, we could share information we find and be better prepared in the event they strike first." She made her bewildering suggestion with a beautiful smile. Jinya had to wonder where her modest, meek self from last night had disappeared to. She could be quite assertive despite her humble tone. He couldn't believe he'd ever thought her to be dainty in the least.

"Father, what's going on?" Nomari looked up at Jinya with a slightly cross

expression.

“We have the same objective, so my presence shouldn’t be a problem,” Kaneomi said. “I’ll train so I don’t hold you back, and I’ll help out with the restaurant.”

“It’d be improper of a young woman to stay with a man she doesn’t know. I’m afraid I’ll have to decline,” Jinya said.

“But you’ve accepted my request, and I’ve paid you in advance. By all logic, I am still your client. You need not go so far as to serve me like one would their master, but I do believe some concessions are in order.”

Jinya found himself at a loss for a counterargument. She had indeed already paid him a hefty fee of sixty yen, and he’d also failed to defeat Jishibari. He owed her. After seeing him fight, Kaneomi had likely decided that Jinya was capable of defeating Jishibari, so she would not withdraw her request now. Even if he offered to return her payment, she would not accept.

“What say you?” she asked, cocking her head slightly with a kind look.

He had no choice. Without a word, he went to the kitchen and began dispassionately cooking. He soon presented the finished bowl to her. “...Here. One kakiage soba.”

“Can I take that as a yes?” She smiled ear to ear, clearly pleased with herself. In stark contrast, Nomari puffed her cheeks out and pouted.

Come to think of it, Magatsume wasn’t the only mystery. Kaneomi’s identity and the reason why Jishibari looked like her also remained unknown.

“It’s delicious.” Noticing Jinya’s stare, Kaneomi smiled slightly at him. She was full of mystery, but at the very least she didn’t seem to be a bad person.

With a weak sigh, Jinya wondered if he could charge a small lodging fee to at least get something out of this.

Demons were running rampant, and a woman known as Magatsume was up

to something. Unknown beings lurked in the darkness of Kyoto, but Jinya's daily life itself hadn't changed much nevertheless. By day he ran his soba restaurant, and by night he hunted demons. But even that routine wasn't beyond small change.

“Whew...” Finally satiated, Kaneomi gently dabbed her mouth. Jinya looked at her in exasperation. “I do hope we get along, you two.”

And that was how Demon Soba gained a mysterious freeloader.

Interlude:
A Tale of Candy Apples and the Heavenly Maiden

1

ONCE UPON A TIME, there were seven heavenly maiden sisters who lived above the clouds.

These heavenly maidens were children of the gods, and they wove beautiful white cloth. This cloth, when made into raiment and worn, could allow anybody to fly.

One day, one of the sisters fancied a bath, so she took her cloak made of such raiment and flew down to the earth.

Now, on the earth lived a young man. His parents had passed away early in his life, so he lived frugally together with a juvenile fox in his blacksmithing village. This fox had been found injured in the nearby forest by the young man, who then saved it. Ever since, the fox had been fond of him.

One night, as the young man was laid up in bed, the fox spoke to him in the language of humans. *“Master, a beautiful heavenly maiden will descend to the earth tomorrow to bathe. If you steal her raiment, she will be unable to return to the heavens and will have to marry you.”*

The young man was surprised that the fox had talked but was not frightened, having known it for a long time. He did as the fox said and went to the riverbank, then waited for the heavenly maiden to appear.

To his disbelief, a fair lady descended from the sky, just as the fox had said. The heavenly maiden took off her raiment and rested it on a nearby branch before beginning to bathe.

Seeing his chance, the young man quietly approached the branch, then stole away the raiment.

Upon finishing her bath, the heavenly maiden noticed her raiment had been taken and began to wail, pleading to the young man. *“I beg you, give me back my raiment. Without it I cannot return to the heavens.”*

But the young man did not oblige. Instead, he took the raiment and burned it before her eyes. As she grieved, he said, *“I am poor, but I will work hard for your sake. Will you please be my wife?”*

Unable to return to her home in the sky, the heavenly maiden had no choice. And so she became his wife.

But the story doesn't end there. True to his word, the young man worked hard for the heavenly maiden's sake. Seeing his efforts, she slowly began to fall for him. In time, she would come to accept him, and the two would love one another.

That was how the heavenly maiden truly became the young man's wife.

—Excerpt from the “Fox's Mirror”

Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan

Kono Publishing

...She looked up to see the clear skies, just as they always were. There was once a time when she flew through the blue expanse, but now it remained forever beyond her reach.

No matter how much she wished to, she could not return to the skies. She now belonged to this far-off land as the wife of the young man, and she knew she would simply have to accept that. She was bound to the earth with only her memories of heaven to look back on.

Time passed peacefully, and at some point the heavenly maiden stopped crying. She grew used to the wifely role that had been imposed on her and, perhaps, came to like it. Every day was busy, but in her free moments she'd

catch herself looking up at the sky. One day, she realized something as she stared at the distant blue. Even though the sky was always there, she did not look up at it so much anymore. Without even realizing it, she had forgotten how she used to frolic in the heavens.

And so, the heavenly maiden lost her ability to fly.

Now then, just what was she held captive by? Was she kept against her will? Was it her body that had been bound to earth? Or was it ultimately her heart that imprisoned her?

August 2009.

I was treated to quite the rare sight today.

“Oh, Miyaka.”

In the evening, I happened to run into a classmate of mine outside. I first met him about a month before school began, and we’d since become acquaintances. I’d even say he was the boy I was closest to in my class.

I wasn’t sure I’d call us friends, though. I mean, I didn’t have anything against him, and I didn’t feel like he had anything against me, but he was always the one lending me a hand when I got wrapped up in occult stuff, so it felt kind of shameless to call him a friend when I was so indebted. I did think he *liked* me, though, just only in the way you couldn’t help but fuss over a cute, helpless child.

“What’s with the getup?” I asked. His clothes surprised me a bit. I usually only ever saw him wearing his student uniform or some casual jeans with a plain shirt, but he was wearing a yukata robe right now as if it were totally normal. It looked perfect on him too, like he had just walked off the set of a period drama or something.

“Exactly what it looks like. There’s a festival at your shrine today, isn’t there?”

Today was August 15th, which meant that my family’s shrine was indeed

holding a festival. Since yesterday, there had been so many vendor stalls getting ready that some of them even had to spill out onto the roads. Many people were looking forward to the event as a highlight of the later part of summer vacation.

“There is. You’re going?” I asked.

“That’s the plan. And you?”

“I’ll be there. As help, though.”

As an Itsukihime, I was stuck with doing various tasks and couldn’t enjoy the festival like others. My mother told me I didn’t have to help if I didn’t want to, but I knew how busy things got every year and wanted to share the load.

“I’m a little surprised, though. I didn’t think you’d be the kind of guy to join these kinds of things all on your own.”

We’d gone to the beach, done some shopping, and even gone to karaoke before, but my circle of friends had generally always been the one inviting him. He gave the impression of an overly serious, unsociable kind of guy, but he was surprisingly amicable and often accepted invitations. Still, I was surprised that he’d attend an event like this himself.

He smiled wryly and said, “There’s nothing strange about it. Being able to drink liquor while listening to festival music is quite the treat.”

“Yikes. I can’t believe those words are coming out of a high schooler’s mouth.” I felt like I’d just heard something criminal. He was supposedly in the clear age-wise, though, so maybe it was all right? “So you’re wearing a yukata for the festival?”

“Huh? Oh, this is kinagashi, not a yukata.”

I didn’t know much at all about those kinds of things and couldn’t tell the difference one bit.

He explained, “A yukata is something you wear after bathing or in the summer. Kinagashi is when you wear a kimono without a haori coat or hakama

pants.”

He was always oddly knowledgeable about the strangest things, yet somehow the same guy couldn't figure out electronics to save his life. He was so bad that he still sometimes confused DVDs with video tapes. I'm not that good with electronics myself, but even I can still teach him things about home appliances. That's how bad he was.

“I notice you're not with Kaoru today. She told me she was coming, so I'm surprised she wasn't with you,” I said.

“Ah, yeah. I have a prior engagement today.”

That was a shame. Azusaya Kaoru had been my best friend since junior high, and the three of us often did things together at school. She was really looking forward to the festival, so I felt a little bad that I couldn't go with her. He was a bit soft on her, so I assumed he felt bad too...or maybe not? He actually appeared to be enjoying himself a little right now.

“Is that right? You seem to be looking forward to it.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah. I mean, you even went all out and dressed up.”

Many women wore yukata robes to festivals, but not a lot of men dressed up for such occasions. It was a bit strange to see him go this far.

He smiled broadly, his expression soft and natural. “Even I get fired up sometimes. I promised a long time ago to meet an old acquaintance today.”

The way he spoke was so gentle that I kind of figured out what was going on. “Don't tell me, a girl?”

“Yeah. How'd you know?” He admitted it plainly, no denial or embarrassment whatsoever. I didn't intend to criticize him for that—I had no right to, since I wasn't his lover or anything. It did bother me a little, though.

“Is that so? You look awfully thrilled to meet her. Is she cute?” I couldn't help but get a little inquisitive. He didn't seem to particularly mind, however; he just

nodded and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

“Of course. She’s a heavenly maiden, after all,” he said matter-of-factly. I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not, but he was grinning a little. He sounded so proud, as if he had one-upped me, that I couldn’t help but be taken aback. Perhaps amused by my reaction, he smiled and started walking again. “I’d best be off. Later.”

“Huh? Hey, wait!”

He continued to walk off while I was still flustered. Soon enough, he disappeared from sight.

He often said Kaoru looked like a heavenly maiden. Apparently that was because Kaoru resembled an old acquaintance of his who had the look of one.

Was he meeting this so-called heavenly maiden today, then? Perhaps. It wasn’t like it had anything to do with me, so I shouldn’t have cared, but...it did feel like I’d somehow lost something.

“...I don’t like this one bit,” I muttered.

As if in reply, a crow cawed.

It was now August in year five of the Meiji era (1872 AD). Things all began when Akitsu Somegorou came bearing strange news.

“Seven days from now, the Aragi Inari Shrine will be holding a festival.”

If someone left Sanjyou Street where Demon Soba was located, they could find a locally famous shrine surrounded by nearby trees. This was the Aragi Inari Shrine, an ancient place of worship that received many visitors even to this day.

However, the shrine was famous less for its religious rites and more for its festival held on the 15th of August. The grounds of the shrine were spacious, allowing for many stalls to fill it on those busy festival days. Festivals were generally held on religiously auspicious days, which directly tied them to both Shinto and Buddhist teachings, but that was merely a pretext to celebrate for

the majority of the masses. The festivals held at the Aragi Inari Shrine were no different—they were seen as recreation and not a religious event by most people.

“You should head on over and take a gander with Nomari-chan. It’s good to relax every now and then.” On the surface, Somegorou seemed to be suggesting that Jinya take a breather with his daughter, but the fake smile on his face told Jinya there was more to it.

With a flat expression, Jinya cut to the chase. “All right, what’s really going on?”

Somegorou’s face lit up as though he were waiting for that exact reply. “Thanks for saving us both some time. I’ve got some rumors that might be of interest to ya.”

He had come to foist off some trouble onto Jinya. Of course, that was just what Jinya wanted. One of them got his problems taken care of, and the other got to take care of problems. It was a win-win for them both.

“Do ya know which god is enshrined in the Aragi Inari Shrine?”

“Seeing as it’s an Inari shrine, it must worship Inari, of course.” Inari was a common subject of worship for many shrines. Such shrines were easily recognizable by their fox statues as foxes were messengers of Inari.

“Right, Aragi enshrines the great fox. That’s why the shrine’s go-shintai² is a metal mirror, see, but there’s a bit of an interesting story about it. Apparently, a heavenly maiden who descended to earth used this mirror to return to the skies.”

After finishing his soba, Somegorou continued his explanation between sips of his tea.

At the Aragi Inari Shrine, they told a tale that spoke of a heavenly maiden who came from the sky and married a man of the earth. Similar legends of interspecies marriage were not rare and could be found in some form just

about anywhere. This story of a heavenly maiden was a common and widespread one as well, almost always involving the heavenly maiden descending to earth and then having her raiment stolen by a man whom she then married.

“A raiment legend?” Jinya said.

“Yes, yes, that’s the word for it. But the Aragi version of the tale is a bit different from the others. In their version, the heavenly maiden has her raiment stolen and is forced to marry the young man as usual, but then she gets sick, so the man tries to return his wife to the heavens. They use a mirror that could connect the heavens and the earth, which happens to be the metal mirror go-shintai worshipped at the shrine.”

“Interesting...” Jinya didn’t think this story was an empty legend. He knew objects could hold power. Yarai was worshipped as a sacred sword which could last a thousand years without any sign of wear, and indeed it hadn’t chipped once in the thirty-plus years he’d been fighting with it. The Yatonomori Kaneomi blades were also special, having their own powers from the demon blood worked into them. Similar things could be said for the artifact spirits Somegorou used. Objects could come to harbor emotions over the long years. An object that had been worshipped like a shrine’s go-shintai could very well gain the ability to connect heaven and earth if given enough time.

“Now, this bit’s important, so listen carefully,” Somegorou said. “Last night, there was apparently some mysterious light coming from the inner sanctuary where the mirror is located. The eyewitness says he caught a faint glimpse of a person there, but the head priest figures it was just some thief with a lantern trying to steal some of the monetary offerings. Interesting stuff, huh?” He grinned. “I don’t have any particular clients for you this time, but you like this kind of stuff enough anyway, right?”

The reality of the mirror’s powers was up in the air, but it wasn’t unthinkable for heavenly maidens to exist when demons certainly did.

“That I do,” Jinya said. “Consider your meal paid for.”

“Oh my, how gracious.”

Somegorou had helped him out plenty of times, so one bowl of soba was nothing.

Thrilled to have a free meal, Somegorou let out some jovial laughter, then drank a second cup of tea and left to get back to work for the afternoon.

“A festival, huh?” Jinya muttered to himself. The tale of the heavenly maiden and the eyewitness account of mysterious light were intriguing, but the festival itself interested him too. Come to think of it, he hadn’t taken Nomari to a festival before. Perhaps he could take care of this supernatural business quickly and then spend time relaxing with his daughter at the festival, just like Somegorou suggested.

“Thank you for waiting. I am the chief priest of this shrine, Kunieda Koudai.”

“Thank you for having me. I am Kadono Jinya. I run a soba restaurant out on Sanjyou Street.”

After talking to Somegorou, Jinya had closed up the restaurant and visited the Aragi Inari Shrine to ask about the legend passed down there, as well as the mysterious light and the person who’d been spotted. The chief priest of the shrine, Kunieda Koudai, was a skinny man in his late forties. He was mild-mannered and took no offense to Jinya’s frank questioning.

“Yes, we do have a legend that speaks of a heavenly maiden who descended to this area. Our shrine’s go-shintai is also indeed a metal mirror said to connect the heavens and the earth. But I really do believe yesterday’s incident was just a thief having a go at the donation box. It’s a little hard to believe it could be anything more; legends are legends precisely because they do not occur often, after all.” The chief priest seemed convinced that the intruder was just a donation thief and thought nothing of the incident.

“I see,” Jinya said. “Would it be possible for me to have a look at this metal mirror?”

“I’m afraid not. We do not allow the general public to view it.”

Shrines were generally built with two main parts: the inner sanctuary and the hall of worship. When people visited a shrine to pray, they generally entered the hall of worship. Further beyond that was the inner sanctuary where the go-shintai was enshrined, which usually was only accessible to those who worked at the shrine. The go-shintai wasn’t considered the shrine’s deity itself, but it was still fairly sacred. That was why it was generally located far back, in the inner sanctuary, where it was further kept in an alcove behind a small set of doors to hide it away from the public eye. It seemed this custom was practiced at the Aragi Inari Shrine as well.

“Kadono-san, you mentioned you run a soba restaurant, yes? Would you like to have a stall at the festival? Our grounds still have plenty of space left.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline,” Jinya said with a slight bow. He looked around the shrine grounds and saw that the preparations for the festival seven days ahead were gradually coming to completion. The people carrying materials around were likely the same ones who would be manning the stalls. “Hm?” Jinya perked up.

“Is something the matter?”

“...No, nothing important.” Just now, he’d seen something move in the grove surrounding the shrine, off toward the side with the inner sanctuary. The chief priest didn’t seem to notice, however.

“Has something caught your interest?”

Jinya shook his head. He was certain he hadn’t imagined what he saw, but telling the chief priest would be pointless. Instead, he said, “It’s quite lively today.”

“And it’ll be livelier yet on the night of the festival. I really do look forward to

it every year.”

Jinya was just saying something harmless to change the topic, but the chief priest replied enthusiastically. His eyes seemed to take on a hue of nostalgia as he reflected on his younger days.

“I take it you have good memories of the festival?” Jinya asked.

“I do, and they always come back to me this time of year. Memories of a summer festival long, long ago...” The sudden feverish tone in the priest’s voice slightly surprised Jinya. He was about to inquire further when a woman’s voice called out.

“Excuse me, dear?” The voice came from a kind-looking woman nearing old age who had a distinct chin and slightly droopy eyes.

“Oh, Chiyo.”

“I hate to interrupt, but a guest has come asking for my husband.” She bowed apologetically, then gave Jinya a smile. She seemed to be the chief priest’s wife. The two looked like a harmonious couple, given how casually they addressed one another.

“Sorry, Kadono-san, but I have some business to attend to.”

“It’s no problem at all. Thank you for your time.”

There was nothing more to be gained from asking questions, anyway. Jinya gave a slight bow and watched as the two left the shrine grounds.

The woman named Chiyo suddenly turned around and smiled sweetly. “Jinya-sama, please do feel free to come again if you ever need anything. You’ll always be welcome here.”

Intuitively, Jinya could tell she was speaking from the heart and not just as a matter of courtesy. “Thank you.”

Chiyo smiled broadly and nodded before walking off.

Jinya’s visit had been sudden, and he had asked a lot of fairly probing

questions. Even so, the chief priest—and his wife Chiyo for that matter—had been welcoming of him all along. Perhaps it took people that kind and bighearted to serve a god. The thought made Jinya feel all the more guilty about what he was going to do next.

He walked from the shrine grounds toward the inner sanctuary, hoping to confirm what he'd seen earlier. People would take notice if he carelessly approached the sacred inner sanctuary, however. At worst, the local authorities might get involved. That was why he used *Invisibility* to hide his form first.

Most shrines were surrounded by a cluster of trees known as a shrine grove. The trees around the Aragi Inari Shrine weren't numerous enough to be called a proper grove, but they weren't sparse by any means. Jinya remained vigilant of his surroundings as he proceeded to walk in the shadows formed by the trees.

Ssshft. Just as he reached the back side of the inner sanctuary, he heard weeds being trampled. He undid his *Invisibility* and popped his sword out of his scabbard, leaving it ready to be drawn at any moment. His target, who hadn't noticed him yet, was walking along carelessly.

Jinya wondered what kind of demon it would be. He slid his feet half a step forward, sharpening his senses as he laid eyes on the enemy.

"Ugh, where am I? Guys? You can come on out now. This is a work thing, right? C'mon, you guys, it's not funny anymore, seriously."

The tension left his body all at once. He felt like a fool for being so guarded toward what seemed to be just an ordinary young girl. "What in the world...?"

She was of slight build and wore a light-blue yukata robe with a morning glory embroidered on it. She seemed to be around thirteen, maybe fourteen years of age. Her hair was tied up with some oddly vivid red cloth, but there was nothing else particularly suspicious about her.

"Whoa!" She finally noticed Jinya's presence, then beamed, running up to him like a playful puppy. "There you are! Thank goodness we finally met up." She approached without hesitation, then froze in place once she drew near. "Huh?

Wait, what? What's going on?" Noises of sheer confusion came out of her mouth.

2

THEIR DAYS OF HAPPINESS continued for a long time.

The young man and the heavenly maiden became a harmonious couple without the slightest grudge between them. As he promised, the young man worked hard despite his poverty, and the heavenly maiden supported him. While their start had been unusual, they had managed to become husband and wife in earnest.

But that all suddenly came to an end.

One day, the heavenly maiden was stricken with illness. Worried, the young man wanted to scrounge up what little money they had to call a doctor, but the heavenly maiden calmly turned down the idea.

"I was born to the heavens. I am not meant to live long on the earth."

Heavenly maidens could only live off the pure air of their birthplace. Life on the earth was akin to wading through poison for her.

"I've lived a good life, having known you. But at the end of it all, I wish to return to the heavens once more."

The young man regretted that he had burned her cloak. He racked his brain, wondering what he could do to help his wife. Then the fox, now fully grown, spoke in the language of humans once more.

"Burn my body, mix my ashes into metal, and use it to create a mirror. That mirror shall become a bridge between heaven and earth."

After saying this, the fox bit off its own tongue and died. The young man did as the fox said and burned its corpse, then worked the ashes into metal and

made a mirror. Once the sickly heavenly maiden held the metal mirror, it glowed with light, and her path to the heavens was revealed.

“With this, you can now return to the heavens,” the young man said.

The heavenly maiden had been ready to die as his wife, but she was saved by the young man’s wish for her to return and live.

“Thank you. But do not forget me. Even if the heavens and the earth separate us, we will always be husband and wife,” she said.

And so, the maiden returned to her heaven.

The young man arranged for the metal mirror to be preserved in a shrine, then returned to his former way of life.

Occasionally, however, the mirror is said to glow. Surely it must be the heavenly maiden visiting the earth to play?

This has been the tale of the *Fox’s Mirror*, as passed down in the Aragi Inari Shrine of Sanjyou, Kyoto.

“...And that’s the ‘Fox’s Mirror,’ the raiment legend passed down in Sanjyou, Kyoto.”

Having returned from the shrine, Jinya was listening to Kaneomi speak. He had mentioned wanting to look into the particular raiment legend told at the Aragi Inari Shrine, and Kaneomi just so happened to be familiar with it.

“Thanks. It’s quite a coincidence that you know the story, though,” Jinya said.

“I just so happened to borrow a book with it, that’s all.” She showed him a book whose cover read *Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan*.

His heart began to race out of nostalgia.

“The book is a collection of many stories, both famous and obscure. There’s ‘The AmanoJaku and Urikohime,’ the ‘Princess and the Blue Demon,’ ‘The Ubume Specter,’ ‘The Invisible Demon of the Temple Town,’ ‘Ghost Alley,’ and

more. It's got quite a few stories you don't see much elsewhere, and the compiler's comments are pretty interesting... Jinya-sama, is something the matter?"

"It's nothing," he said. But, in truth, he felt strange. He had heard of the book *Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan* before, during the fabricated day he had spent together with Yuunagi, Nomari's mother. He had assumed the book wasn't actually real, but here he was seeing it before him now. That fact bewildered him, but the realization that not everything about that day had been a lie uplifted him a little.

"If you say so. Sorry, I've strayed off topic a bit, haven't I? The raiment legend you wanted to hear about was this 'Fox's Mirror,' wasn't it? Incidentally, who might this lady be?" Kaneomi glanced over at the girl Jinya had met in the shrine grove.

"H-hello." The girl, feeling a little put on the spot all of a sudden, smiled stiffly. She'd said she had nowhere to go, so Jinya had taken her to Demon Soba for the time being.

He hadn't explained anything to Kaneomi yet, so she was a bit uncertain what tone to use with the girl. "Please call me Kaneomi. May I have your name?"

"Nice to meet you. I'm, uhhh... Wait, is it okay for me to give my name here?" The girl started with a greeting but then began to mutter to herself before going silent completely.

Unsure what to do, Kaneomi looked to Jinya for help, so he summarized the girl's identity as briefly as possible. "She's a heavenly maiden."

"What?" The girl's and Kaneomi's voices overlapped. Kaneomi wore confusion on her face, and the girl blushed bright red at being called a heavenly maiden. Both stared intently at Jinya, but he really had no other way to put it, so he just repeated himself once more.

"I said, she's a heavenly maiden."

Half a koku³ earlier, back at the shrine grove, the strange girl looked at Jinya in confusion.

“Huh? Wait, what? What’s going on?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Huh? U-uh...”

Though she was a stranger, he felt no caution toward the girl. She was clearly a human and did not look trained in martial arts. Still, he kept his left hand on his scabbard, ready to draw at any moment.

“Tell me your name, for starters,” he said. “I’m Kadono Jinya.”

“Huh? What’re you introducing yourself for?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“What do *you* mean ‘what do you mean’?” The girl cocked her head. The two were clearly not on the same wavelength.

“I...don’t have a clue what you’re getting at, but never mind. I’d like to ask you some questions, if that’s all right,” he said.

“O-okay, sure. Oh, actually, I’d like to ask you some things first, if you don’t mind.” Seeing him nod, the girl hesitantly asked, “What’s with the outfit?”

Jinya looked down at his clothes. He was wearing a black haori coat and gray hakama pants, all uncreased and in good condition. The sword at his waist could perhaps be seen as strange, but there were still ex-samurai who insisted on wearing swords even now in the Meiji era. His look was basically normal. “Is something wrong with my appearance?”

“Huh? O-oh, uh, no, you look good, but, uhh...” She smiled dryly. Then, as if she’d suddenly been struck with a realization, she went wide-eyed and gasped. “Wait! *No way*. Hey, uh, so like, where exactly is this place, if you don’t mind me asking...kind sir?”

“The Aragi Inari Shrine.”

“No, no, I mean this area, what’s the name of this town or whatever? Um, if you would be so kind as to tell me.”

“This is Kyoto, right around Sanjyou Street. And you don’t need to try so hard to speak politely if it’s too much trouble.”

“O-oh, okay, thanks, phew,” she said, a bit embarrassed. She chewed over his words, deep in thought. “Kyoto, huh...? All right, one more question. What year is it?”

“The fifth year of Meiji.”

The girl sagged her shoulders and sighed, apparently reaching some kind of understanding. “Thanks. I think I get what’s going on now. So that talk about being a hundred was for real, then... Wow, I can’t believe I’m not even freaked out by this kind of stuff anymore.” She seemed oddly weary.

“If that’s all, I’d like to ask you some questions now. First, what are you doing here?” Jinya asked. They were in a thicket behind the inner sanctuary of the Aragi Inari Shrine. This was no place where ordinary people were allowed to wander. The only people he could imagine wanting to be here were thieves hoping to break into the shrine.

“Hmm, yeah. Good question. What *am* I doing here?” The girl sagged her shoulders and drooped her head. “There was this bright light that shined for a moment, then the next thing I knew, boom, here I was. So, yeah. I don’t really know why I’m here.”

“I see. By any chance, do you know your way home from here?”

“Nope. I took a quick look around, but this place clearly isn’t my neighborhood. I don’t even know the first thing I’d do to get back.” Her teary eyes and the sad look on her face didn’t seem like an act. Jinya had no clue who this girl was, but at the very least it didn’t seem like she was trying to trick him.

If he were to take what she said at face value, then she had been enveloped

in light and suddenly transported here from a completely different place. He recalled what he'd heard the previous night about the metal mirror glowing with light and wondered if, perhaps, she had come from a place one could not return to by ordinary means, like in a particular legend.

“Could you *actually* be a heavenly maiden?”

“And then you brought her here, I take it?” Kaneomi said.

In the end, the girl hadn't given him a clear-cut answer. Jinya brought her back to his home, though; he would've felt bad leaving her on her own when he knew she had nowhere to go.

After listening to his explanation, Kaneomi let out a soft sigh. “You certainly... How should I put it? Let's say you're no stranger to bringing women home. First me, and now this girl.”

That was quite rude, making him out to be a philanderer. In the first place, Kaneomi had *forced* her way into staying at his place, so she had no grounds to be making such a claim at all.

“But putting that aside, you truly believe this girl is a heavenly maiden?” she asked.

“I'm not completely sure, but she does seem to be from a far-off land.”

The girl had gawked at the townscape the entire way back to Demon Soba. She also seemed a bit bewildered by the local attire. She had to have either come from a foreign country or a separate world. Jinya wasn't quite sure which it was, but he had a feeling she was far removed from the culture of Japan regardless.

“So, Heavenly Maiden-dono...” Jinya turned to address the girl, who grew red in the face.

“Um, Kadono-kun? Could you maybe cut it out with the ‘heavenly maiden’ stuff?” She seemed to reject the moniker out of embarrassment. It'd be

inconvenient to continue the conversation without a way of addressing her, though, and she still hadn't told him her own name.

"Well, you don't want us to know your real name, right?"

"Yeaah. I just get the feeling it'd wind up being weird."

He didn't ask why that was. He figured she had her reasons, and he didn't make it his business to pry.

"All right, then. How about we just call you Asagao?" On the girl's yukata robe was a vivid morning glory—known as 'asagao' in Japanese. It wasn't the most inspired name, but that should be fine since it was only temporary.

"I see you didn't reach far for that one," Kaneomi said.

He himself thought the same, but it still peeved him to have it pointed out so bluntly. "You're the last person I want to hear that from, 'Kaneomi.'"

"Kaneomi isn't an alias, though."

"Sure. Anyway, is 'Asagao' fine?" Jinya asked, returning to their original topic.

The girl muttered, "So *that's* where it came from," to herself before realizing he was talking to her. She hurriedly bobbed her head up and down. "O-oh, sure!" Though still a bit bewildered, the girl—Asagao—managed a childish, happy smile.

"Great. So, as I was going to say, you're free to stay here for a while if you need to."

"Wait, really?"

"I don't mind. You have nowhere else to go, right?" Even Jinya was surprised by how kind he was being. He glanced at Kaneomi to make sure she approved of his decision.

"As a freeloader, I have no say on the matter," she answered immediately, likely having no intention to object from the start. Seeing the discussion was drawing to a close, she stood up from her seat and made for the exit.

“Where are you going?” Jinya asked.

“The conversation seems to be just about finished, so I figured I’d take my leave. I have a rendezvous with my lover to attend to.”

Surprised by her unexpected answer, Jinya looked back at her blankly. Amused, she put on an impish smile.

“He’s a man who could rival you, I might add.” With that parting shot, she left. She carried herself so briskly that he could only watch in amazement as she went out.

“...I just can’t get a read on that woman,” Jinya said. Perhaps what she said about a rendezvous with her lover was a joke and she was just heading out to search for Jishibari...or perhaps not. He hadn’t a clue. She was simply unreadable. “Oh, sorry. So, what’ll it be? You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to, of course.”

“Oh, um...” Asagao hung her head in thought. This was a hard thing to decide on the fly. From her perspective, a guy she had only just met was asking her to stay at his place. Any hesitation she had was understandable.

Jinya had no ulterior motives, of course. Seeing her without a place to go simply reminded him of his situation when he fled Edo for parts unknown back when he was a child. In fact, he was acting less out of worry for the girl and more out of his own sentimentality.

“Are you *sure* it’s okay for me to stay here?” she asked. “I mean, I don’t have any money to give you or anything.”

“I don’t need money. I earn more than enough to get by already.”

“Okay, but aren’t you suspicious of me at all?”

“You’re no threat. But you’re more than welcome to try and catch me off guard if you’d like.” He transformed his usual passive expression into a slight, daring smile.

Her eyes filled with nostalgia. “Ha ha. You know, you really are kind.”

Her choice of words struck him as odd, but he didn't pry. It'd be a shame to spoil her joyful expression now.

"I'll take you up on your offer, then." Her smile—unlike her bewildered, stiff one from before—was soft and gentle.

"Another one?"

When Nomari returned home from elementary school and heard that Asagao would be staying with them, her expression clouded over.

"Hello. It's nice to meet you, Nomari-chan. I'm, um...Asagao. Yeah." Asagao awkwardly introduced herself, still unused to her alias. Even after she bowed to the child, Nomari didn't look any happier. Her cheeks puffed out in displeasure.

"Nomari," Jinya said encouragingly. Only then did she make a slight bow in response.

"Nice to meet you..." she said, a sad look remaining in her eyes.

"Sorry for deciding things without asking you," he said.

"No, it's fine..."

Nomari wasn't a willful child, but that didn't mean it was okay for him to impose on her so much like this. In fact, now that he thought about it, he'd been so single-mindedly hunting demons as of late that he hadn't spent much time alone with her recently. Perhaps he ought to indulge her for once.

"Tell you what, to make it up to you, why don't we go out and do something together?" he said.

"Really? Like what?"

"Well, Aragi has a festival coming up. I thought maybe we could go look at the stalls together that day?"

"A festival?!" Her face immediately brightened at the suggestion. She looked up at Jinya with wide eyes and smiled.

Relieved she liked the idea, Jinya patted her head and said, "How about we head out tomorrow and look for yukata to wear while we're at it?"

"Can we? Thank you, Father!" She hugged him, her earlier gloom gone as if it had never really been there to begin with.

She could be quite calculating sometimes, but Jinya found even that aspect of her to be cute. He made a slight grin.

"Wow, you *really* are a father," Asagao remarked. He had told her about Nomari beforehand, but Asagao insisted he had to be joking and refused to believe him. But there was no room for doubt after she saw Jinya dote on Nomari as much as he did.

"I told you, didn't I?" he said.

"I mean, sure you did, but it was asking a lot for me to believe it, you know?" She pursed her lips in slight annoyance.

Her doubts were perhaps warranted, given his appearance. "I suppose you're right."

Hearing him agree, she puffed her chest out victoriously. She may have been a heavenly maiden, but she was as expressive as a child.

"I'm surprised you were such a doting father, though. Talk about unexpected."

"I get told that a lot."

"Aha ha, I had a feeling." Asagao laughed. Though she was staying with a stranger, she had no tension in her at all. Her smile was genuine and joyful, without a single hint of sadness.

And so, the heavenly maiden came to be bound to the earth. Why she could no longer fly was something Jinya still did not know.

AUGUST 9TH.

When she awoke, she sensed something off about her surroundings.

“Nh...?” She rubbed her sleepy eyes and scanned the place, finding herself in an unfamiliar tatami-matted room. A young girl slept on a futon by her side. There was another futon in the room as well, neatly folded away.

She briefly wondered where she could be, then remembered the events of the previous day. How could she ever forget? She, Azusaya Kaoru, had mysteriously been transported to the Meiji era.

She sighed. She didn’t know how she got here, and therefore she had no idea how to get back. But there was some silver lining to be found, as she’d at least managed to run into an acquaintance and secure a place to sleep.

“Heh, there’s no way anyone will believe I went to the Meiji era and met a classmate.” She couldn’t help but giggle. She’d been able to recognize the Jinya of this time as the same person she knew in her present only because he had once told her of his demon identity—and the fact that he was over a hundred years old. Of course, his sword was a big clue as well. Yarai was dear to him, having been by his side throughout his years ever since the moment it was given to him by his village chief. In fact, he’d apparently only entrusted it to another once in his entire life. That was why she could be so certain that the man she had met was no lookalike or ancestor of the Kadono Jinya she knew but the real thing.

She was grateful for his kindness in giving her a place to stay, but she couldn’t remain in this time period forever. She was pondering what to do moving forward when she heard a noise. Curious, she left the bedroom and went into the restaurant. There, she found Jinya in the kitchen with a pot—presumably containing breakfast—bubbling over a stove flame.

“Oh, you’re up,” he said.

“Uh, hey. Good morning,” she greeted him. Then she blushed, realizing she wasn’t exactly looking her best since she’d just woken up. Being seen so disheveled by a boy—and a classmate at that—was embarrassing, even if this wasn’t the first time. She asked, “Is there somewhere I can splash some water on my face?”

“Sure. There’s a small well in the courtyard out back.”

“Aha ha. Right. A *well*...” The idea of having to draw water from a well baffled her modern sensibilities, but she hid her shock with some wry laughter and headed for the courtyard.

“That girl’s just as strange as Kaneomi. What’s going on with young women these days?”

Overhearing Jinya mutter like an old man as she left, Kaoru burst out laughing.

“Welcome!”

Akitsu Somegorou arrived at Demon Soba just a bit past noon, aiming for the time when business had slowed down. The lively voice of a girl greeted him as he passed under the entrance curtains. Such a thing would normally make one smile, but Somegorou was bewildered instead.

“Huh? Did we come to the wrong place?”

“No, Master. This is Demon Soba.”

Somegorou was used to seeing Nomari and his old acquaintance Kaneomi as the only females ever working at the restaurant, so he was surprised to see a different girl was there. His disciple Heikichi seemed a bit curious about her as well and snuck glances her way.

“Oh, Somegorou,” Jinya said.

“Hm? Oh, hiya. Where’s Kaneomi?”

“Meeting her lover, apparently. What’ll it be?”

“I’ll take a kitsune soba. You, Heikichi?”

“Just a tempura soba for me.”

Unlike the distracted duo, Jinya acted no different than usual as he took their orders. Seeing him, they began to wonder whether *they* were the weird ones for thinking something was off.

Awkwardly, they shuffled into some nearby seats. The girl, Asagao, soon came over with a tray of teacups.

“Here you go!” Her youthful smile was lovely, and she scurried around the restaurant without pause, like an adorable critter that had somehow put on a yukata robe. Still, to the regular customers at Demon Soba, her presence was as strange as could be.

“Thank you.”

“...Thanks.”

The two’s replies were stiff and their expressions slightly awkward.

“A heavenly maiden, is she?” After Jinya had told him everything, Somegorou let out a big sigh. “Well, I guess maybe it’s *not* impossible.”

“Really? Is it that hard to believe, given your profession?” Jinya asked.

“Ha. You got me there...”

While most would take the story of a heavenly maiden appearing in a flash of light at the Aragi Inari Shrine with a grain of salt, the idea of a man using the spirits within objects as fighting tools was equally eyebrow raising. Somegorou was in no position to cast doubt on the story, but he wasn’t rash enough to accept it without question either. With a plastered smile still on his face, he looked at the girl.

She could be some spirit trying to deceive them, or perhaps a normal person

dragged into some supernatural business, or a number of other things. There clearly were many possibilities. And yet, Jinya had decided to treat her as a heavenly maiden, no matter what the truth might actually be.

“U-um, is something wrong?” Asagao asked.

“Oh, no, not at all. Just couldn’t help staring because you’re so cute, missy.”

“Huh? O-oh, eheh heh, thank you,” the girl said bashfully. She came off as terribly naive and didn’t seem to harbor any hidden ill intentions. By all appearances, she was a normal young and sweet girl in every way.

Jinya trusted the girl enough to let her stay in his home, and she seemed harmless. That being the case, Somegorou stopped regarding her with suspicion, dropped his plastered smile, and introduced himself. “Oh, where are my manners? I’m Akitsu Somegorou, this guy’s best friend.”

“Again, since when are we best friends?” Jinya said.

“Ha ha, you say the darndest things sometimes, pal.”

Asagao giggled at their exchange, then awkwardly but cheerfully introduced herself. “Oh, I’m, uh, Asagao. It’s nice to meet you!”

The pureheartedness of children only grew all the more dazzling the older one got.

“Yeah, nice to meet you. C’mon now—you too, Heikichi.” Somegorou gave a cheery nod to his disciple, who simply stared at Asagao without introducing himself.

“This girl’s supposed to have appeared in a flash of light? I don’t buy it. Are we sure she ain’t some demon too?” His eyes were full not of suspicion but hostility.

“Huh? U-um...” The peaceful mood soured at once as Asagao timidly took a few steps back. Heikichi didn’t let up his fierce glare, however.

“Hey, cut that out, Heikichi. Sorry ’bout that, Asagao-chan. This boy’s a bit daft, you see.” With a smile, Somegorou pounded his knuckles down on his

disciple's head.

"Ouch!" Teary-eyed, Heikichi rubbed his head. His master hadn't held back much. "What was that for, Master?"

"If you really don't know, then shut your trap and think about it until you do."

Reluctantly, Heikichi fell silent.

Worried that the two were fighting because of her, Asagao grew flustered. "O-oh, um, Akitsu-san? I don't really mind, so, you know..."

"Aha ha. You're a kind girl, Asagao-chan. But I'm not angry at 'im because he called you a demon or anything." Somegorou spoke in an exaggerated tone to try and change the mood.

"Huh?" She looked at him in confusion. He felt like a fool for ever doubting such a naive girl.

"My disciple here might become an artifact spirit user one day. Maybe even the fourth Akitsu Somegorou if he's lucky."

Heikichi looked just as surprised by those words as Asagao was. Somegorou smiled in amusement at his disciple's reaction, and his tone turned softer.

"But I can't entrust anything to someone who's so intolerant of others that he turns hostile just because he doesn't know what someone might be. You need to be broadminded if you want to carry the name of Akitsu Somegorou."

Somegorou would not pass on his name to Heikichi if he could not face someone, be they heavenly maiden or demon, and at least give them a chance. But on the other hand, that also meant he was ready to pass on the name if Heikichi could change.

Understanding his master's implicit approval, Heikichi's eyes moistened. "M-Master..."

"I won't tell you to like demons, but we're artifact spirit users. We use demons to do our work, so if you can't at least tolerate them, well, you're going to have a tough time."

“But... Yes, I understand.” Heikichi’s hatred of demons ran deep. He couldn’t accept the idea quite yet, but at least he didn’t reject it right away.

Somegorou suggested they eat, so Heikichi did just that. He was a stubborn boy, but he listened.

“Sorry about that, Asagao-chan. Hope we didn’t bother you too much.” Somegorou bowed his head to the girl, who frantically waved her hands in response.

“No, not at all!” She smiled sweetly once he lifted his head. At the sight of her expressiveness and sincerity, the last of his suspicions finally dissipated.

“Oh, by the way, you’re staying here with this guy now?” he asked.

“That’s right. It’s only thanks to Kadono-kun that I’m not sleeping on the streets. He’s, like, seriously a huge lifesaver.”

“I see, I see.”

She seemed unused to formal language, as her way of speaking faltered here and there, but Somegorou didn’t particularly mind. If anything, her very presence made for a good source of amusement. The face of the wise master who’d chastised his pupil faded away as his lips curled into a sly grin.

“Not bad, Jinya. Not bad at all.”

First Kaneomi, and now Asagao. Even though he had a daughter, Jinya had brought home two women to live with him. Somegorou might never get such a perfect chance to tease his romanceless friend ever again.

“...What do you mean?” Jinya asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking you’ve managed quite the feat, pulling two ladies with a kid around. All right, I think I’ll head over to Tokyo now. Someone’s gotta let Ofuu-chan know what’s going on.”

“And here I thought you valued your life.”

“Hey, I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Come on, no need to give me that look!”

After Somegorou cracked one of his usual jokes, Jinya glared at him. Neither of the two were serious, just taking friendly jabs at one another.

“Who’s Ofuu-san?” Asagao asked. She paid no mind to the lowbrow talk, showing more interest in the woman who’d been mentioned.

Jinya made a difficult look for a moment, but he saw Asagao wasn’t going to let him deflect, so he reluctantly answered. “Someone I owe a great deal to. Ofuu’s taught me a lot. I am who I am today only thanks to her.”

“Oooh, I see. So she’s someone *special* to you, huh?”

“Nothing like what you’re imagining. She’s a friend, and maybe like an older sister to me. I’m not quite sure how to describe it.”

Seeing a natural smile form on his face, she grinned happily. Jinya thought it was a bit strange that she’d derive such joy from someone else’s happiness.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking about how I’m learning so many unexpected things about you. You even have a best friend!”

“I do *not*.”

“Sure, sure.”

Somegorou watched the two with a smile. From what he’d been told, they had only just met one another the other day, but one would never guess it from how they acted. It was especially surprising how Asagao didn’t cower in the face of Jinya’s brusqueness. She had more courage than one might expect from her childish appearance. From the way the two joked with each other, one would even think they were already friends.

“Hurry, Father, hurry!”

After Nomari returned home from school, Jinya took her out to a kimono fabric store on Sanjyou Street. Kaneomi still hadn’t returned from her supposed

rendezvous, so it was just Asagao back at the restaurant. This was the first time in a long while that the father and daughter had done something special on their own, which was probably why Nomari was so ecstatic.

“Hey, now. No need to pull,” he said softly. He sped up slightly, pulled along by Nomari as they held hands. The people they passed smiled at them, their hearts warmed by the sight.

Kyoto had been at the height of its political unrest only a few years ago. Outings like this would have been difficult then because you never really knew if you’d be safe, but things were peaceful again now. The two could enjoy their afternoon without reservation.

The world had changed, and Jinya felt the difference all too keenly. Some of the people they passed by made curious glances at the sword on his hip. The present era had no need for swords anymore, and it seemed intent on reminding him of that fact at every turn.

“Welcome!”

The two entered a kimono fabric store packed with lines of textile rolls. Jinya didn’t know enough about kimono robes to know which products on display were of the highest quality, so he called out to the store owner, a broad-shouldered man, figuring it was better to ask than to risk a poor pick.

“We’re looking to buy a yukata robe,” he said.

“I see. How about one made with the nagaita honzome chugata dyeing technique, then? Yukata dyed with this method are able to have detailed patterns despite being made of cotton. They’re even comparable to silk kimono in beauty and elegance.”

“What do you think, Nomari?”

“I want you to pick, Father,” she said with a smile.

Jinya lightly scratched his head, feeling the pressure on him. He may have been able to hold his own in a fight, but he didn’t have much of an eye for

aesthetics. Still, he couldn't let his daughter down.

"We'll take one made with that nagaita...whatever technique."

"The nagaita honzome chugata dyeing technique?"

"Yes, that. She'll be the one wearing it. As for the design...do you have moonflower?"

"Yes, we do. I'll bring one for you right now." With that, the store owner disappeared into the back.

The two had some time to kill while they waited, so they browsed the store. Business seemed good: There were quite a few other customers there, ranging from elderly women to young girls.

"Thank you, Mother."

"Not at all, dear."

There was a mother-daughter pair shopping as well. The daughter smiled happily while the mother tied her hair up with some cloth she had just bought. The cloth looked similar to the type Asagao used.

"Hm..."

"Something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing."

Nomari stared at the mother and daughter but averted her gaze and smiled when Jinya called out to her. From the sad look in her eyes, it didn't seem like "nothing." He thought about asking further, but then the store owner came back.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's what you requested."

"Thank you. By the way, can I ask what that might be?" Jinya looked over at the mother-daughter pair and the decorative cloth they had purchased. He wasn't particularly well-versed in accessories, but he was sure he'd never seen any woman he knew use such a thing to tie their hair before—other than

Asagao, at least. He was genuinely curious about what it was.

“Ah, yes. That would be a ribbon.”

“A *rii-boon*?” Jinya repeated the unfamiliar word, raising an eyebrow.

The store owner promptly explained. “Yes, they’re a hair-tying tool from the West. Foreign women love to use them, apparently. They haven’t gained much traction yet because they’re still a new thing here, but some of the more cosmopolitan ladies have adopted them.”

The only fashionable women’s hairstyle Jinya was aware of was the bun. The times truly were changing, it seemed. There would likely be even more foreign culture making its way into their world from here on out. He decided that embracing it might prove amusing.

“We’ll take one of those *rii-boons*...ribbons as well, then.”

“Very good, sir. What color would you like?”

“I don’t see white... Do you have pink?”

“We do. I’ll package it together with the yukata for you.” The store owner began to wrap the yukata and the ribbon in paper. Jinya watched, feeling a bit strange about it all.

Since ancient times, there has existed an art of wrapping items in paper known as “origata.” When paper entered widespread use in the Edo period, origata became used to wrap things such as gifts. The gift giver’s choice of paper and ability to work their creativity into complex folds was an excellent opportunity for them to show both their playfulness and their sincerity. However, with the advent of paper printing in the Meiji era, people began wrapping items in more basic ways. Origata was a rare sight now.

In the old era, paper was a rare commodity. Folding it was seen as an act of both etiquette and prayer. One could not fold paper without it being from the heart. A gift could be a transient thing, but the sincerity with which it was given always lingered. Therein lay the spirit of origata. But now paper was a mass-

produced commodity, used to wrap items in one's day-to-day work.

The technology of foreign countries was pushing Japan forward, but something precious was being lost in the process. The prediction left behind by Hatakeyama Yasuhide had proved true. Jinya had no intention of rejecting the new advances and culture on the horizon, but he did feel a pang of sadness over what was being lost in their wake.

The two held hands on the way back as the sky took on an evening glow. Perhaps tired from all her earlier exuberance, Nomari was quiet and kept her gaze low. After the two had been silent for a while, she looked up at Jinya. "Hey, Father?"

"Yeah?"

"What was my mother like?" There was hesitation in her voice. Apparently her silence hadn't been provoked by fatigue but by her thoughts after seeing the mother-daughter pair earlier. Nomari was still young; perhaps she yearned for a mother.

"Let me think..." Jinya wasn't quite sure how to answer. He truly thought of Nomari as a daughter, but she was originally an abandoned baby, so he knew nothing of her true parents. He had no clear answer to give.

"You'll be fine. I know she'll be safe with you."

That said, he did know a woman who had the right to be called her mother, even though they weren't connected by blood.

"Your mother's name was Yuunagi." The words came naturally to him as he recalled that nostalgic evening sky they had seen. "And she was a liar."

"Huh? A liar...?"

"Yeah. She'd tell lies, like 'I hate children' and that sort of thing."

He recalled Yuunagi's impish smile and the way she carried herself. It all lingered inside him. She lied and remained inscrutable to the end, but he was

happy he could remember her for who she was.

“But she took care to be gentle when she held you. She claimed to hate children, and yet she worried about your future all the same. She was a liar who could never actually hope to hide her love for you. She was an awkward woman through and through.”

Yuunagi could lie, going against the very nature of demons, but she could not lie about her love for Nomari. She might have denied it, but Jinya believed Yuunagi truly deserved to be called Nomari’s mother.

“Your name comes from a flower called ‘beauty-of-the-night’ that blooms in the evening. I gave you that name to connect you to your mother, whose name means ‘evening lull.’”

Nomari listened without saying a word, her expression unreadable. Jinya had spoken as softly as he could in hopes of conveying some of Yuunagi’s kindness. He felt this was his duty as her husband, even if that had only been for a day.

“I didn’t have a mother myself, so I’m not quite sure what a mother is supposed to be like, but I know for certain that Yuunagi loved you. Surely it’s people like her who are meant to be called mothers.”

“...I see.” Nomari seemed to take her time digesting his words. She then took a deep breath and looked up, showing a smile once more instead of a sad expression. “Thank you, Father. I was just a bit curious what my real parent was like.”

Her phrasing surprised him. Her *real* parent, meaning she didn’t see Jinya in that role.

“Nomari...” he said, wide-eyed.

“It’s okay. I know.” She smiled at him a bit bashfully.

Now that he thought of it, she already knew that he was a demon. She was no longer young enough to think they’d be blood-related despite all the differences between them, was she? No, she had grown.

She met Jinya's eyes now without averting her gaze. This wasn't a moment for him to lie or try and dodge the issue. With a slight nod, he admitted the truth. "Yeah. I'm not your real father."

It hurt him to say it. No matter how precious she was to him, he could not change the fact that they were not related by blood. Perhaps that was the real reason he had avoided the topic up until now. Even so, Nomari gently smiled.

"No, you are." She shook her head, more out of reassurance than anything else. She had asked to hear about her mother, not about her true mother *and* father. "I've always wondered a little why I didn't have a mother." She spoke as if she were only making small talk, out of consideration for her father. "But it doesn't really matter because I have you. To me, you are my real father." Her simpleminded smile seemed to contain a hint of maturity in it.

"And to think it was just the other day I was changing your diapers." He couldn't help but grin bashfully at her unashamed display of love. He'd thought she was still a child, but she had grown up before he knew it.

"Heh heh." She smiled bashfully as well, turning a bit red out of embarrassment.

"Should we head back?"

"Yeah."

They held hands once again, unable to keep from smiling when their eyes met. They continued their way home, father and daughter.

She soon stopped in her tracks and said "Oh..."

"What's up?"

"Um, well, I just want to be clear that I don't *want* a mother or anything."

Bewildered by such a sudden remark, Jinya said nothing in reply.

As though pressing him to respond, Nomari straightened her back and brought her face as close to his as possible. "Again, I was only asking about my mother because I wanted to hear about her, *not* because I want a new one."

“Wait, where is all this coming from?”

“Well, you know... Kaneomi-san and Asagao-san are kind of staying over at our place, so I figured...”

Seeing her sulk, he finally put two and two together. She was worried he would marry a woman. Or, to put it another way, she still wanted to keep her father’s affection for herself just a bit longer. Such a childlike worry tickled him. He rubbed her head and said, “Don’t worry. I don’t intend to find a wife or anything like that for the time being.”

“Really?”

“I do not lie. I have my hands full with life as it is. The thought of marrying hasn’t even occurred to me.”

“I see. Heh heh.” She squirmed happily and squeezed his hand as the two started walking again.

He looked up and saw that an evening lull had arrived. It made him recall a certain impish grin.

Warm emotions swayed in evening light. The sunset, something he saw every day, looked particularly beautiful today for some reason.

“Hey, Father? You said you didn’t have a mother either?”

“That’s right.”

His mother had passed away when he was too young to remember her. In his second home of Kadono, the one who raised him had been Motoharu. He’d rarely interacted with Yokaze and never felt a sense of motherly feelings from her.

“Then I’ll become your mother!”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” He couldn’t help but grin at her strange statement.

But she didn’t seem to see anything strange about what she’d said at all. She

began to talk about the future with a mixture of seriousness and glee. “You became my father, so I’ll become your mother when I get older and pamper you all you want.”

It was a silly idea, but it still made him smile. He wasn’t mocking her; he was simply too happy not to smile. She was genuine. Nomari, with her tiny, tiny hands, was declaring she would be the one to look after him one day.

She had grown into such a kindhearted girl. In all honesty, Jinya hadn’t been sure if he’d been playing the part of father correctly. But surely his daughter’s caring nature meant he had raised her right? Surely he deserved to be proud?

“I see. I’ll look forward to it, then,” he replied.

The shadows grew long in the evening sun. Side by side, their own shadows melded into one. Soon enough, they would be close enough to see their home, and then their peaceful time together would come to an end.

He wanted to walk with her just a bit longer, though. He knew an end had to come eventually, but that precise knowledge made him wish it wouldn’t.

“Oh, welcome back.” When they returned, the heavenly maiden greeted them with a wave of her hand.

“We’re back, Asagao-san.”

“Huh?!”

Nomari cheerfully greeted Asagao, making the latter go wide-eyed. Nomari had clearly resented her presence yesterday, and the sudden change in treatment came as a shock.

“O-oh, uh, did you find a good one?”

“Mm-hmm. I’ll show it to you later!” Smiling broadly and holding the package containing their purchase in her arms, Nomari trotted off into the back.

“How come she seems so different?” Asagao asked.

Jinya found himself without a good answer, so he just dodged the question.

“Don’t worry about it.”

4

“SAY, WHERE’S Kaneomi-san at?”

Asagao woke up at the same time as Jinya, having felt bad about freeloading and staying asleep while the homeowner worked. But as she wasn’t a morning person, a drowsy look remained on her face. She and Jinya talked a bit while he made breakfast. Eventually, she awakened enough to notice Kaneomi wasn’t around.

“She left already. Another rendezvous with her lover, apparently,” he answered.

“You don’t say. That sword she carries is a Kaneomi, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Yatonomori Kaneomi, a demonic sword. I’m surprised you know about it.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve seen one before,” she said with a smug smile.

Jinya found that a bit unexpected. There were four Yatonomori Kaneomi blades in total, so it wasn’t unbelievable that someone would spot another somewhere else, but a heavenly maiden knowing of one came as a surprise. He asked where she saw it, and she replied it was owned by the father of her friend, who lived at a shrine. For some reason, she seemed greatly amused as she told him this.

“Did you sleep well last night?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm, I did. Honestly, I can’t thank you enough for letting me stay here.”

“It’s no big deal. Besides, you’re helping me out with the restaurant.”

“Gotta pay you back somehow. Waitressing has been surprisingly fun, though. I might be pretty well-suited for it!”

“Wait-tress-ing?” he repeated back, not recognizing the word. She giggled. Though she didn’t seem to be making fun of him, he couldn’t help but feel like young women these days were truly an enigma.

“Don’t worry about it. I noticed Nomari-chan is quite fond of you, though. You two get along well, huh?”

“I suppose. She’s still at that age where she wants to be pampered.” He was honestly ecstatic to hear that he and Nomari looked close, and he couldn’t refrain from cracking a slight smile.

“And you’re all too happy to pamper her, am I right?”

“I won’t deny it, but that’s nothing to tease someone about.”

“Aha ha, all right, all right.”

It had been three days since Asagao came to Demon Soba, and she’d grown rather relaxed with the others in that time. Jinya had thought she’d be more anxious about being in an unfamiliar land, but that didn’t seem to be the case. She was bolder than she looked, able to talk with surprising frankness to a nearly six-shaku tall man she’d only recently met.

“I know I’ve asked this already, but you’re *seriously* Nomari-chan’s father, right?”

“I am.”

“Wow. I mean, you always seemed a bit ‘fatherly’ in some ways, but it’s still weird to think you’re an actual father.”

“I get that a lot.”

She really was bold to ask such a thing. Jinya understood that he looked too young to be a father because he didn’t age, but he was a little pained to think he’d look even less like Nomari’s father as time marched on.

“All right, breakfast is about ready. I’ll go wake up Nomari.” Jinya donned a mask of calm and cut the conversation short. He headed toward the bedroom but stopped midway and glanced back. “Oh, by the way, I’ll be heading out

myself once Nomari leaves for school.”

“Oh? Where are you going?”

“The Aragi Inari Shrine.”

“What for?” she asked with a confused look.

With his usual lack of expression, he answered, “According to legend, their Fox’s Mirror returned the heavenly maiden to the skies. I figure a clue might be had there.”

After Nomari left for elementary school, Jinya and Asagao headed to the Aragi Inari Shrine. The shrine’s festival preparations were further along than they’d been the other day, and there were more people around as well. Many stalls were already ready for business, and the shrine lacked its usual tranquil air, largely due to the noise. One could feel in their bones the sensation that the festival was near. Jinya and Asagao mingled with the crowd and walked around the shrine.

They were not here to scout the place before the festival or anything of the sort. The nature of the mysterious light Akitsu Somegorou spoke of remained unknown, but Asagao had undoubtedly arrived here from some place unlike their own. Whether she was a true heavenly maiden or not, it seemed certain there was at least some kind of supernatural element at play. In all likelihood, that element was the Fox’s Mirror, the shrine’s go-shintai, said to connect the heavens and the earth. That being the case, the shrine was the first place they should investigate. There might not be much information to be gleaned from simply observing the place like this, but it was a start, nonetheless.

Since it was an Inari shrine, they were naturally met with stone fox statues once they crossed under its torii gate, one on each side of the stone path. Curiously, however, the left eyes of each fox had been crushed. Other than that, they noted nothing in particular. The place looked much like an ordinary shrine.

There would be no point just looking at the outside shrine building. If they wanted to investigate the Fox's Mirror, they'd need to sneak into the inner sanctuary. But as soon as that thought came to Jinya, a face he'd seen before called out to him.

"Oh my. Is that you, Jinya-sama?"

Her name was Chiyo, if he recalled correctly. She was a woman nearing old age. She approached them with a gentle smile on her face. Of course, he couldn't very well ignore her, so he gave a light bow. She politely and gracefully bowed back, then raised her face to nod and gave a strong smile.

"Who might this lady with you be?"

"Oh, nice to meet you. I'm Asagao."

"Nice to meet you, dear. I'm Chiyo."

The two bowed to one another. Asagao no longer paused before saying her alias, having grown used to using it. There was nothing strange at all about their exchange, but something did bother Jinya. For some reason, Chiyo seemed to already know his name even though he'd never mentioned it to her—from the first time they'd met, in fact. That was odd, seeing as he'd never encountered her since he came to Kyoto.

"I apologize, Chiyo-dono, but I don't quite recall giving you my name..." he said with a questioning look. Despite his directness, she didn't seem shaken in the slightest.

"Ah, yes. I asked my husband for it," she answered. But then how had she already known his name when they first met? His doubts remained, but she seemed harmless enough.

"But of course. Pardon my probing." He ended up pulling back, understanding that further questioning wouldn't get anywhere.

"Not at all." She bowed slightly, then looked at Asagao. "Are you two married?"

“Wh-what? No!” Asagao exclaimed. Even with all the noise at the shrine, her voice carried far. She seemed greatly embarrassed, her cheeks bright red.

“Oh, is that so? I had thought you two were planning a date at the festival.”

“W-well, we’re not.”

“My, aren’t you just adorable?” Chiyo giggled at Asagao’s childish reactions, though of course she meant no ill will.

Jinya wasn’t against idle chatter, but he wished they could get down to business if possible. He gave Chiyo a look, and she nodded back.

“Might I ask what brought you here today, then?” she asked.

“I was hoping to talk to Kunieda-dono,” he said.

“I’ll call him over at once. Incidentally, Jinya-sama...” She stared at his eyes. She remained just as well-mannered as before, but her gaze seemed to be asking for something with an air of slight dissatisfaction.

“Yes?”

“Oh, it’s nothing serious. I was just wondering if you wouldn’t speak freely with me like you used to.”

“Pardon?” The unexpectedness of the request took him by surprise. As far as he knew, this was only the second time they’d met, and the first time they’d had a real conversation.

“It just feels a bit odd to have you speak so formally toward me. You needn’t humble yourself. Please, feel free to address me without honorifics as well.”

“I could never.” He was greatly hesitant to address a married woman without honorifics, even if she wanted him to do so.

Having her request turned down, she put a hand to her cheek and cast her gaze down sadly. “Oh dear. That’s too bad. Well, I’ll go bring my husband Koudai over, so please wait over there.”

She pointed to a bench over in a corner of the shrine grounds, likely set up as

a place to rest during the festival. With a weak, reluctant smile, she politely bowed and headed toward the hall of worship.

Jinya and Asagao sat down on the bench. The grounds were abuzz with people preparing for the festival. Asagao watched, full of curiosity, as they moved this way and that.

“There’s so many people, and the festival isn’t even here yet,” she said.

“Aragi’s festival is a fairly large one. There’s much to prepare.”

“You don’t say. Kind of gets you excited, doesn’t it?” She clenched her hands into fists, looking thrilled.

The place certainly did have a particular, rarely seen energy to it. There were some angry shouts here and there from people in a rush, but the working men were all cheerful, and many were already pouring drinks under the excuse that the festival preparations could be considered part of the festival itself by a generous interpretation of logic. It was both hectic and peaceful. Such a sight could not be savored on the day of the festival itself.

“There’re so many kinds of stalls! Hm? What’s that one there? Something-something-tem.”

There were dango stalls, spice stalls, exhibition stalls, even stalls selling candy art. All were in various states of preparation, and among them was the one she’d pointed out: a tempura stall, the “pu” and “ra” part of the banner written in characters that were apparently too difficult for her. What was more, she was trying to read the text left to right for some reason.

“That’s a tempura stall,” he said helpfully.

“Ohh, so you can spell tempura like that too. Wait, what? What’s tempura doing at a festival?” She looked even more mystified than before.

“What do you mean? Tempura is a festival staple. You see tempura stalls all the time.” He saw nothing strange about tempura at a festival, but then again, their sensibilities were different.

“You’re kidding. The main festival foods are more like chocolate-covered bananas, frankfurters, yakisoba, takoyaki, and so on.”

He gawked at her, not even remotely recognizing any of the things she mentioned.

“Ah, right. Meiji era,” she murmured. “I guess you’d be more familiar with... candy apples! Yeah, candy apples are great. Some of my favorites.”

“Oh, I know what apples are.” Finally, something he recognized came out of her mouth.

Apple trees came to the country from mainland Asia in the Heian period. They were mainly an ornamental plant, but their tiny fruits could be eaten as a sweet treat. Jinya didn’t quite know what *candy* apples were, but he could infer they were some sort of candy made from apples that was a common festival food wherever she came from.

“Festivals must be quite different where you’re from,” he said.

“Huh? O-oh, uhhh, maybe, yeah.” She smiled ambiguously and nodded.

He decided she might as well try attending their festival, since she seemed fairly interested. He said, “I’ll be going to this festival with Nomari. You’re welcome to tag along if you’d like.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Sure, so long as you don’t mind being a third wheel. I do have to place her before you.”

“Aha ha ha. You really love your daughter, don’t you? But yeah, I don’t mind. I’d totally love to check out the festival!”

He had invited her on a whim, but she was unexpectedly enthusiastic. Afterward, she teased him about how much he doted on Nomari, and they talked some more about festivals. Eventually, somebody approached them.

“Hello, Kadono-san.”

It was Kunieda Koudai, the chief priest of the shrine. He didn't seem to mind Jinya's sudden visit, greeting him with a warm smile. Jinya and Asagao stopped chatting and stood up. Asagao introduced herself, then the three made some light small talk until Jinya finally saw a moment to bring up what he was here for: "Would it be possible to have a moment of your time?"

"I'm a bit busy preparing for the festival, but a moment should be fine," the chief priest answered.

"Thank you very much. Do you know the tale of the Fox's Mirror?"

"Of course. I am the chief priest here, after all. I'm quite familiar with our go-shintai's legend." Despite the oddness of Jinya's question, the man answered with a smile and began to recount the story. "This is how the tale goes..."

In a blacksmithing village, there once was a young man and a juvenile fox that could talk. One day, a heavenly maiden descended to the earth, and the young man burned her raiment... The story recounted by the chief priest was, for the most part, the same as the one Kaneomi had told.

Jinya narrowed his eyes in thought for a moment.

"What d'ya think? Isn't it a strange story?" the man cheerfully said. "Kyoto has a great number of heavenly maiden tales, but the tale of the Fox's Mirror is a bit stranger than the rest."

"I suppose so. It's not often one of these stories ends with the heavenly maiden returning to the skies."

"Indeed, that part is rather peculiar. But what's even more odd is that the story wasn't put together quite correctly."

Jinya had thought the story was rather conventional, but the chief priest seemed to imply otherwise, and with strange phrasing as well. Confused, Jinya was about to ask for clarification, but the man spoke before he could.

"Kadono-san, tales like these have no weight if they're entirely fabricated, but they also draw no interest if they're told plainly without some exaggeration. A

legend must be recounted with just the right mix of truth and fiction.”

“You mean to say there’s falsehood in the tale of the Fox’s Mirror?”

“Yes, and truth as well.” The certainty with which the man spoke made Jinya feel he wasn’t just making idle small talk. If anything, it felt as though he had seen straight through Jinya and knew exactly what he was after. The meaning of his words eluded Jinya, though. Asagao seemed similarly stumped, thinking hard with a complicated look on her face.

“Your name is Asagao, isn’t it?”

“Huh? O-oh, yes!” Having been lost in thought, Asagao was surprised to hear her name.

The chief priest gave the girl time to gather herself before speaking slowly. “Do you like festivals?”

“Huh? Oh, uhhh...”

“Ha ha, forgive me. It’s just that we will be having a festival here in five days, on the fifteenth. Why don’t you and Kadono-san come if you have the time?”

“Ohh. Actually, we were just talking about doing that.” All tension left her as she realized she was just being asked a rather basic question. She spoke with a bright smile and a lively tone, not being the timid sort to begin with.

“There’ll be many stalls on the day, and I expect it’ll be quite crowded. Is there anything you’re particularly looking forward to seeing there?”

“Oh, sure, lots. But candy apples for sure. You can’t have a festival without them, right? I’ve got a bit of a sweet tooth, you see.”

The man was taken aback for a moment, staring at Asagao. He nodded to himself, then let out a warm sigh and narrowed his eyes nostalgically. “Ah, yes. Candy apples. I like them quite a bit myself.”

“You do?”

“Oh, but of course. I’d say they complete the whole festival experience,

although they could do to be a little smaller.”

“Aha ha, I know what you mean. A single one will make you full on its own.”

“Exactly.”

To Jinya’s surprise, candy apples were apparently more common than he’d first thought. The two continued to talk excitedly about candy apples for a while. After that topic was finished, the chief priest—now in a rather good mood—changed the topic to the festival. Asagao listened with interest, and their conversation seemed like it wouldn’t end anytime soon.

Jinya didn’t take part in the conversation. Although he planned to come to the festival with his daughter, he was here now to investigate the Fox’s Mirror, and he wasn’t too enthusiastic about lingering. He hoped their chat would wrap up soon.

“Dear, haven’t you kept them long enough?” Conveniently, Chiyo arrived at that moment and gracefully cut the chief priest and Asagao’s conversation short.

“Ah, Chiyo.”

“I brought some tea for you all.” She carefully sat a tray with three teacups and a small plate of isobe mochi on the bench. Apparently, she had taken a while to return to them because she was preparing this mochi.

“Oh, isobe mochi. Lucky you, huh, Kadono-kun?” Asagao said with a smile. She clearly meant no deeper meaning with her words, but that only served to confuse Jinya more. Why would she, whom he’d only met a few days ago, say such a thing?

“I thought you might like some. Was I wrong?” Chiyo asked.

“Not at all. It’s a favorite of mine, actually,” Jinya replied.

“Thank goodness,” she said with a sigh of relief. “Please, enjoy.”

Jinya couldn’t help but feel something was odd. Asagao and Chiyo both spoke as if they had known isobe mochi was a favorite of his. He could write off Chiyo

knowing his name as simply him overthinking things, but this was much too jarring to simply ignore.

“I apologize; my husband can chat one’s ear off if given the opportunity.” Chiyo smiled softly, seeming no different than before. There was certainly something off about her, but Jinya didn’t think she meant him any harm. If anything, he felt she was entirely friendly to him.

“Not at all. If anything, we should be the ones to apologize for keeping him so long,” Jinya said.

“Oh, I certainly didn’t mind,” the chief priest said.

Jinya let his doubts go unresolved, deciding that asking too many probing questions and damaging his relationship with the two wouldn’t be worth the risk.

Chiyo glanced toward her husband and gently chided him. “It’s good to enjoy yourself, dear, but we shouldn’t trouble our guests too much.”

He scratched his cheek sheepishly and replied, “Ah, I suppose that’s true. I guess I got a bit carried away with nostalgia.”

The two were clearly a loving couple. Chiyo’s tone was too sweet to really come across as admonishing.

“Oh? What do you mean by nostalgia?” Asagao asked.

“Ah, yes. I actually met my Chiyo on the night of a festival, you see.” He spoke in a wistful voice as his gaze wandered to the Aragi Inari Shrine’s hall of worship. A distant scene was reflected in his eyes as he emotionally began to tell the story. “She used to be a shrine maiden for a different shrine back then. Every year when the summer festival rolls around, I recall that first night we met.”

Jinya did not know what vision the chief priest was thinking of now, but he could tell it was something the man would not give up for the world.

“I remember it like it was yesterday. The sky above was full of stars, festival

music was playing, and the shrine was lit by the swaying light of lanterns. And there she stood, amid it all.”

In all likelihood, whenever the man thought of festivals, his mind first raced to the night he met his wife, the moment everything seemed to begin for him. Jinya knew nothing of his circumstances, but he was sure of this, for he’d experienced something similar as well. Even now, he still saw that night sky in his heart from time to time.

“Yes... On that night, I met a heavenly maiden.”

Raiment legends often featured a young man taking a heavenly maiden as a wife. The chief priest’s claim of meeting such a maiden, just like in the tale of the Fox’s Mirror, showed that the passion he felt that night remained in him to this day, something that awed Jinya slightly.

“A heavenly maiden...” Jinya murmured.

“Oh, I’m being a little fanciful, of course. But the way she seemed to be one with the night did make me see a heavenly maiden then.” The chief priest playfully winked.

Chiyo showed no sign of embarrassment, merely smiling nostalgically as well. The only one embarrassed at all was Asagao, oddly enough. She had gone red in the face from all the sentimentality.

Despite the mood, Jinya hung his head with a stiff expression. He still couldn’t figure out what the man meant when he said the Fox’s Mirror tale contained both truth and fiction. He felt something he’d heard was a big clue, though.

“Oh, I know. Kadono-san, Asagao-san, would you two like to see the Fox’s Mirror?”

Before Jinya could set his thoughts straight, the chief priest cheerfully made that offer. Jinya looked up to see a suppressed smile on the man’s face.

They walked past the hall of worship and into the inner sanctuary. Even

though it was never visited by outsiders, the inner sanctuary was well cared for, not a spot of dust to be found. But the floorboards creaked slightly under their weight, betraying the shrine's age.

"So this is the Fox's Mirror..." Jinya murmured.

A small set of doors were opened to reveal an eight-legged cypress wood stand encircled by a length of shimenawa rope. Enshrined on the stand was a spotless metal mirror.

Jinya and Asagao stared at the Fox's Mirror, the Aragi Inari Shrine's go-shintai. A go-shintai wasn't considered the shrine's deity itself, but it was still sacred. That was why it was kept shut away in its alcove, not to be seen by the public eye. The chief priest's decision to show it to them now was a significant act of kindness.

"The very same," the chief priest replied.

Despite its religious nature, the metal mirror looked quite plain—dull, even. It did seem somewhat timeworn, but the metal was in far too good condition to be as old as the tale made it out to be. It looked no more than fifty years old at most. It was a bit of a letdown, to tell the truth.

"In appearance, it is no different than an ordinary mirror," the chief priest said. "But it *does* have the same power described in the tale."

Jinya had seen many objects with strange abilities before, so he would not be too surprised if the Fox's Mirror did indeed have the power it did in the story. He asked, "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I've seen it. I've seen the mirror connect the heavens and the earth." The chief priest spoke with conviction. There was no ambiguity to be found in his words. Jinya made a side glance at his face and saw an intensity that seemed to insist he was sincere. The chief priest then turned around and looked directly at Asagao. "I'm sure the mirror could help your heavenly maiden return to her sky, wherever and *whenever* that might be."

He knew Asagao was a heavenly maiden. That must have been why he brought them to the inner sanctuary after refusing Jinya's earlier request to enter.

"...What? How?" Asagao asked, eyes wide in disbelief.

"You're not the first. There was one other who arrived here from a place far, far away. Or have I mistaken your identity?" The man bore no ulterior motives. He must have genuinely encountered another heavenly maiden before, and he wanted nothing more than to help Asagao, who was in a similar predicament. There was nothing suspicious about his behavior; he was being as tenderhearted as a chief priest could be expected to be.

So why did Asagao frightfully take a step back, her shoulders trembling slightly?

"Blood is needed to activate the mirror. If you wet the mirror with some of your blood and touch it, you will be returned to the place, and time, you wish to go back to." The chief priest calmly watched her recoil as he pulled out a small knife. His claim was preposterous, but he spoke it with utter seriousness and clarity, as if he were trying to reason with Asagao.

"U-um, but..."

"What's the matter? With this, you can return. Isn't that what you want?" He offered up the small knife, whose blade gleamed in the dim light of the inner sanctuary.

Asagao froze in place. Perhaps it was not the knife she feared.

The chief priest did not pull back his outreached hand, and Asagao did not take the knife. A dead silence filled the room as time passed them by. Seconds seemed to stretch out to eternity until Asagao finally broke the silence.

"U-um, sorry! But, uh, I don't feel like I'm quite ready yet, mentally... Aha ha..." Her laughter was weak and dry. Despite the opportunity, she did not take the knife. The heavenly maiden, upon being offered a raiment to return to the

skies with, turned it down of her own volition.

The chief priest nodded with some disappointment. Still looking directly at her, he said, “Let me know if you change your mind. However, I would recommend you make your decision before the day of the festival.”

She didn’t reply, instead hanging her head like a child scolded by a parent.

In her place, Jinya asked, “Why before the day of the festival? Will she not be able to return if she lingers past then?”

“No, there won’t be anything barring her return. But if she waits until the day of the festival, I have a feeling she won’t want to return at all.” Koudai’s gaze turned distant, seeming to see something far beyond the two.

5

AUGUST 11TH.

“Thank you! Do come again!” The voice of a lively young girl rang out in the busy restaurant.

It was now Asagao’s fourth day at Demon Soba. Not wanting to be a complete burden, she’d been helping out with the restaurant during that time by washing dishes and the like.

It was nearly sunset by the time the last customer left. Jinya closed the restaurant for the day, taking down the entrance curtains and beginning to cook dinner. Tonight’s meal would be tempura, miso dengaku, a vinegar-dressed cucumber and seaweed mix, and miso soup with green onion and fried tofu. There were some restaurant leftovers thrown in, but it was still a fairly luxurious spread. Only the father-daughter pair and the heavenly maiden ate; the fourth lodger was absent.

“Kaneomi-san sure is taking a while to come back,” Nomari said worriedly. Staying out too late wasn’t good, especially for a woman.

“I wouldn’t worry. I’m sure she has her reasons to be out,” Jinya said.

“But what if something happens to her?”

“She’s stronger than she looks. She should be fine.”

“Hmm. Well, if you say so.” She seemed reassured by his words.

Kaneomi had been out frequently as of late, missing many of their shared meals. She claimed she was leaving to meet her lover, but Jinya was wiser than to take those words at face value. She wouldn’t tell him what she was really up to, but that was fine by him. Her business was hers alone. If she asked for help, he’d give it, but she was her own person and she could take care of her own needs.

“Dinner is pretty good today.”

“Right?”

Nomari, now cheerful again, shared a smile with Asagao. Things had been awkward between the two on the first day, but they’d eventually warmed up to each other. Asagao—presently stuffing her mouth with tempura—was a few years older than Nomari but looked about the same age as her. They acted like sisters around one another.

“I’m surprised you actually know how to cook, Kadono-kun.”

“Yeah, well, I wanted Nomari to be able to eat proper, fresh food. I guess this isn’t all that fresh since the tempura is restaurant leftovers, though.”

“No kidding. I guess you’re a real papa then, through and through.”

“Hm?” Jinya didn’t ask what she meant since it was too much trouble to have her explain every bit of nonsense that came out of her mouth, but “papa” certainly didn’t sound like a Japanese word.

“What’s up?” she asked. He hadn’t even realized he had been staring at her. She giggled, stirring slightly. She seemed happy, but something about her expression was off.

“Nothing,” he replied.

The heavenly maiden was supposed to be stranded in a foreign land. So why, he wondered, didn’t Asagao bring up yesterday’s events, which provided her with the raiment she needed to return to the skies?

Azusaya Kaoru didn’t have good grades, and she wasn’t great at sports. She wasn’t a shrine maiden with history tracing back to the Edo period, and she wasn’t from a lineage that had been exorcists for generations. She was just an ordinary high school girl, one you could find anywhere. The normality of her life had never been a problem for her, and she enjoyed high school. But sometimes, she hated how un-special she was.

“Asagao?” Jinya called out to her. She had frozen in place, lost in her thoughts, while carrying a bowl of soba. His voice was flat, but he was probably worried about her. She quickly apologized and continued working. With a nod, he resumed cooking.

After starting high school, Kaoru had gotten wrapped up in various strange incidents one after another, but she never expected that she would travel back through time to the Meiji era. Luckily enough, however, she coincidentally ran into the Jinya of this time and secured food and a roof over her head. She even finally learned the meaning of the strange name he called her from time to time. All in all, she was happy to have met him.

And yet, he was not the Jinya she knew. Her Jinya would have never chosen to drop the issue after her strange behavior just now. Her Jinya was a considerate and attentive older man who always followed through if he saw someone troubled. A bit of her Jinya could still be seen in this one from the curt way he tried to help others, but they were not the same.

“Welcome. Oh... It’s just you, Somegorou.”

“Don’t be too happy to see me. Get me a kitsune soba.”

“Sure thing.”

Akitsu Somegorou came practically every day, always seeming to enjoy his banter with Jinya more than the actual meal. It came as no surprise to Kaoru that Somegorou would *still* be close to Jinya here. With some amusement, she thought about how strange it all was.

“Oh? Something funny happen, Asagao-chan?” Somegorou asked. She hadn’t even realized she was smiling. “You just let me know if Jinya here ever tries to make a pass at you. I’ll set ’im straight.”

“Hey, don’t go sully my good name,” Jinya said. He was always more relaxed than usual when he was with Somegorou. Jinya might’ve denied it, but the two definitely looked close enough to be considered best friends.

“What? I ain’t sayin’ anything bad about it. I was just trying to reassure her since grim-faced guys like you always scare girls.”

“That’s...fair.”

Kaoru had never once been scared of Jinya, not in her time or this one, but Jinya seemed to worry about his intimidating countenance quite a bit.

The two men continued to crack jokes back and forth. Kaoru smiled, happy just from listening to the two. Life here was fun, and comfortable as well... Perhaps that was why she was a little scared to return.

Summers in Kyoto were hot. The city was in a valley surrounded by mountains, so the air did not flow well, causing the heat of day to linger through the night. But extreme temperatures were said to make the beauty of the seasons stand out more distinctly, so perhaps it was not wholly a bad thing.

After bidding Nomari to sleep, Jinya returned to the restaurant to have a drink for the night. He had no snack to pair with the liquor, but the lingering summer heat and the flickering lantern light added enough seasonal flavor to be worthwhile. The warmth gliding down his throat was comforting.

He drank in silence alone for a time until he heard a door slide open.

“...Kadono-kun?”

He looked to see Asagao standing there, seeming a bit hesitant as though worried about intruding. She wore the yukata robe he’d given her to use as sleepwear.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?” he asked.

“Not at all. I just couldn’t sleep.” She smiled bashfully. Her smile seemed a bit sad, however, and he had a feeling it wasn’t the dim light playing tricks. The heavenly maiden who always laughed with joy was nowhere to be found. In her place was a child who looked helpless and lost.

“Want to join me?”

“Oh, sorry, but I can’t drink.”

“I’ll put some tea on, then. Go ahead and sit.”

He had already put out the stove fire for the day, but he relit it anyway as he didn’t want to waste the chance to have a proper one-on-one talk with her.

She took up his somewhat forced offer, sitting down and waiting without a word of complaint. Though she was but a child, the girl hadn’t shown a single hint of fear toward him, even though he was a fairly intimidating six-shaku-tall man. If anything, she had been friendly with him since their very first encounter. She was certainly mysterious—real heavenly maiden or not.

“Thanks. Sorry for the trouble,” she said.

“It’s nothing. We haven’t had a chance to talk lately, so I figured this would be a good time.”

A summer night spent chatting over liquor and tea might be just what the doctor ordered.

Asagao smiled faintly from across the table. Her usual cheerful demeanor was gone, replaced by an air of listlessness. “You’ve really been taking good care of

me, huh?”

“Don’t worry about it. Have you gotten used to life here?”

“Yeah. Things were really confusing at first, but life here is fun now that I’m more used to it.”

“Good to hear.”

They spoke leisurely. She played with her tea, tilting the cup from one side to the other, then taking a sip and saying a few words here and there. Whenever their eyes met, she grinned faintly in a bashful way.

There wasn’t a trace of unease in her. She’d indeed been bewildered when she first came to this unfamiliar land, but she never once seemed worried about her plight, always enjoying herself. The only time he had seen fear from her at all was when they had found a way for her to return home.

“Hey, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” she said.

“Go for it.”

“Well... Why’d you let me stay here? I just don’t understand. I guess you’ve always been like this, but most people wouldn’t let a stranger stay with them just because they needed help.”

He wasn’t sure what made her say he’d always been like that, but he understood that wasn’t the important thing now. Softly, as though trying not to disturb the stillness of the night, he revealed a vulnerable part of himself. “A long time ago, I met a man who took me in when I had no place to go.”

His reply could hardly be considered an answer to her question. Perhaps it was better to say he was merely reminiscing on the past. He recalled that rainy night when he ran away from Edo with Suzune. The cold rain had battered them, and they had no refuge in sight. But a man appeared and offered a helping hand.

“I still remember what that man did for me. Maybe that’s why I felt like doing something out of character for once.”

The girl made a confused face, which was only to be expected since she didn't know his background. But he had nothing more to say. He was only being sentimental here, and he felt that talking at length would only make his words carry less weight.

"There's something I'd like to ask you as well, if that's all right," he said.

"Sure. What is it?"

"Did the place you came from bore you?"

She froze stiff at his question. After a long moment of silence, she strained her voice to say, "What makes you say that?"

Her expression was awkward, and her fingers trembled. Mentioning that would only fluster her, however, so he sipped his drink and feigned indifference instead. "I guess it just feels that way watching you. Call it an old man's wisdom or what have you."

She hung her head and rested her arms on the table, looking so frail that he worried she'd crumble apart then and there. "It wasn't boring. My friends are there and all. But...being there does get exhausting from time to time."

Although he called her a heavenly maiden, Jinya had seen Asagao as nothing more than a child. But the gloom clinging to her now told him he had been wrong.

"I go to school, study, and then walk home with my friends. On our way back, we do all kinds of fun things. Every single day is full of fun."

The heavenly maiden looked up at the clear blue skies and remembered her days of happiness, but she did not wish to return to them. Though she was bound to the earth after the theft of her raiment, Asagao never once complained about being here.

"But sometimes, life feels as suffocating as it is fun. I have a friend who's a shrine maiden. She's in the same year as me, but she's so much more mature. And I don't mean in terms of looks. She's already figured out what she wants to

do in life, and even her grades are better than mine.”

Asagao likely wasn't the type to complain to begin with, nor the type to want others to worry about her. But more than that, she simply enjoyed her life here. Her time on the earth was fun, enough to momentarily make her forget life in the heavens.

“There's this boy who sits next to me in my class who's simply amazing. He's strong, kind... He has a lot of pain inside, but he tries his hardest to succeed anyway. Seeing him makes me feel foolish for doing nothing but enjoying my life without a second thought.”

Jinya could think up a number of possible ways she could have come to this land—the Fox's Mirror, the power of a demon—but all of them rang hollow now. Perhaps she simply wanted to get away from it all. Perhaps she found her everyday life too much to bear and wanted a place where she could just breathe easy.

For better or worse, her wish had been granted. The heavenly maiden had descended to the earth and tried to forget the skies.

“Is it wrong to enjoy life?” he asked.

“Well, of course not. But those who manage to persevere through suffering are much more impressive than those who don't.”

That was why she was so flustered to have found a way back home. She had just arrived in a place where she could breathe easy, and she was afraid of returning to a life that suffocated her. Who could blame her for that?

Belatedly, Jinya finally realized why the heavenly maiden from the tale was bound to the earth. She had been shackled by the very fact that she was a heavenly maiden, just as Asagao was shackled by her own life in the heavens.

“Hey, Kadono-kun? Are you...happy?” Asagao finally raised her face to stare intently at Jinya. What she asked was less of a question and more of an appeal for an answer, a feeble plea much like something a child would say while

tugging at the clothes of a parent.

“I don’t know.” Jinya had no right to think he had any answers to give. Decades had passed, and he’d killed so many, but he was still as clueless and unsightly a man as he’d ever been. He paused to drink down the contents of his cup, and his voice sounded feebler once he resumed. “I don’t hate my life now, but I hesitate to say I’m happy. I don’t understand it myself. It’s pathetic, I know.”

A man filled with so much hate could not speak of happiness. No matter how much he changed, no matter how many things he came to hold dear, the hatred burning inside him would not fade, and he accepted that as a fact of life. Even though he had a daughter and did not hate the life he led now, he still couldn’t change the path he had chosen for himself.

“Oh, I see...”

The two were, perhaps, unexpectedly similar. He knew the suffocating feeling she spoke of because he felt it himself. He didn’t like to acknowledge its existence, but he became aware of it whenever he settled in one place. That was why he lived life desperately forging ahead. In contrast, she was trying to enjoy life as Asagao precisely because she was stuck in one spot.

“We can’t change who we are,” he said. “Just being alive is a struggle in itself. That’s why...”

“...We have to move forward eventually?”

He looked at her, surprised she’d finished his words for him. The gloom surrounding her had disappeared at some point.

“That boy I told you about said something similar before, so I actually already knew. No matter how comfortable this place might be, I can’t stay.” She smiled brilliantly, embodying the clear blue skies she must once have flown in. “But I want to linger just a bit longer. Just a little bit. Surely it’d be okay for me to rest a while?”

She still fondly remembered the sky in her heart, but she was just too tired to look up at it right now...

"I'm sure that'd be fine," he said. "We all need a break every now and then."

That was why a little rest was in order.

Sometimes, it was good to let yourself stop and take a breather. At the very least, Jinya knew he was better off now that he could do such things.

August 12th.

Asagao went to the Aragi Inari Shrine and saw the chief priest.

"Excuse me, I know I said I didn't want to do it before, but would you mind if I use the Fox's Mirror?"

"Oh? Why the sudden change of heart?"

"I've decided that it's time for me to take that step forward and move on!"

It was another busy lunch rush at Demon Soba. The regulars had taken Asagao's presence for granted now, having grown used to the sight of her restlessly scurrying around. Some customers even chatted her up.

"So you're heading back, eh? Good for you. I'm surprised to hear it's that easy, though. Maybe you can actually go back and forth between the heavens and here whenever you please?"

Of all the customers she talked to, Akitsu Somegorou was the kindest. After ordering his kitsune soba, he listened to her talk about how she was going back home, then congratulated her.

She was scheduled to return on the 14th. Until then, she planned to work at Demon Soba to pay Jinya back for all his help.

"Why're you leavin' so soon, though? Don't tell me Jinya did something... Nah, I guess I don't have to worry about that. He wouldn't do anything that'd make

Nomari-chan hate him.”

“...I hate that I can’t prove you wrong,” Jinya said.

Asagao burst into laughter. Jinya and Akitsu Somegorou really were the best of friends, whether now or in the future.

“It is a shame to hear you’re leaving. We’ve only just met.” Kaneomi was actually here for once, but she didn’t help with the restaurant; instead, she was neatly eating her kitsune soba.

Come to think of it, she and Asagao had never really interacted much even though they were both freeloaders, and that was a shame. Maybe they could have become friends.

“Kaneomi, I do believe you said you would help out with the restaurant as part of our deal?” Jinya shot her an icy glance. Asagao was a bit surprised to see him make such an expression, knowing what he’d be like in the future.

“But Kadono-sama, having me walk around the restaurant with a sword would only hurt your business.”

“Then just leave your sword somewhere while you work.”

“You must be joking. This sword is my soul. Without it, I would die.”

Kaneomi was evidently very attached to her sword, seeing as she kept wearing it even in the Meiji era. More than that, however, it sounded like she was just making excuses not to do any work.

“Aha ha ha! Looks like you got your work cut out for you, Kadono-kun,” Asagao said.

“That I do.” He sighed, seemingly at his wit’s end. But he seemed to smile ever so faintly, and she had a feeling it wasn’t just her mind playing tricks.

“Asagao-chan, you’re leaving?”

“Yep. Thanks for everything, Nomari-chan.”

“Aw...” Nomari seemed saddened by the news. Despite their rocky start, the

two had hit it off well. They'd gone on walks together in the evenings and helped Jinya with his cooking, living like sisters for a short time.

"But it's too bad, eh, Jinya?" Somegorou said.

"What's too bad?"

"Oh, y'know. This might've been a good chance for you to find a mother for Nomari-chan."

"You and your jokes."

The restaurant always got livelier with Somegorou around. Jinya may have complained about him a lot, but he really was just a bit more talkative than usual when Somegorou was there.

"Asagao, order's ready."

"On it!"

Jinya made the soba, and Asagao carried it. The two had gotten used to their division of labor and were practically in sync by now. This was Asagao's first time working in a restaurant, but she enjoyed the experience. This world she'd stumbled into by chance was a pleasant one.

But time passed all the faster when one was having fun. Before she knew it, two days had come and gone, and the day of parting was coming up fast.

"Tomorrow's the day, huh?" she said with a sigh.

Once again, after Nomari was tucked into bed, Jinya and Asagao sat across a table. It was yet another humid summer night, but this time the mood felt lighter.

"You feeling all right?"

"Yeah. Just a bit sad is all." She smiled softly, without a hint of gloom.

Jinya drank his liquor and Asagao her tea, and the two let time peacefully pass them by. He felt a bit emotional to think this would be the last time they'd get

together like this, and she seemed to have the same thing on her mind.

With a teasing, joking tone, she said, “Hey, what would you do if I said I wanted to stay here?”

He didn’t even need to think about it. Without a moment’s delay, he replied, “That’s a pointless question.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I know you’d never actually say that.”

She puffed up her cheeks in annoyance, a childish look which suited her much more than listlessness or worry. “Oh, c’mon. Hypothetically.”

“Would you ever actually say it, though?”

“Well, no...”

“Then what’s the point?”

Despite his obstinance, she seemed to be enjoying herself. The distance between them, neither too close nor too far, felt just right.

“Breaks are good precisely because they’re short,” he said. “Their worth fades when they’re drawn out.”

“Yeah. I think I know now why the chief priest said tomorrow was my deadline to return. If I said I’d return after going to the festival, I’d probably never go back at all.”

First it’d be the shrine festival, then the upcoming Moon-Viewing Festival, then New Year’s in winter. If she extended her stay once, there would be nothing to stop her from doing it again. Unless she mustered the will to return now, she might never go back.

“That’s why I’m doing it. I’m leaving.” She spoke firmly, wonderfully hiding the trace of uncertainty she felt.

“Well said.” He nodded, pretending he’d noticed none of her doubt.

The heavenly maiden had finally lifted her head to look to the skies. What did

she see there? The young man bound to the earth had no way of knowing, but their last night together was certainly a peaceful one.

Their time together was short. But they had understood one another, and that was why they could cleanly part. By way of proof, the smile on her face the night before she left was as unclouded as the clear blue skies.

“Well, I think I’ll excuse myself here.”

On August 14th, Jinya and Asagao went to the Aragi Inari Shrine together. The chief priest led them into the inner sanctuary and then immediately left, allowing them to say their goodbyes alone.

“Goodbye then, Kadono-kun. Thanks for everything!” Even at their parting, Asagao was cheerful. She made an exaggerated bow.

“Be well, Heavenly Maiden-dono.”

“Jeez. Not that again.”

She probably didn’t want to add a melancholy tone to their last moments together. She acted cheerful, but a tinge of sadness could be seen in her eyes. Her reluctance to part proved that her days here meant something to her, and Jinya felt the same way.

“I probably won’t be able to come back, huh?”

“I doubt it. This’ll most likely be the last time we ever meet.”

Such a convenient coincidence wouldn’t occur a second time. The tale mentioned that the heavenly maiden sometimes visited the earth to play, but reality was unlikely to be so kind. It hurt to admit, but this would be their final farewell.

“Hee hee. I guess so.” But Asagao covered her mouth, suppressing a laugh. He wanted to ask what was so funny, but she seemed so happy that he decided to let it be. Why risk ruining their farewell? Let her return with a smile.

“Were you able to rest well?”

“Yeah. I think I’m ready to try a little harder again over on the other side. What about you, Kadono-kun?”

“I’m the same as I’ll ever be. I don’t even think about changing.”

“You’re so stubborn.”

“And proud of it.”

A slight smile rose to his face as she puffed out her cheeks in annoyance. She was in an expressive mood and changed the topic to whatever thought came to her that moment. They continued to banter lightheartedly for a while, until eventually there was nothing more to say and a silence fell.

“I’d best be off, then.” She took the small knife she’d borrowed from the chief priest and cut her thumb. A small red bead of blood oozed out, giving off a rust-like smell. She stood before the metal mirror enshrined in the back of the inner sanctuary and looked over her shoulder back at Jinya. “Hey, Kadono-kun?” she said, showing him her best smile. “If we ever meet again somehow, let’s go to a festival together, all right?”

“Sure thing. I’ll buy something for you if you want.”

“Get me a candy apple, then.”

“You got it. I won’t forget.”

She looked at him for one last moment, then touched the mirror. A flash of white appeared, and then she was gone.

“...Farewell, Asagao.”

And that was how Asagao returned to the skies with no attachments or regrets left. Her heart that had been bound to the earth was made light again. The heavenly maiden had remembered how to fly.

THE FOX'S MIRROR.

Once upon a time, a young man who lived in a blacksmithing village married a heavenly maiden. Their beginning wasn't the best, but they eventually fell in love and truly became husband and wife. But one day the heavenly maiden became sick, so the young man wished for her to return to the heavens. What granted his wish was the Fox's Mirror, made from the ashes of a fox worked into a metal mirror. It was thanks to this Fox's Mirror that the maiden could reach the heavens once again.

August 15th.

Bathed in summer rays, the Aragi Inari Shrine was buzzing with activity. A large crowd had gathered on its grounds, their fervor a match for the intense heat. They were here for the summer festival, of course, as were Jinya and the rest.

"Woo-hoo! Let's start off by checking out *all* the stalls they've got, Heikichi!"

"Master, please be quiet. You're embarrassing me."

Swept along by the festive mood, the master and disciple parted from the group and mixed with the crowds. Jinya watched them go out of the corner of his eyes, then surveyed the congestion.

There were stalls selling dango, tempura, and even candy art. A mix of various smells wafted through the air alongside a clamor of noise. Street performers cut paper into art and spun plates, and children and adults alike danced to festival music.

"There're so many people!" Nomari exclaimed. This was her first time seeing a festival, and Jinya would have brought her to one sooner if he had known she'd be so thrilled. He couldn't help but smile seeing her eagerly run ahead.

"Oh dear. Nomari-san, please don't run," Kaneomi said. She still wore her sword even at the festival. She was acting as Nomari's chaperone for a short

while, as Jinya had some quick business he needed to take care of.

“It’s crowded,” he murmured to himself.

“Indeed, but the crowds are exactly what make festivals so special,” Koudai replied.

The two men sat on a bench in the resting area, observing the hustle and bustle of the festival.

Asagao had returned to her sky without a hitch, but she left many mysteries left in her wake. That was why Jinya had come to the chief priest for answers.

“Just what is the Fox’s Mirror anyway?” Jinya asked. Having seen the mirror itself, he did not doubt its powers, but he also didn’t fully buy its background.

“Yes, well... A legend must be told with elements of both truth and fiction,” the man said, repeating what he’d explained before. He smiled softly and calmly. He had claimed Asagao wasn’t the first heavenly maiden to appear, which meant he must’ve grasped the whole truth of Asagao’s presence from the very start, and likely known how it would end as well.

“The mirror really exists, so what part is fiction?” Jinya asked.

“Think about the legend once more. Don’t you think there’s something off about it?” The man began to speak without pause. The legend told at the shrine itself seemed to contain a clue to the truth behind this incident. “The tale of the Fox’s Mirror is a story passed down ’ere in Sanjyou, Kyoto. So it’s a bit odd for it to feature a young man born in a blacksmithing village, ain’t it?”

Now that he mentioned it, it *was* strange.

“That’s ’cause the tale of the Fox’s Mirror and the story of the heavenly maiden are two separate stories combined together.”

“I see. You mean the Fox’s Mirror itself was made somewhere other than Kyoto?”

“Exactly.”

Jinya had been operating under the wrong assumption this whole time. But then what did that mean for the story of a heavenly maiden coming to earth? He was about to ask, but the chief priest suddenly looked away. Jinya followed his gaze to see a woman gracefully walking toward them amid the commotion of the festival.

“For you, Jinya-sama.” Chiyo, the chief priest’s wife, gave a slight bow and put a tray on top of the bench. On it were two teacups and a small plate of isobe mochi.

Isobe mochi had been a rare treat at his home in a small iron town. It had always been a great joy when Jinya’s foster father made it for him. To this day, it remained a favorite of his, even more so than soba. But neither Koudai nor Chiyo should have known that.

“This was a favorite of yours, right?” she said.

Chiyo had known his name before even telling him her own, and she even knew of his love for isobe mochi. In all honesty, she was more of a wonder to him than Asagao, who came from the heavens. Even now, Chiyo’s modest, graceful demeanor didn’t crumble. A moment of awkward silence passed before the chief priest suddenly stood up.

“Let me change places with my wife here. She knows much more about the Fox’s Mirror than I do. It was made in her village, after all.”

“Huh? But...”

“I’ve been wanting to look around the festival anyway. It’s a bit of a shame there won’t be any candy apples, but ah well.”

With a joking tone, the man walked off, even as Jinya called out to him. Jinya looked at Chiyo in confusion. She gracefully sat next to him, showing no sign of irritation at her husband for forcing the task of explaining onto her. Jinya was a bit bewildered by what had just happened, but if she knew the information he needed, then he had no complaint.

“All right. If you would, then, Chiyo-dono.”

“You wanted to know about the Fox’s Mirror, didn’t you?” She took a deep breath, her expression turning serious. What she spoke of was no legend but the very real nature of the Fox’s Mirror. “The Fox’s Mirror was created from the spear and blood of a demon that could see the future. The blacksmith who crafted it wanted to make a mirror that could reflect the future, but instead he created one that connected the past to the future. We enshrined it as a go-shintai to ensure no one would touch it. In time, perhaps partially out of necessity, its tale became combined with that of the local raiment legend, and it became known as a mirror that connected the heavens to the earth.”

Legends did not reflect truth, but they weren’t entirely fiction either. The Fox’s Mirror didn’t connect the heavens to the earth but instead the past to the future. The tale passed down at the Aragi Inari Shrine was meant to hide the truth.

Jinya couldn’t contain his surprise. He knew of many items that bore special powers, but this outdid them all. A mirror that allowed one to travel through time could flip an entire country on its head depending on how it was used.

“However, the mirror’s power weakens with each year. In time, the Fox’s Mirror will be no different than any ordinary metal mirror.”

“Wait. Then Asagao is...”

“From the future, yes.”

“...I see.”

The heavenly maiden was someone who had simply stumbled into the past by chance. In other words, Asagao was just an ordinary girl.

Jinya had no way of knowing how far in the future she came from or what kind of life she led. The suffocating existence she mentioned took a shape he couldn’t even envision. But really, that didn’t matter. In the end, Asagao had chosen to return to that future of her own volition, and that was enough for

him.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Not at all. I only hope I’ve been of some help.”

With the conversation over, Jinya softly sighed. Despite some unresolved questions about the identities of the Kunieda couple, he was basically satisfied. He didn’t believe they would answer his questions about who they were, so this was as good a time as any to call it a day. Next, he would meet up with Nomari and enjoy the rest of the festival. He stood to leave when Chiyo timidly called out to him.

“Um, Jinya-sama, I think I’d prefer you speak freely with me after all.”

“Huh? I could never...”

“Please, I insist.”

He had refused this request of hers once already because she was a married woman. But she was asking again, her eyes serious—pleading, even. He was a bit hesitant to relent, but to refuse her twice felt cruel, so he gave in.

“All right. In exchange, Chiyo-do...Chiyo, please speak freely with me as well.”

He scratched his head awkwardly as he addressed her informally, which seemed to make her truly happy for some reason. What a peculiar woman she was, having known his name and favorite food and all.

“All right. In that case...” She abandoned her usual graceful bearing, her eyes instead gleaming like those of a child who had successfully pulled off a prank. She smiled broadly, as though gloating. “Could I call you Jinta-nii?”

His mind went blank. A sudden shock rattled his consciousness. He hadn’t been addressed as “Jinta-nii” in an eternity, and he knew only one person who used to call him that. He traced his memories back as the mysteries unraveled one by one.

Of course she would know his name and the fact that he loved isobe mochi. It was clear now why the legend took place where it did, and why it was a *Fox’s*

Mirror. The iron-producing village of Kadono worshipped Mahiru-sama, the local Goddess of Fire. Mahiru-sama was said to light inextinguishable fires as well as live in the Irazu Forest as a fox.

“...You’re Chitose?!” he shouted at an uncharacteristically loud volume.

Chiyo—*Chitose* giggled, enjoying the sight of him so flustered. “It took you long enough, Jinta-nii.”

Chitose, the girl who lived at the village teahouse. She was one of the people who’d accepted his younger sister, and she was quite fond of Jinya as well. She’d still been a young girl when he left his village thirty-two years ago. The image of her younger self was still strong in his mind, so much that it hadn’t even occurred to him that she might one day grow up to leave the village and marry.

“What’re you doing here?”

“This is a branch shrine of Kadono’s. After the princess passed away, I took over as Itsukihime. That’s how we’ve come to manage this place as a couple.”

The tale of the Fox’s Mirror was set in a blacksmithing village, which was strange for a story from Kyoto, but not so for one from Kadono. The Aragi Inari Shrine worshipped a fox deity as well. In all likelihood, the shrine was originally established to worship a form of Mahiru-sama.

“You’re the Itsukihime?”

“I was, but only in name. With Yarai gone, I was just an ordinary shrine maiden.”

“I see. That’s how you became Chiyo.”

Just as Shirayuki became Byakuya,⁴ Chitose had shed part of her old name and adopted the Japanese character for “night,” becoming Chiyo. She was continuing anew the tradition that had ended because of his failure.

“And what about Kadono?” he asked.

“I’ve entrusted it to my daughter. We won’t let the shrine maiden line die out again.”

“So she’s the current Itsukihime?”

“That’s right. The Itsukihime are no longer confined to the shrine these days. Our shrine is now just like any other one. I do like its new name, though,” she said with a suppressed laugh.

Jinya let his emotions out with a sigh, then looked at her. Once a young girl, she was now a mature, ladylike woman who supported her husband. It was strange to think how the years could change her so.

“Kadono must have changed quite a bit.”

“It has, which is really a shame. If I had become Itsukihime a little sooner, I could have had you protecting me.”

“Ha ha. Is that right?”

“Unfortunately, we no longer have shrine maiden guardians.”

Their unexpected reunion was heartwarming, but also soft and mellow. That must have been because they’d both aged so much. They joked and laughed, forgetting their time apart and the changes they had both undergone.

“I’m glad I could fulfill that promise I made,” she said. His expression showed he didn’t understand, but he soon remembered and smiled. “You remember now?” she asked.

“...Yeah. I do.”

When he left Kadono, he said he’d like to try her isobe mochi once more if he ever returned. He’d only said that because he didn’t have the heart to say he would never return, but she’d remembered his words regardless. That touched him.

“Please, try it.”

“Thank you.”

He reached out for the isobe mochi she'd brought. The soy sauce was fragrant, and the mochi was still warm. He filled his mouth with one and found it delicious. The isobe mochi she cooked was just as good as the ones his adoptive father used to make for him.

"It's wonderful."

"Of course it is."

The image of the younger Chitose overlapped with that of the more mature Chiyo. It was nothing more than nostalgia playing tricks on his eyes, of course, but he was happy he could return once more to those bygone days.

"Father!"

A voice pulled him out of his memories. He looked to see Nomari waving at him from the crowd with Kaneomi by her side. Kaneomi looked exhausted, likely from having been dragged every which way.

"Go on," Chitose said.

"...Thanks." He felt reluctant to part, but he also couldn't ignore his daughter. He drank down his tea, then stood up. "Goodbye... No. Until next time, then, Chitose."

"Indeed. Take care, Jinta-nii."

They had no need for farewells, nor any reason to fear parting. They could see each other whenever they wanted.

"Father, are you done talking?" Nomari asked.

"Yeah."

Bathed in summer rays and surrounded by festival music, Jinya joined Nomari and held her hand. He felt the warmth of summer and a fulfilling sense of happiness.

"I'm hungry!"

"Same here. How about some candy apples?"

“Okay! What’s a candy apple?”

“...You know, I don’t really know myself.”

Candy apples had come to mind because they were Asagao’s favorite, but just what were they? Candy art shaped like apples? Apple-flavored candy? He did not know, and he didn’t see any candy apple stands even after looking around.

“Actually, never mind. Let’s see what else they’ve got,” he said, and together he and Nomari looked around the festival.

It would be nice if he could fulfill his promise to Asagao someday. Since she came from the future, maybe the chance might actually come. He would look into just what candy apples were before then.

“Father, this way, this way!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

For now, however, he would simply enjoy the hectic celebration.

The sky was a clear blue, and their summer festival was only just beginning.

There are many theories about the origin of candy apples, but most agree they were first created on the west coast of the United States of America. The first candy apples weren’t made until 1908, thirty-six years from this point in time, and they wouldn’t appear at Japanese festivals for many years after that.

When I came to, I was lying down on the ground of the shrine’s inner sanctuary.

“...Huh?”

I sat up and looked around. I heard festival music playing and began to walk toward a lighted area. Taking care not to be noticed, I stepped out of the inner sanctuary and found that a festival was underway.

The grounds of the Jinta Shrine were full of stalls, all ones I actually

recognized: takoyaki, frankfurters, goldfish scooping, candy apples, target shooting, chocolate-covered bananas, and more.

“I...made it.” I let out a great big sigh of relief. I was back in my time.

I’ve had many strange experiences thanks to a certain male classmate of mine, but this one was by far the strangest yet. Never in a million years had I thought I might wind up visiting the Meiji era.

“Kaoru? Is that you?” I heard a voice call out to me from behind. I turned around and saw Miyaka, my close friend since junior high school, standing there.

“Oh, hey, Miyaka-chan.”

“Hey. You here for the festival?”

“Aha ha. I guess so,” I awkwardly answered. She probably wouldn’t believe me if I told her I just got back from the Meiji era. Or maybe she would? She was no stranger to occult stuff, so who knows? “Hey, Miyaka-chan, can you remind me what year it is?”

“What? Why?”

“It’s just slipped my mind a bit. Y’know how it is.”

“Well, all right. It’s Heisei 21.”

So, 2009 by the western calendar. And since it was the night of the festival, it must have been August 15th. Only half a day had passed since that strange light enveloped me.

“That morning glory yukata is pretty cute,” she said.

“Thanks. You look cute yourself.”

“Don’t. Please.”

She was wearing her shrine maiden outfit, much to her embarrassment. Her tall and slender frame really made anything she wore look good on her. *Unlike me. So unfair.*

“Oh, speaking of yukata...” she said with a slight frown. Her face was usually expressionless, but she seemed to be pouting right now.

“Yeah?”

“I met you-know-who down by the stone steps earlier.”

“You-know-who” definitely meant Kadono-kun. It was weird to think he was still around after I just saw him back in the Meiji era. He *did* say he was a demon who would live a thousand years or so, but that was hard to swallow.

“He was wearing this...kinagashi thing or whatever? Apparently he has a date, but he was still waiting for her to show up, last I checked.”

“A date?”

With an unpleasant look on her face, she nodded.

Come to think of it, I *had* invited him to check out the festival together only to get told he had a prior engagement. So he had a date, huh?

“Yep. Apparently they made plans a long time ago.”

“I wonder who his date could be. Maybe somebody we know?”

She shrugged and said with some annoyance, “Who knows? He did say she was a heavenly maiden, though. Maybe it’s that person he mentioned who looks like you?”

Kadono-kun did sometimes call me a heavenly maiden for some reason. Apparently it was because I was the spitting image of an old acquaintance of his, so much so that he accidentally called me “Asagao” from time to time. Of course, now I knew the real story.

Underneath all the festival music, I felt I could hear the words I once said: *If we ever meet again somehow, let’s go to a festival together, all right?* I had made that promise only moments earlier, and yet it had been more than a hundred years ago. Before I knew it, I was running.

“Wha—Kaoru?”

I heard Miyaka calling out behind me, but I didn't stop. The possibility just wouldn't leave my mind. I ran as though my life depended on it. My strange, otherworldly experience was still fresh in my mind, and perhaps that was why I wanted to see him so badly. I wanted to know what kind of face he'd make. Maybe I'd catch him flustered for once? I could tell I had a big grin on my face, and there was no doubt in my mind that he'd be there waiting for me.

My yukata was hard to run in, but I still dashed down the stone steps two at a time. I landed, almost falling over, then scanned the area. There were many people there, but I found him, standing slightly off the path, right away.

"You're late, Azusaya."

He was there, waiting for me—the heavenly maiden—just like I knew he would be.

"Um, uhh..."

He waved when he saw me. He wore a kimono robe with no haori coat or hakama pants, which suited him better than the school uniform did. He looked no different than he did back in the Meiji era.

"Calm down, for starters," he said.

"R-right. Sorry. Um... Hey, it's been a while...?" Not sure what to say, I wound up blurting out something dumb. My face was probably bright red.

He smiled gently. "It really has been. I can finally call you Asagao again, huh?"

I felt my face grow even redder, and my shoulders trembled. I was only some girl he had known for a week, but he still remembered me even after a hundred years. That made me immeasurably happy. "You remembered."

"Of course. We promised to go to a festival together, didn't we?"

"Aha ha, I guess so. I just didn't think you'd seriously remember me."

All that had happened more than a hundred years ago to him, and yet he still remembered me as Asagao.

“This is all kind of strange,” I said.

“More nostalgic for me. I don’t think of those days very much anymore, but I do remember they were good times.”

He probably saw something else, another time perhaps, when he looked at me now. His eyes narrowed ever so softly. He felt nothing like a high schooler, more like somebody who had genuinely lived over a hundred years. That was why I couldn’t help but want to ask him a question.

“Hey, Kadono-kun? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. So...” I hemmed and hawed for a bit, but quickly worked up the courage to repeat the same question I had asked long ago. “...Are you happy?”

What I had experienced recently was already ancient history for him. A hundred years had passed. Nomari was gone. Somegorou and Heikichi were gone. Kaneomi was gone. All those people I’d had good times with had long since passed away. Kadono-kun had likely experienced more farewells than I could even imagine, and yet he smiled so tenderly now. I had to know just what he was thinking.

“Of course I am,” he said in a voice as unyielding as steel but still gentle. “Living so long means that I’ve experienced many losses, and there’s no way I wouldn’t be sad about that. But it’s not all bad. I’ve lost many things, but I’ve gained many others as well. What’s more, if I weren’t so long-lived, I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the occasional surprise reunions that crop up.”

In the past, he hadn’t been able to say he was happy. But now, after an expanse of time I couldn’t even fathom, he could. I was truly overjoyed for him.

“Does that mean me?” I asked.

“You have no idea how happy I was when I met you again.”

“Oh jeez, there you go again.” Though I laughed his comment off, I was probably red as a tomato. But he didn’t so much as bat an eyelid when he said

it, which was honestly just unfair.

He surveyed the festival stalls. “Shall we be off, then? I’ll buy you a candy apple like I promised.”

He turned around, the hem of his clothes fluttering slightly in a stylish way. Once again, I keenly felt that he was truly a man from the old world.

“Yeah... That look really does suit you,” I said.

“Is that right? I’d say your yukata suits you far better, though.”

“H-huh? You think so?” I was wearing the morning glory yukata I had bought specifically for the festival. I quite liked it myself, but I felt a bit bashful to hear his unexpected reply.

“I do. A morning glory yukata looks just perfect on you.”

But perhaps a part of me knew he would say that, just as a part of me waited for what I knew he would say next.

“In fact, you look just like this heavenly maiden I once met.”

And so, that forgotten promise sworn many years ago came to fruition on this day.

Vain Flower

1

HIS BODY FELT DULL. His breath came ragged. His legs were like lead. But he trudged on regardless.

“Stay with me! We’ll join up with the main forces soon!”

Labored puffs of air brushed his ear, and a faint reply came. “Ah... It would’ve...been nice...to see the new era...”

“What’re you saying?! We *will* see it, ushered in by our own hands! We’re not meant to die here!”

With his comrade on his back, he continued to walk the long path. The two had staked their lives together, so the thought of abandoning the other man to his fate never once occurred to him. He pressed forward, encouraging the weak man on his back all the while.

“Heh... Yeah...” His comrade smiled one last time. “We will...make it...a new...” And just like that, he breathed his last.

The Boshin War was a conflict fought from 1868-1869 AD between the new government army—primarily comprised of the Satsuma-Choshu alliance—and the shogunate forces, as well as the Oetsu-Reppan-Domei alliance. The war took place from the Bakumatsu period to the beginning of the Meiji period and ended in victory for the new government army. After the war, the defeated forces were publicly dismantled and the Meiji government’s claim to be the rightful ruling power of Japan became an unquestionable reality.

Samurai fought tooth and nail on both sides of the war. But even though so many laid down their lives in the process, the new era that awaited them all turned out to be one in which they had no place. If the Edo period could be called the era of the samurai, then its end was theirs as well.

It was March in year nine of the Meiji era (1876 AD). Jinya walked down Sanjyou Street with his daughter Nomari. She was thirteen now and had grown slightly more mature, but she still loved her father dearly. She happily tagged along whenever he went out to buy things for the restaurant, and they were doing just that today when he abruptly stopped in his tracks.

“Father?” Nomari looked up at him with some concern in her eyes. The pink ribbon he’d bought for her some time ago draped onto her shoulders, having been used to tie her black hair up.

“...Hm? Oh, sorry.”

“Is something wrong? You don’t look so good.”

“It’s nothing. Nothing at all.” He tried to downplay his mental state, but his expression remained stiff as he stared at the newspaper in his hand. A man shouting “Extra! Extra!” had been handing them out by the roadside, and the contents felt like a mortal blow to Jinya. “...The Sword Abolishment Edict, huh?”

To further establish their legitimacy, the Meiji government took steps to abolish many of the things that could be seen as remnants of the Edo period. Edo was renamed Tokyo, the feudal system was dismantled for a prefectural one, and the samurai were rendered the warrior class—a status that was largely an empty title.

Later, on February 7th in year six of the Meiji era, blood revenge was made illegal in what was known as the “Vengeance Prohibition Edict.” In the Edo period, being able to take revenge for the murder of one’s own blood kin was a right taken for granted. Samurai who lamented the murder of family members but made no effort to avenge them were mocked and not considered true warriors by others. But now, killing in the name of vengeance was a crime, plain and simple.

Later yet, in year nine of the Meiji era, the Sword Abolishment Edict was passed. It prohibited the public possession of swords for all, with an exception

for those wearing court dress among the nobility, the military, and law enforcement officials. In essence, those who were not part of the Meiji government's privileged class had their right to carry a sword taken away. This would be the final nail in the coffin for the samurai.

"The times sure do change," Jinya murmured. That grievance was felt by all those who had lived with a sword by their side. Without even realizing it, he reached his left hand out to Yarai.

His sword and his hatred meant nothing to the Meiji. The new era that had been ushered in after the tumultuous days of the Bakumatsu only felt indescribably suffocating.

Shhft—the wind blew.

From complete rest, she drew her blade in one swift motion. The sound of the air being cut could easily be mistaken for the sound of a passing breeze. The dark gray of steel glistened orange with the sunset that bathed the courtyard.

Kaneomi gave her undivided attention to swinging her sword. With every movement, her hair and clothes fluttered, her sword practice resembling a dance. If her movements were to be likened to dancing, then the sound of the air being sliced must have been the accompanying music. *Cut, swipe, thrust*. She displayed all the basics of the sword beautifully. The sword was a tool for killing, and martial arts were nothing but techniques to take life, but he still found himself captivated regardless.

Gradually, her dance gained speed, becoming a flurry of movement. Then, finally, one last fierce slash was unleashed, and Kaneomi came to a stop.

"Wonderful," he said. His praise was brief, but that only made it all the more genuine.

It was evening. Jinya had watched unblinkingly as Kaneomi practiced her swordsmanship in the courtyard behind Demon Soba. Her form was without

pretense and a pleasure to behold. The diligence of her training was evident in her refined, tranquil movements.

“Kadono-dono,” she said with surprise, having just noticed his presence. Jinya was stronger when it came to the sword, so his praise came as a slight shock.

“That was good swordsmanship, not something you can achieve through half-assed means.”

“You flatter me. These skills of mine are nothing, and they’ll be even less than that from now on.” Her pained smile showed that she must have heard about the Sword Abolishment Edict. Her expression was gloomy, despite the serenity of her form just moments earlier.

Jinya sat down on the veranda. Kaneomi paid him no mind and swung her sword twice, then a third time, and finally stared at her blade, seemingly checking if it was truly in her hands.

“Have you heard the news as well?” she asked.

“I have.”

“I see. To tell the truth, I’ve known this day would eventually come, and yet I still find myself bewildered now that it is here.” With an uncharacteristically weak smile, she stared sadly at her sword. She looked much like an uncertain child. Jinya did not try to offer her words of comfort, but he knew how she felt. The Sword Abolishment Edict bewildered him as well. His left hand reached out on its own for Yarai, checking if its familiar presence was still there.

“Kaneomi, would you be able to abandon the blade?”

“Certainly not. This blade is who I am. How could I ever part with it?” She spoke decisively in a dispirited voice, and her unpretentious words reflected Jinya’s own thoughts.

“I feel the same way...”

He’d still been young when he first held a sword. It was a wooden one, given to him by the father of his childhood friend. Thinking that strength would allow

him to protect many things, Jinya had swung his wooden sword with foolhardy devotion. That didn't change even after he received a real sword.

He wielded his blade for the purpose of protecting others. To that end, he'd both succeeded and failed over the long years. As time passed, the burdens he carried grew, and his blade became increasingly impure with each superfluous load. But even so, he never once considered abandoning it.

The sword was merely a weapon, but over the years it had become a shield to protect what he held dear. A mere tool had turned into a friend; a life partner had become his own identity. The sword had always been there by his side, and now the new era demanded he leave it behind.

"Kadono-sama, have we come this far only to be erased?"

He had no answer to give her. But he did know one thing. "I don't know. But... I do think we missed our proper time to die."

Death or dishonor. To live past the moment one should have died could be an unsightly thing. Hatakeyama Yasuhide had seen this very future, and that was why he chose to die as a samurai. Perhaps he had been right to do so.

Jinya gazed off at the sky as it melted into dusk, remembering the smile of the man who died a samurai.

"Hey, Boss? You hear the news about the Sword Edict?"

Two customers suddenly chatted up Jinya one day around lunchtime. It had been a while since he settled down in Kyoto, so quite a few customers talked to him freely. He usually did his best to be amicable, but he didn't have it in him today; his expression was stiffer than ever.

"...I have."

"Good stuff, ain't it? Sure put those sword-carrying folks in their place! We're really in a whole new world now."

"...Is that so?"

The two men stopped eating in their exuberance, instead talking excitedly about the Sword Abolishment Edict. Jinya knew they meant no ill will, but he could not muster up any meaningful responses. He had simply grown too familiar with the feeling of Yarai by his side.

“The country used to be crawling with them ronin bastards, always thinking they were hot stuff just because they carried a sword. But now we’ll be free of them! Hooray for the new government!”

“You said it! And just look at what a mess those stupid samurai made of the country. We shoulda taken their swords away ages ago! It’s not like they actually had the pluck to use ’em!”

“Exactly! We’re better off without the samurai. Just think about how hard life was back when they ran things compared to now.”

Jinya’s heart stirred every time he heard the men’s loud laughter. He felt as though they were mocking the sword he had lived by all this time. Unknowingly, he balled up his hands into fists. He was about to glare at the men, but then Somegorou dumped the contents of a kitsune soba over their heads.

“Yowch!” the men yelped, covered in hot soup.

“Oh, so sorry. I’m getting a bit old, y’see. Don’t really know what I’m doing sometimes. Might even be going senile, really.” Somegorou didn’t even try to convincingly feign ignorance, or even look at the men for that matter. He plastered a fake-looking smile on his face and crossed his arms in mock surprise at his own actions.

“The hell are you thinking?!”

“Don’t think you’re gonna get away with this!”

His act only made the men angrier, their faces reddening as they yelled at him. Only then did he stop playing the fool.

“What the hell am I thinking? What the hell are *you* two thinking?”

The temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. It didn’t really, of course, but

Somegorou's icy tone and frigid gaze made it feel that way. The men stiffened, feeling a fierce intensity unthinkable for someone who seemed to be an elderly man past his forties. The other customers in the restaurant watched nervously.

"You lot have some nerve running your mouth like you did. Get lost, numbskulls. You won't be let off with just soba over the head next time," Somegorou said. His eyes expressed silent but fierce fury.

Overwhelmed, the two men took a step back. Somegorou had fought many demons and lived to tell the tale, and his glare could be considered a weapon in its own right. The men had lost all will to fight.

"Feh, let's get out of here."

"Yeah. We ain't ever coming to this restaurant again!"

The two men stormed out, leaving behind throwaway lines fit for third-rate villains. In fact, they didn't even pay for their food.

Somegorou clicked his tongue, then quickly assumed his usual fake smile again. "Got kind of lively in here, huh? Apologies, everyone. Please do enjoy your meal." With the exaggerated gestures of a performer, he bowed his head to the remaining customers. His playing the fool seemed to calm the commotion. After confirming the mood had eased, he took a seat near the kitchen.

"Sorry about that, Somegorou," Jinya said.

"Nah. If anything, I should be apologizin' for chasing out your customers."

"Not at all. That was refreshing to watch."

"Oh, is that right?"

As the owner of the restaurant, Jinya was in no position to get angry at his customers. That was why Somegorou did so on his behalf, also making sure to downplay it so that Jinya didn't feel indebted in any way. Jinya couldn't help but smile faintly at Somegorou's kindness.

"By the way, Jinya..." All at once, Somegorou's expression turned serious. He

clasped his fingers together and held them before his face, then went still. Ten solid seconds of silence passed until he finally broke the oppressive air by saying, “Could I get another lunch?”

Somegorou’s kitsune soba lay scattered on the floor.

After finishing work, Jinya ate dinner with Nomari and then relaxed in their living quarters. He drank his after-meal tea like always. However, Nomari strayed from the norm by leaning her back against his for some reason. He felt her gentle warmth through the folds of their clothes and wondered just what was going on with her.

“Nomari?”

“Yes?”

She was thirteen now and was growing more and more independent from Jinya each day, and yet she leaned against him now. He was happy for her affection, but he had to wonder where this was coming from all of a sudden.

“Is something up?”

“Mmm, I guess. I felt like some pampering was in order.” She turned around to hug him from behind, like a parent might do with a child. She squeezed him tight, brought her lips close to his ear, and softly whispered, “Cheer up, Father.”

“Nomari?”

“I can’t imagine a world where you don’t carry a sword, but...it’ll be okay.”

Jinya was speechless. He had thought she was looking for his attention, for him to coddle her, but he’d been wrong. She was consoling him under the pretense of pampering him.

“...So *I’m* the one being pampered?”

“Heh heh, of course. I’m going to become your mother, and it’s a mother’s job to care for her child.”

When she was younger, she had said something along those lines. He had assumed she would realize how silly the idea was and outgrow it with time, but she'd never taken her words back. Perhaps it was because she knew she would one day outgrow Jinya himself.

As a demon, Jinya did not age. In just ten more years, Nomari would grow old enough that it would be difficult for him to claim to be her father. Perhaps that was why she said she would become his mother, so they could remain family in the years to come.

"You're still saying that?" he said.

"Of course. You've supported me all this time, so it's only right for me to grow up fast and start supporting you back."

What a silly thing to say. In truth, she already supported him. Her presence alone was what allowed him to be who he was today.

"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."

He had found happiness, something precious and hard to come by. He smiled, feeling joy, true joy, deep down in his core.

But even further inside him, an unknown something cast a shadow over his heart.

He had a friend who would get angry in his stead. He had a daughter who would stay with him even as the years passed. And yet, he still felt sad to know that the familiar touch of cold steel was growing distant from him.

2

JINYA HAD PROMISED to go for a walk together with Nomari the prior night, so he closed the restaurant after lunchtime. Somegorou was aghast to find the place closed, but Jinya wasn't particularly invested in keeping it open since it

was nothing more for him than a means of blending into society. Repaying his daughter for comforting his spineless self was far and away more important to him.

Nomari was ready to leave, and he didn't want to keep her waiting long. He quickly changed, removing his work clothes and throwing on an under-kimono, then donning a long kimono robe with a belt. He put on hakama pants as well, completing a semi-formal look. He wore no sword at his waist.

His side felt lighter than usual, and that made him a bit restless. He knew it couldn't be helped, but the discomfort nagged at him nonetheless. He had no intention of abandoning the blade as he needed a weapon to slay demons with. But he didn't want to wear a sword while the sun was still up and risk getting in trouble with the authorities. Maybe in the past he wouldn't have cared, but he had Nomari now, and he didn't want to make her worry.

"I've grown impure, huh?" he said, remembering the words that someone else had said long ago. Jinya had burdened himself with excess that only served to dilute the purity of his true goal. He was exasperated at himself for not being able to remain pure, but he still saw merit in his way of being.

Even so, there was a gloom that hung over his heart, and he didn't know how exactly to describe it. For the time being, he fixed his collar and finished getting ready.

"Ready to go, Nomari?"

"Yeah!" She gleefully smiled back at him as he met her at the door. The thought that he could see this smile just by leaving Yurai behind lightened his heart a slight bit.

They walked the streets hand in hand with no destination in mind, but she seemed happy enough with just that. However, she wasn't lost in her own enjoyment. She walked on his left, the side he typically carried his sword on, as though trying to make up for Yurai's missing presence. Her nonchalant

thoughtfulness reminded him what a kind daughter he had raised, and he felt a bit happy. Children grew up so fast, and that brought both joy and sadness in equal parts. *Oh, how troubling it is to be a father*, Jinya thought.

“Kadono-sama?”

After walking along Sanjyou Street for a while, the two happened across Kaneomi on her way back to Demon Soba. She looked like she always did: long black hair, intimidating outfit, and a sword at her hip.

“On your way back, Kaneomi?”

“I am. Is the restaurant closed?”

“Yeah. We had some business to take care of.” He avoided mentioning that his business was going for a walk with his daughter.

Kaneomi looked at his waist and smiled weakly. “How surprising. I don’t think I’ve seen you out without a sword before.”

“Yeah, well, it’d be a problem to get caught with one.” He glanced over at Nomari, and Kaneomi nodded in understanding. Carrying a sword was a crime now. As Nomari’s father, he couldn’t risk getting into trouble with the law.

“For your daughter’s sake, eh? How very like you.”

“I see you’ve brought your own sword along.”

“But of course. This blade is who I am. I cannot part with it.” She gently touched her Yatonomori Kaneomi.

Jinya did not fault the woman. He was in no position to anyway, as he too had something he could never give up.

“I trust you cannot part with your sword either, Kadono-sama. You’ve merely left it behind for now. Am I correct?”

Correct she was. He wasn’t wearing a sword now because he was walking with his daughter, but he had not abandoned his goal. Vengeance killing and the possession of swords might have been made illegal, but his hatred

remained.

Jinya keenly felt the rapid pace of the new era. Many things were changing, and he was being left behind.

“I’ll head back first.”

“Oh. Sure.”

Kaneomi quickly ended the conversation and headed away, soon breaking into a light trot and leaving sight.

“Someone’s in a hurry.”

“Father, look.” Nomari pointed out a group of police officers. Kaneomi must have fled to avoid being caught with a sword. She couldn’t abandon the blade, but it seemed she didn’t want to needlessly fight the police either.

“There’s a lot of officers around, huh?” he said.

“Yeah. Maybe something happened?” Nomari scanned the area. There were a number of men on patrol, all clearly flustered.

Jinya tended to walk toward any place where there seemed to be trouble, a habit he’d formed over years of following demon rumors. Not far from Sanjyou Street was Chion-in Temple. The road leading up to it began near Shirakawa River, right where an old gate known as Kawarabuki Gate was located. The disturbance seemed to be coming from that gate.

“Stay close to me, Nomari.”

“O-okay?” She pressed close to her father, sensing the air change around him.

He remained vigilant of their surroundings as they walked forward. Abruptly, a voice called out to him.

“Kadono-san?” It was Mihashi Toyoshige, the owner of Mihashiya, the confectionery next door to Demon Soba. “Oh, I see you’re with your daughter.”

“Hello. The two of us are on an outing together.” Nomari politely greeted the man with a bow.

Toyoshige greeted her in return, then looked back at the crowd with a frown. He seemed to be one of the many rubberneckers gathered there.

“Mihashi-dono, can you tell me what happened here?” Jinya asked.

“Oh... Well, it’s not really something a young girl would wanna hear...” He scratched his head and grumbled like he often did. He leaned closer so Nomari couldn’t hear and whispered, “Seems that somebody’s died.” Indeed, this was not suitable news for a young girl.

Jinya found himself whispering back as well. “An accident?”

“Murder. A slasher on the loose, apparently. Feels almost like we’re back in the Edo days again.” The man tried to shrug nonchalantly, but his distaste was visible on his face. “One of them out-of-place ronin folk probably did it. Stupid, really. Nothin’ more shameful than someone who can’t keep up with the times.”

Jinya had nothing to say to that. After all, he himself was one of those people unable to adapt to the changing times.

Sensing Jinya stiffen, Toyoshige joked, “Though I guess I’m not one to talk, seeing as I run an unsuccessful confectionery and all.”

In place of thanks, Jinya smiled slightly. His cheeks felt stiff.

“Anyway, you an’ your daughter should get home early, Kadono-san. Never know if it’s still dangerous out.”

“What about you?”

“Shucks, it’s a bit hard for me to head back now. The missus wanted me to think up some new sweets, but nothing’s coming to mind. Ah, jeez...” With heavy steps, the man walked away from the crowd.

Jinya looked once more at the wall of people. With so many massed together, it would be difficult to learn what tragedy had unfolded. That prevented him from gathering information, but at the same time it meant Nomari wouldn’t have to see whatever wretched sight was there.

“Shall we go home, then?” he said.

“Yeah...” She agreed, looking a bit disheartened. Their first outing together in a long while had ended on a sour note.

A figure watched the father and daughter as they left.

“Hmph. Uncle Jinya and Nomari-chan are always so close.” Himawari, the eldest daughter of Magatsume, puffed out her cheeks in irritation. Being a demon, she appeared just as youthful as she did in the past. Her crimson eyes bore no animosity, her glare not scornful but pouting. “How irritating. At any rate, thank you once again for your help this time.”

“It was my pleasure,” replied the deep voice of the demon standing off to Himawari’s side.

“Nothing too unpleasant, I hope?”

“Not in the slightest. I merely culled a pig fattened on peace. I had no reservations whatsoever.” The demon had killed a man who used to be a samurai. This ex-samurai had done nothing of note during the Bakumatsu period, merely happening to side with the new government army. But that alone had been enough for him to land a position, albeit a small one, in the new Meiji government. Utterly sickening.

“If you say so. We really owe you, though. It’s thanks to you that we have so many corpses to work with—although I do expect our hindrances will begin to take notice.” After gathering so many corpses, they were all but guaranteed to catch the attention of demon hunters. One demon hunter in particular came to mind, putting some excitement in Himawari’s voice. “I’d say this is a good point to call it.”

“You mean call it quits?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t want to push things and anger Uncle Jinya too much.”

“I see. In that case, I shall set about my own aims.” Expressionless, the

demon looked off in the direction Jinya had gone.

“Are you really going to challenge him?”

“Of course. You’ve given me an opportunity to do so, and I am grateful for it.”

“But you know how strong he is, right?”

“I am aware. But that is all the more reason for me to challenge him.” The demon walked away, then took human form and blended in with the crowd.

“A goodbye wouldn’t hurt, you know,” she grumbled, slightly furrowing her brow. She was joking, however, not angry in the least.

The demon’s goal had only ever been to fight Jinya. He’d been killing people as thanks for her saving his life, but that debt was now repaid. They no longer owed each other anything at this point, so there was no reason to be angry or even thankful toward one another.

“You’re a vain flower, huh?” She thought of the demon who’d just left, musing that he was just like a vain flower—one that bloomed in vain, bearing no fruit. He was fated to blossom, scatter, and leave nothing behind.

She had no words to stop him with.

“This doesn’t look like some ordinary slasher on the loose.”

That night, after work was over, Jinya called Somegorou over to the restaurant. The two sat facing one another and drank as they discussed the recent slasher incident.

“What makes you say that?” Jinya asked. Though they were drinking, his gaze remained sharp.

“Well, for starters, it took a while for these incidents to get noticed because no bodies could be found.” Somegorou had dropped his usual smile for his grim demon hunter look. “At best, an arm or a head would be left behind, but no

whole bodies have ever turned up despite all the blood at the scenes. The entire thing reeks of supernatural influence.”

“I’ve heard the same, but why can’t the slasher just be hiding the bodies?”

“What’d be the point? It’s still plain as day that a murder happened. It makes more sense to think somebody is going out of their way to collect these bodies.”

Somegorou was a good thinker and had a sharp intuition; his opinion carried more weight than most. Assuming the slasher was after the dead bodies and not settling a grudge or killing for money, then there had to be a reason why they wanted those bodies.

“I ain’t got a clue what they’d use the bodies for, but I doubt it’s anything good,” Somegorou said. “I’ll keep looking into things on my end.”

“Please do.”

If some sinister force was acting behind the scenes, then Jinya would destroy it. His way of life hadn’t changed, even in this new era where swords were no longer needed. Demons could not escape their nature. Once again, he was reminded that he was a talentless man good for nothing but swinging a sword.

He finished his cup. Warm liquor glided down his throat, but he did not find the taste pleasant.

A few days after Somegorou said he’d investigate, Jinya got up early in the morning and made for the old Kwarabuki Gate. The police officers in the area made it impossible to get too close right away, so he had waited a few days, but any trace of the murder was probably gone by now. However, he had no other leads, so he went anyway.

“Hm. Nothing left,” he murmured. The police were gone as he’d hoped, but there weren’t even any bloodstains left behind, let alone a body. He had expected as much, but it was still disappointing.

He had a reason for coming back here again. He'd been looking into the murder over the past few days, and it was clear that this wasn't an isolated incident. From what he'd heard, this was the eighth. Two of the killings were done with a sword, which was why people thought it was a slasher on the loose.

These murders weren't like ordinary slashings, however. Two of the killings were known to have been committed with a sword, but the cause of death for the remaining six was unknown as no corpse had been left behind, only pools of blood and bits of flesh. The lack of bodies had made it difficult to know who had died and delayed any public announcement of the incidents. It was easy to assume a demon was behind this.

Jinya had no clues to work with. He racked his brain, wondering what he should do, when he noticed a sudden anomaly and braced himself.

A familiar scent had wafted his way, one that shouldn't have remained in this place, even if a corpse had been here some days ago. The clear presence of the scent meant his target had no intention of hiding himself.

"Haaaah!" A demon leapt off the roof of the gate, yelling as though he had no intention to catch his victim unaware. His skin was a bloodlike dark red, and he held a massive tachi blade that was longer than he was tall. He swung downward, trying to bisect Jinya down the middle.

The falling swing was haphazard. Jinya leapt backward to avoid the strike, and the sword slammed into the earth and kicked up dust.

A scent like rust and sulfur clung to Jinya's nostrils. He recognized it. "Blood..."

The red demon before him was rich with the dense, choking stench of blood, but he had no visible wounds, and his sword didn't seem wet with anything.

"I have a request to make of you."

"That's one hell of a thing to say after attacking me."

"Apologies. I wish for a deathmatch with you and couldn't help but be a little hasty."

The demon spoke surprisingly politely and didn't seem insincere. That being the case, Jinya had no right to be rude back. He didn't have Yarai with him, though, since the Sword Abolishment Edict made it difficult to carry in daylight. How careless of him.

“To think you of all people would be without a sword. I feel disappointed—no, dismayed even.” The demon sounded deeply vexed as he pointed his dark-crimson sword at Jinya.

The demon's phrasing bothered Jinya. He made it sound like they knew each other, but Jinya did not recall ever meeting him. The strangeness of his words only made Jinya more vigilant.

“Have you abandoned the blade?”

“No. I've merely discovered more things I hold dear,” Jinya flatly replied. Though he was sad to feel his blade leave his side, he truly had found other things he cared about to make up for it.

“I see...” The demon seemed irritated by Jinya's reply and made no effort to hide his hostility. **“A shame. It seems you will die here as a coward afraid to wield a blade.”** His gaze turned sharp. Seemingly unable to bear waiting any longer, he surged forward.

The demon's footwork was clean. He didn't charge ahead relying on physical strength alone; instead, he incorporated proper sword technique. He kicked off of his left foot and leapt into striking range—textbook movements. Then he swung down, displaying proper fundamentals yet again.

Jinya had no sword, and there was not enough time to dodge. The approaching blade stuck him diagonally across his chest, but instead of cutting, it made a high-pitched metallic sound ring out. The demon had cut Jinya's clothes but stopped right at his skin.

The demon displayed shock, and Jinya stared flatly back at him.

“Did you think I was defenseless just because I didn't bring a sword? You

underestimate me.”

Jinya had used *Indomitable*, Tsuchiura’s wish for an unbreakable body made manifest. His body would not be cut easily, and even without a sword he still had ways to fight.

“Come, *Dog Spirits*.” He held his left arm aloft, and a black haze began to form and solidify into the shape of three black dogs. The dogs attacked, with the demon’s throat, arm, and leg each targeted by one of them. The demon scattered them with his long blade, but that gave Jinya the opening he needed.

“Gah?!”

The *Dog Spirits* were only a decoy. Jinya’s real strike was a full-body blow with his left shoulder to the demon’s solar plexus. Unable to defend himself, the demon was sent flying back.

The unarmed strike was far from lethal, however, and Jinya’s lack of a weapon proved problematic. The demon quickly stood back up and looked over. Surprisingly, his gaze held not animosity but joy.

“It would seem I have underestimated you. You are as strong as I’d hoped. But even so...” The demon’s voice turned grave as he spat, **“I’d rather not have seen you without a blade.”**

The demon leapt back, then turned and ran without hesitation, leaving Jinya alone at the old gate. He did not give chase. Despite his efforts, the lack of a sword had proved significant, and he didn’t want to risk fighting and having the tables turned on him. What was more, the encounter gave him such a sense of unease that he simply wasn’t up to giving chase.

The demon seemed to know him, but no matter how hard Jinya tried to remember, he could not recall ever fighting him. *Something* was there, though, nagging him in the back of his mind.

Seeing that his thoughts led nowhere, Jinya sighed and gave up thinking about it. And yet, the demon’s parting words continued to echo in his mind.

SEVERAL DAYS HAD PASSED since Jinya's encounter with the demon, but nothing new had happened. Time passed fruitlessly. The demon was clearly the slasher who'd committed all those murders, but that was the only information Jinya had to work with. No new victims had appeared, and people were starting to forget that the slashings had occurred at all. There was nothing Jinya could do but return to his ordinary life as the owner of a soba restaurant.

"Shoot. We're out of sake." After most of the lunchtime customers had cleared out, Jinya noticed that the kitchen was out of sake. Not the kind for his personal consumption but cooking sake. The past few days had been fairly busy at the restaurant, so he'd gone through his supply fast and restocking had slipped his mind.

"Father, want me to go buy some?" offered Nomari as she cleaned the tables. After graduating elementary school, she could've moved on to higher education, but she'd chosen to help Jinya with the restaurant instead, saying that a basic education was enough for her. Her will had been firm, and she was now an asset to the restaurant.

"Hm? Oh, in that case... Actually, no. I'll go." He'd normally let her handle these kinds of small errands, but he was worried about letting her go out alone when the slasher was still on the loose. Thankfully, the last of the customers had just left, so he could take down the entrance curtains for a short while.

"Let me come with you, then," she said.

The demon from a few days ago had sounded as if he were after Jinya. He probably wouldn't make a move in public, but it could be dangerous for Jinya to bring Nomari along.

"No need. I'll be back soon."

"All right. If you say so." Nomari had always been an obedient child, and that had only grown truer with age. She backed down easily even though she was

clearly a bit unhappy about it, looking at him with upturned eyes and a sad smile.

A look like that was simply unfair. He didn't have it in him to ignore his daughter making such a face. He was too doting of a parent. How could he have refused her offer anyway, when she made it out of the goodness of her heart? Now that he really thought about it, leaving her alone in the house didn't necessarily mean she was safe. It was better for her to be at his side where he could protect her. He dug up every excuse he could think of and patted her head. "Actually, why don't you come along after all?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. Going out together will be nice for a change."

He wondered if Ofuu's father had ever faced similar "difficulties" with his daughter in his time. The sight of Nomari's smile just so happened to make him think of that father and daughter he once knew.

The two made a purchase from their usual liquor supplier and headed back. Jinya's right hand held a liquor bottle, and his left clasped Nomari's hand. They could walk like this precisely because he had no sword. By all accounts, he should be happy at this moment, but he simply couldn't bring himself to be. Words he'd heard long ago flitted through his mind.

"Why do I kill? What a strange thing to ask. Why shouldn't I kill when swords exist for that very purpose? I don't understand your question one bit."

Jinya once met a murderer who lived by the blade, seeking perfection with it. The morality of his actions was questionable, but the sincerity with which he wielded his sword was truer than anyone else's.

"But even if I am weak, I am a samurai. And as a samurai, I want to fight for the sake of others until my last breath."

Jinya once had a friend who wished to fight for the people.

“That is why I seek to be killed: so I can remain a samurai who lived and died for the shogunate.”

Jinya had known a samurai who lived and died with the Edo period.

These men were all a far cry from one another, but they all fought to protect something they held dear. Their actions showed their pride and their feelings. But that was all being swept away by the changing times.

In truth, Jinya knew that a sword was merely a tool to kill. It wasn't wrong to outlaw such a thing. In the long term, the Sword Abolishment Edict would likely prove good for the country. But *he* lived by the sword, and he didn't know if he could live without it.

“Hee hee.”

“Hm? What's up, Nomari?”

“Oh, nothing. I'm just kind of happy. We've been going on a lot of outings together lately, haven't we?”

Her hand felt much warmer than the touch of cold steel, but that only made him feel sad. He could not part with his attachments.

“O demon, bound by your sword, you shall have no place in the world to come. Both demons and the sword are fated to fade.”

That prediction had come true. This world did not accept his sword or his hatred, and that was why life in it was so suffocating. People like him were not needed in the new era.

As his spirits sank, his surroundings seemed to darken. But all his sentimental feelings vanished at once when he heard a cheerful voice.

“Hello, Uncle. Have you been well?”

His mind, stuck in his memories, snapped back to reality. Standing in the crowd was a young girl with her distinctive wavy brown hair—Himawari.

“It has been a while. I'm glad you seem to be in good health.” She smiled

warmly at him and made a polite bow. She acted more mature than her appearance let on, but her behavior only served to confuse him as she had already made it clear she was his enemy.

“...You’re still calling me ‘Uncle’?” he asked.

“Huh? Of course I am. That’s who you are to me, after all.” She seemed bewildered by his question, looking like a clueless child. He was hesitant to fight her. He may have been hardened by countless battles against demons but taking on someone younger than his own daughter still felt wrong.

“Father, who’s this?” Nomari asked.

“Hello, Nomari-san. It’s nice to meet you. I am Himawari, an acquaintance of your father’s.” Himawari cheerfully introduced herself and bowed to Nomari.

On the surface, such behavior was normal—heartwarming, even. But Himawari was the daughter of the enigmatic demon known as Magatsume. With that thought in mind, Jinya moved in front of Nomari as if to protect her.

“Oh dear. Am I perhaps disliked?” Himawari said.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but things are what they are,” he replied.

“Hm... That’s kind of depressing.”

“Sorry. Now, what business do you have? I doubt this meeting is by chance.”

“It is not. I’m here not on business of my own but to pass along a message,” she said with a slight pout. Before he could get a word in, her expression and tone shifted drastically, turning grim. “Kadono Jinya-dono, come to the bank of the Yamashinagawa River at dusk. Bring your sword so we may duel.”

“...And who is this message from?”

“Somebody you’ve already had the pleasure of meeting, I believe.”

It was likely the demon with the long red blade that had attacked him at the old gate. He must have *really* wanted to fight Jinya with a sword if he made such a point of asking him to bring one.

“If you fail to appear...” Himawari suddenly smiled, the tense air easing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jinya saw something moving fast—a flash of red. He quickly grabbed Nomari and braced himself.

“Gagh...”

“Nguh...”

He heard the sickening sound of tearing flesh, followed by death throes. Then a shrill scream sounded, and fear and confusion rippled through the crowd like a wave.

Jinya and Nomari weren’t the targets. Instead, four passersby were killed in the blink of an eye with a dark-red blade.

“Fath—”

“Don’t look!”

He covered Nomari’s eyes, then glared off in the direction the sword had come flying from. He didn’t see the demon in question.

All the while, Himawari had the same gentle smile on her face. “...then the same thing shall happen to those dear to you.”

The girl of tender years looked terribly sinister.

“A duel? Must be a rather old-fashioned demon, then.”

After parting with Himawari, Jinya returned to Demon Soba with Nomari and began preparing. He wore his usual kimono robe, but now it was joined by his long-time partner Yurai.

“Do you plan to accept the challenge?” Kaneomi asked.

“I do.” He touched his metal scabbard with his left hand. It had only been a few days since he stopped wearing Yurai, but donning it again felt nostalgic. He couldn’t help but feel relieved by its presence.

“Why?”

If he was worried about those close to him, then he had no choice but to accept the duel...and yet, it would be wrong to claim that was why he accepted the challenge.

A slight frown appeared on Kaneomi’s shapely face. She looked at him with pitying eyes, seeming to see right through him. Sensing she already knew, he decided to lay bare the truth.

“Lingering attachment,” he said. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was ecstatic at the prospect of a duel. People had died, and those he held dear were under threat, but he was still overjoyed to know for sure that the sword he wielded wasn’t meaningless. “No matter how happy I may be, I remain an insignificant man. This way of life is the only one I can lead.”

“I see... Yes, that must be so.” Her voice was weak, for she too felt the same way.

The will of one person amounts to very little when it is set against great change. All the conviction and strength Jinya had built up over the years meant nothing in the Meiji era.

Still, he donned Yarai and left the restaurant. He was a man who could not change to fit in with the new world, and he had a feeling the demon he was meeting was the same.

The cherry blossom trees lining the Yamashinagawa River were at the height of their bloom. Their petals were tinged vermilion by the evening glow and displayed a charm entirely different from the cherry blossoms of daytime. Their beauty became all the more ephemeral with the knowledge that night would soon arrive.

“So you’ve come.”

Standing on the riverbank was a hideous demon with dark-red skin, a

mismatch with the beautiful scenery. The demon's hands were empty, the long sword he'd held last time nowhere to be seen.

"You ask me to bring a sword, yet you've arrived unarmed yourself. Am I being mocked?" Jinya said with a glare.

"I assure you that is not the case," the demon calmly replied. **"I have lived with no thought in mind but the prospect of a deathmatch with you. Trust that I am not so foolish as to make light of you now, especially after our previous encounter made it clear just how strong you are."**

The atmosphere changed. It became filled not with malice or animosity but with a pure will to fight. There was no disdain in the demon's eyes, only a deep desire that Jinya accept his challenge.

"Just to be sure, you are the one who committed the slashings, aren't you?"

"I am."

"I see. In that case, will you tell me your name?" It was a ritual of Jinya's to ask the name of those he would kill. He slowly drew his blade.

The demon hesitated slightly, then looked away in apology. **"I have already given you my name. If you've forgotten it, then perhaps I was just that insignificant a man."**

So they really had met before, Jinya thought. But before he could ponder it any deeper, the demon began to move.

The demon slowly raised his right arm in front of him and made a tight fist. His nails dug into his own flesh, causing blood to ooze. Jinya was momentarily confused by the action, but he soon understood what was happening as the blood solidified, eventually taking the shape of a sword. However, the trickling blood didn't stop, instead clinging to the sword as if to envelop it. The demon took the sword and gripped it in both hands. **"This is my power, *Blood Blade*."**

"I see. So that's why you didn't need to bring a sword."

"Indeed. I am my own blade."

The demon had the ability to turn blood into a sword. Quite a fitting ability, considering how obsessed with the weapons he seemed to be.

The demon took up a stance with his blade loosely held before himself. In contrast, Jinya held his sword pointed to the side. The two were ready. Jinya still had some lingering doubts, but he would not hold back. Their battle awaited.

Without warning, the two lunged forth.

The demon's footwork was more precise than his loose starting stance led one to expect. He kicked off his left foot and leapt into striking range, using textbook movements. At the same time, he swung his large red blade down directly overhead.

Jinya could not take the blow directly. He stepped diagonally to his right, then pivoted off his right foot, avoiding the strike and moving to the demon's left side. He then struck with a horizontal slash, but the demon made the insane decision to catch the blade with his left palm.

The demon's skin tore and blood sprayed, but the cut did not go deep enough to sever the arm.

Jinya couldn't let the demon grab hold and lock his blade down, so he retreated, vigilant of a follow-up attack. The demon grimaced painfully, then swung his left arm. Jinya was already out of range and assumed the swing would miss, but he misunderstood his foe's intentions. Blood scattered off the demon's palm and turned into blades that rapidly approached Jinya. Apparently, the demon's power even had influence on blood that had left his body.

Though surprised, Jinya quickly maneuvered his sword to knock away the coming projectiles.

The demon pressed the attack again, diagonally swinging down his sword that was roughly his own height. The strike was disciplined, textbook perfect even, but that made it all the easier to handle. Jinya struck horizontally against the

flat edge of the demon's sword, diverting the trajectory. Then he followed up with a rising slash, grazing the demon's chest with his sword tip and causing fresh blood to spurt. He tried to attack once more, but the demon touched his chest wound and abruptly pulled out a second sword, which was directed at Jinya. Jinya blocked the unexpected counterattack, then calmly studied the demon.

The demon was quite skilled with the sword, but his power was the real problem. The amount of blood spilled did not seem to match the mass of the blade it created. The blood appeared to only serve as a catalyst for making blades out of thin air, so it would be difficult for Jinya to try and stall the fight until the demon was weakened by blood loss. Also of note was the straightforward diligence the demon swung his sword with. Jinya felt as though he'd seen similar strikes before.

Jinya's thoughts caused him to freeze momentarily, and the demon took the opportunity to raise his sword and swing it down in an overhead strike. As the blade approached at an inhuman speed, Jinya reached for his metal scabbard and pulled it up. He used it as a shield and stepped in, shoving the strike aside.

After staggering slightly, Jinya quickly regained his footing and kicked off with his left to slash diagonally downward, aiming for the demon's shoulder. From such a close distance, it seemed sure to land, but he was surprised to find he had no time to complete his swing, as the demon was one step ahead. Before Jinya's attack could reach him, the demon had thrust his sword forward.

"Gh...!"

Jinya couldn't use *Indomitable* fast enough. Reading his opponent's move and then waiting to use the power was one thing, but he lacked the proficiency to deploy it instantly like Tsuchiura could. His left shoulder was gouged, but he used the close distance to charge, aiming a shoulder at the demon's solar plexus. The demon dodged with ease, though, as if he had seen the move before.

The two distanced from one another and went stiff. Their reasons for not moving were different, however. The demon was being wary, not wanting to jump in carelessly. Meanwhile, Jinya was shaken and had lost some of his will to fight.

The earlier thrust had surprised him. He had seen a similar maneuver from Okada Kiichi, only Kiichi's had been far smoother, enough to give Jinya goosebumps. Compared to Kiichi's, the thrust from just now seemed like nothing special. It was very simple swordplay. The moment Jinya tensed to repel the demon's sword, the demon had eased back on his strength and pulled his right foot back. Lowering his stance, he pulled his arms in to direct his sword tip at Jinya and thrust. To put it simply, he had scattered Jinya's strength and counterattacked.

"Why?" An old memory came to mind. The move the demon had used was something Jinya had shown a friend once. This friend, an earnest and honest samurai, had asked to spar with him. While honesty was a virtue of this friend, it was also a weakness because it made him easy to read. That was why Jinya had shown him that move in hopes it would be of use to him.

"That technique just now was something you showed me, wasn't it?"

Those words made Jinya's chest feel tight. He'd had a faint inkling for a while now, but he had hoped he was wrong. Now it was beyond denying, though.

"Why?" He grimaced, and his shoulders trembled as he let out a pained yell. "Why are you doing this, Naotsugu?!"

The demon was Miura Naotsugu Arimori, a friend of Jinya's from his time in Edo.

ordered Shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu to resign. Yoshinobu initially planned to obey and retire to Osaka, but a series of provocations made by members of the anti-shogunate faction began a conflict that led to the burning down of the Satsuma estate in Edo. This further resulted in Yoshinobu amassing a shogunate army fifteen thousand strong, drawn mainly from the Aizu and Kuwana domains, and marching it north to Kyoto on January 2nd of year four of the Keio era (1868 AD). The new Meiji government responded in kind with a 4,500-man army composed mainly of the Satsuma-Choshu alliance's soldiers. The two armies clashed on January 3rd in Toba and Fushimi, just outside of the Kyoto area. This conflict would later become known as the Battle of Toba-Fushimi.

Despite being vastly outnumbered, the new government troops were better equipped and had higher morale. In just one day, they forced the shogunate army to retreat and brought the battle to a close on the 6th. With their victory, the anti-shogunate forces gained initiative within the new government and organized a pursuit army to follow Yoshinobu, who had fled to Edo. In hindsight, this conflict could be called the battle in which the new era was finally wrought.

But one mustn't forget that with war comes sacrifice. Regardless of whether it ends in defeat or victory, blood must be spilled.

Miura Naotsugu Arimori fought in the Battle of Toba-Fushimi. The army as a whole emerged victorious, but that did not mean it was successful on every front. In the area where Naotsugu fought, it was met with heavy losses after a fierce attack by the shogunate army.

"Stay with me! We'll join up with the main forces soon!"

Naotsugu walked carrying a man on his back—a comrade who fought for the same cause. The battle was over. Naotsugu encouraged the man on his back over and over, but the man's replies were feeble. Eventually Naotsugu started shouting at him. They were both heavily wounded, but they had staked their lives together, so the thought of abandoning the other man to his fate never once occurred to Naotsugu.

“We will...make it...a new...” But in the end, the man on Naotsugu’s back still breathed his last.

“...Ahhh...” Naotsugu no longer had the energy to stand. His wounds were too deep. It was a miracle he had walked this far at all. He had lost too much blood and could feel his body turning cold.

He wanted to see a peaceful world where everyone could laugh together, but he knew that was no longer possible for him. His time was up, and so he slowly let his eyelids droop shut.

“Naotsugu-sama, please pull yourself together.”

He heard a youthful voice and opened his eyes once more. “...Who...are you?”

Standing before him was a young girl, something he’d never expected to see on a battlefield. From her attire, he wondered if she might be a daughter of some well-to-do family, but then he saw her smile and struck that possibility out of his mind. No *human* would smile in a situation like this. Most telling, however, were her eyes. They stared directly at him, a vivid red, the eyes of a demon.

“My name is Himawari. I can save you, if you wish. You only need to abandon your human form.” Softly, she smiled. “Become a demon, and you may live a second life. Will you take my offer?”

“...What do you have to gain from this?”

The demon knew his name and appeared before him when he was on the verge of death. She clearly had some plot in mind, but she let on nothing, carrying herself with grace.

“I’m merely acting on my mother’s orders. Now, what will it be? Do you hesitate to become a demon after all?”

Naotsugu knew demons weren’t necessarily wicked, no matter how hideous they might appear, and so he was not against the idea of becoming one. He had some reservations about parting with his humanity, but if it meant he could

continue the fight and help build the foundations of the new era, then he was willing to become a demon.

“It appears you’ve made up your mind. Please drink this.” She seemed to see right through his wavering heart. She produced a small vial from her kimono robe and forced its contents down his throat. His consciousness faded there.

When he awoke, Naotsugu was no longer human. His body was a full size bigger than before, and his skin had turned a dark red. His demon form was different from the one he recalled his friend having, but he was still grotesque. He wasn’t without complaint, but, overall, he was grateful. Thanks to Himawari, he could now fight again. Unlike his comrades who’d passed, he would be able to see the new world.

He resumed fighting, this time as a demon. His newfound strength was great. What was once grueling combat became easy. He felt satisfaction in knowing his efforts contributed to the cause. But his joy was short-lived.

On May 15th in year four of the Keio era (1868 AD), elite Shogitai troops joined with shogunate forces to fight a new government army mainly composed of Satsuma and Choshu troops. The sword held no place in this battle. Instead, modern weaponry reigned supreme, specifically Snider rifles, rifled mountain cannons, and Armstrong cannons. The shogunate troops were easily routed in a landslide victory for the government.

Naotsugu knew it was a good thing that the battle was short, because it meant less death, but he still lamented how useless the sword in his hand felt.

And so, the Boshin war ended in overwhelming victory for the new government. Victory had been obtained on the back of modern weaponry, but everyone rejoiced all the same. The fighting was finally over. There was no longer any need to fear. The curtain rose on the new era.

The feudal lands were returned to the Emperor, and on June 25th in year two of the Meiji era, the new government declared that all former samurai below a certain rank now belonged to the warrior social class. Thus, samurai became a

thing of the past. Things did not end there, however. In year three of the Meiji era, commoners were forbidden from possessing swords; and in year four, an edict was passed that removed the need for those of the warrior class to wear swords and maintain stringent hairstyles. Of course, it must be said that this edict didn't force anyone to do anything. It merely gave them the choice to opt out if they so wished. But the government was sending a clear message: *Your swords no longer represent the spirit of the samurai.*

Though they were now allowed to, few ex-samurai cut their hair or removed their swords. They may no longer have been samurai, but they still had their pride. They knew swords were weapons by definition, but they simultaneously believed them to be the proud tool they had forged a new era with. But the new era didn't see things in the same light.

Then the Sword Abolishment Edict was passed. In his head, Naotsugu understood why. To become legitimate in the eyes of the people, the Meiji government had to distance itself from the Edo shogunate, and both samurai and swords stood in the way of that. But his heart couldn't accept it.

"...Ahhh..." He walked the streets and saw how everyone rejoiced. *Why, he wondered, why does everyone hate swords so? Wasn't it the sword that brought about this new world?*

In war, death could not be avoided. One had to be prepared to take life, as well as to see one's fellows lose their own lives. It was a taxing thing. The sensation of cutting flesh haunted the mind, the act of killing twisted the heart, and the death of those who shared the same dream was excruciating. But Naotsugu persisted through it all because he had a goal. He bore all the pain and all the grief because he wanted to fight for a future he believed in, and yet the future that came was one that did not even acknowledge his hardships.

"Naotsugu-sama?"

He despaired at the new world. He stood still, unable to muster the strength to move his limbs. That was when Himawari appeared before him again.

“There’s something I’d like your help with. Is this a good time?”

The world of man had no use for samurai and the sword, but now a demon said she needed him. What choice did he really have?

“Miss Himawari saved me from the brink of death. I am grateful to her.”

The demon, Miura Naotsugu Arimori, spoke with a distant look in his now-red eyes. Jinya had no way of knowing what sight he envisioned. The man who’d once fought for the weak and a new world had become something ghastly in nature, and Jinya, for the life of him, could not understand why.

“But now I think it was a mistake to have stayed alive. I’ve abandoned my humanity only to find a disappointing future awaiting me. I have to wonder, just what have I lived for all this time?” Naotsugu grimaced. Though he was now a shadow of his former self, their years of friendship allowed Jinya to pick up the self-derision in his voice.

Jinya still remembered those days they spent together at Kihee. He wouldn’t have given up that time for the world, and that was why he had to pose his question once more: “Why are you doing this, Naotsugu?”

The grotesque, dark-red-skinned man scoffed before replying in an icy tone devoid of friendliness. **“Pardon? I’m afraid I don’t understand your question.”**

Jinya trembled. Things used to be the other way around. Jinya had been the cold, expressionless one while Naotsugu had been more animated. Their swapped roles reminded Jinya just how much time had passed since those days.

“You’ve become a murderer. Just how many people have you killed? Was mindless slaughter the reason you took up the sword?”

“Jin-dono, you misunderstand. I merely killed pigs fattened on peace, not people.”

“Naotsugu!”

How could he say such a thing? Hadn’t he claimed that samurai fought to

protect the weak? Wasn't he the same man who couldn't bear watching so many people suffer under the failing Tokugawa rule?

Naotsugu seemed genuinely perplexed by Jinya. **"Why are you angry? Are we not the same?"**

Jinya couldn't disagree there. The two were indeed the same. The swords they had held dear all this time were being taken away from them by the new era.

Naotsugu's gaze contained a mix of scorn and pity. In Jinya, he saw a pathetic man who did nothing while his identity was taken from him by the new world. **"Is it not unpleasant? We warriors brought about this peace. And yet we, the ones who fought, are oppressed while those who did nothing live free. Has there ever been such an unjust world?"**

Jinya didn't want to hear it. He stepped in and slashed diagonally across as if to stop Naotsugu from speaking. Naotsugu easily blocked him with his large red blade. Now that he was a demon, his strength and reflexes had improved.

"Enough," Jinya said. "Isn't this world what you wished for?"

"...What?"

"The samurai have brought peace to the weak. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Naotsugu's eyes widened. He seemed shaken, his face warping with anguish. But that expression was quickly erased by fiery anger. He lunged, yelling, **"Silence!"**

His swing was haphazard, lacking any proper form. It was more of a swat than a true strike. Jinya blocked it with Yarai, then retreated, putting distance between them.

Naotsugu fixed his stance and made an icy, furious glare. For the first time yet, he showed genuine hostility. **"You understand nothing! You claim you cannot change your ways, yet you so eagerly give up your sword!"**

Jinya grit his teeth. He had indeed believed he would live and die unable to

alter his ways, but since then he'd grown weak from having taken on so many excess things. Time had changed him, as slight as that change might be. He'd even come to like his transformation, and he had all the people he'd met to thank for it. And yet, Naotsugu, one of the very people who'd induced his change, was saying he was wrong to have done so.

Such words cut deeper than any sword could. Jinya's heart ached, but he did not let it show, for Naotsugu himself looked far more pained than Jinya.

"You're right, I followed the Sword Abolishment Edict. I found something worth laying down the sword for. But don't you have people dear to you too? Wouldn't you bear the momentary shame for their sake?" Jinya understood where Naotsugu's disdain for the Sword Abolishment Edict came from. But just as Jinya had Nomari, Naotsugu had a wife and child of his own. Shouldn't he have been able to change as Jinya had?

"Enough, enough!" Trembling, he declared, **"I...I would never, *never* just let my sword be taken from me!"** He bellowed and charged forth. He raised his large red blade high, then swung it down with all he had as though letting his emotions run wild. Even when he was in such a state, his swing was beautiful and by the book. The arc of his blade reflected the sincerity with which he had studied the sword.

"I cannot truly abandon the blade either. But what will killing innocents do for you? What will killing me do for you?! Is this what your sword was for?!" Jinya responded in kind by letting his emotions fill his swing as well. He knew that showing emotion in a battle might leave him more open to attack, but he could not restrain himself.

"No! My sword exists to protect others!"

"Then why are you doing this?!"

"Because so many of us died for nothing!"

Jinya blocked Naotsugu's fierce blow but could not move to counterattack. No, rather, he could not bring himself to counterattack. He faced Naotsugu

head-on, intending to fully take in his words.

“So many of us died. Those who dreamed of a better future, those who wanted to protect others...”

Every swing and every word hurt them both, but they did not stop. They couldn't. Naotsugu had chosen this path, and he could not stop now.

“Some people were scared of fighting, and some of killing. But we all fought anyway, thinking our lives would help build a better future! What we have now, this new era, was made possible by our swords!”

With only their pride to support them, the samurai had wished for a beautiful future. In a sense, they had achieved it.

“And yet...and yet they take our swords and rob us of our pride! The ones we protected scorn us!”

But the Meiji era did not accept the samurai. A few persisted as members of the new government, but the majority of them were demoted to a social class little different from that of a commoner.

“Why has this happened?! I could accept dying on the battlefield. I could stand being mocked and ridiculed. I didn't seek anyone's praise to begin with. I would happily accept peace at the price of some scorn. But why, why must they take our swords from us?! Our swords are our very pride! They are who we are!”

Naotsugu couldn't give a damn about his social class. But he had pride, pride as a samurai who upheld peace just as his ancestors had done before him. That was why he'd put his life on the line and fought. He saw that his fellow samurai had failed to uphold the peace and set out to fulfill his duty as a samurai by remedying the situation.

And yet, his reward was to have it all taken from him. The new government undid what countless samurai had built, deemed them a lowly warrior class, and then, finally, robbed them of their pride.

“Is this supposed to be the new world my comrades died for?! No, it can’t be! This can’t possibly be the future we fought to see!” He attacked relentlessly, leaving no time for Jinya to even breathe. His furious blade contained the emotions of those he’d fought with, the grief of all the men who’d had their swords, their very pride, taken from them. That grief resembled the gloom in Jinya’s own heart.

“Is that why you took to killing? What happened to wanting to protect the weak?!” Jinya shouted, knowing full well that his words wouldn’t make Naotsugu stop.

“Am I supposed to just bear the disgrace, then?! We’ve had our pride stolen, been called worthless, been humiliated...and you would still have me fighting to protect those who make no effort to fend for themselves?!”

“Tell me, then, what meaning is there in us fighting now?! Tell me, why...why must I point my blade at you?”

“There’s meaning here, all right. It’s more meaningful than fighting for the future was, at least.” Naotsugu swung diagonally upward as though scooping something up. Jinya couldn’t dodge. He blocked, but the strength of the blow pushed him back. He used the momentum to put distance between himself and Naotsugu, taking care not to lose his balance. He expected a follow-up attack, but none came. Instead, Naotsugu glared furiously at Jinya, angry that he was not fighting him in earnest. **“I kill to repay the one who saved my life. And since you would stand in the way of my killing, I will cut you down.”**

“In that case, you could have planned a sneak attack.”

“As a samurai, I could never do such a thing. That is why I chose to challenge you to a duel instead.”

Nothing Jinya said seemed able to change Naotsugu’s mind. A demon could not escape its nature. If Naotsugu could change his mind here and now, he would not have become a demon in the first place. He was so true to himself that it hurt.

“Fight me, Jin-dono. Please. Or your daughter shall die.”

Jinya grimaced. Nomari had been fond of Naotsugu. He'd even joked about having her marry his son once, long ago on a veranda somewhere.

“...For what purpose do you wield your blade?” Jinya repeated a question that had been posed to him long ago, one he no longer had an answer for himself. To his surprise, Naotsugu answered without even a hint of hesitation.

“To make people know the worth of the blade. I don't care if it's through random slashings or corpse collecting. If there's a way I can prove the worth of the blade, then I must do it. I don't know what Magatsume intends to do with the corpses I give her, and I don't care. I suppose seeing the world turned on its head might be amusing in its own right, though.”

“...You think proving your blade is worth something will change anything?”

“Perhaps not. But if I fail to prove the blade means anything, then we samurai will have truly lived for nothing.” Though no tears filled Naotsugu's eyes, Jinya couldn't help but imagine the man crying. Naotsugu didn't ask for much. He simply wanted to remain a samurai. But the Meiji era didn't even allow that small wish to be granted, forcing Naotsugu into a corner. **“Jin-dono... If you still call yourself my friend, then fight me. My blade is hollow. But by fighting you, it can be full again.”** He'd fought for the sake of others only to receive a future he hadn't asked for. The reason he wielded his blade had been taken from him, and all he believed in had been declared worthless. **“Please. Give meaning to this meaningless blade.”** At the end of it all, he could only wish for one small thing.

Naotsugu was a vain flower. He might bloom, but he'd never bear fruit. He was fated to be scattered by the winds of the new era, leaving nothing behind.

“Is there no other way? Can't you forget all about it and live in this new world?”

“Enough already! Don't ask me to do something you know you can't do yourself!”

Naotsugu's firm refusal made it clear: There was nothing Jinya could do now but grant his friend's wish.

Jinya changed into a demon, taking on a grotesque form of his own.

"...Thank you. You really are my friend."

He could probably have finished this fight in his human form, but if this battle would be his send-off for Naotsugu, then he could not allow himself to hold back. To do so would be discourteous and remove any right he had to call himself Naotsugu's friend.

"I feel the same way." He repositioned Yarai, then thrust his right shoulder forward and lowered his center of gravity. Meanwhile, Naotsugu took the textbook-standard stance, holding his sword directly in front of himself with the tip pointed at Jinya's eyes. "Or else I wouldn't be doing this." Jinya wished he hadn't said those last words. He was pained by the circumstances, but he had no wish to complain about them.

Naotsugu understood what Jinya meant. Naotsugu's wish wasn't truly for a duel but to give all he had in a battle and die as a warrior. The old-fashioned samurai way of dying. Naotsugu had no place in the world now as a demon, so it was best that he perish here and now—while he could still die a samurai.

"Ready?"

"Whenever you are."

Jinya moved first. He dashed forward with his weight low to the ground, invading Naotsugu's space in a single action. But this put him in Naotsugu's range first, as the length of Naotsugu's weapon was greater than his own.

"Haaah!" With a fierce cry, Naotsugu swung. But Jinya had read the move and dodged the strike by a hair's breadth, then stepped forward with his left and swung at Naotsugu's neck. Naotsugu forced his upper body back, causing Jinya's blade to glide just over him.

Jinya raised his sword again and slashed down at Naotsugu's shoulder.

Naotsugu responded by slashing upward with a reverse grip, meeting Jinya's sword at the same angle. Evenly matched, the two blades recoiled back.

Naotsugu grimaced, then quickly regained his balance and raised his sword as high above his head as he could. He swung it down violently with all his strength. To a less experienced swordsman, such a strike might've seemed deadly, but Jinya saw no threat in it. Naotsugu's strike was one of desperation, a full-power attack that abandoned all technique. In all likelihood, this was the first time he'd fought an equal opponent since he became a demon. His inexperience was on full display. Jinya could have easily parried the reckless attack and seized the initiative, but he chose not to.

"Superhuman Strength." Jinya supplemented his strength and chose to challenge Naotsugu head-on. He had to. If he didn't show at least this much fighting spirit, then this wouldn't be a proper send-off. He stepped in, crushing the earth below him, and attacked with all his momentum. He didn't even think of defending or dodging. Naotsugu's red blade cut flesh, but before it could reach bone, Jinya's own sword approached Naotsugu's heart.

Naotsugu's eyes grasped it all, but he could not move. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the tip of Jinya's sword dug its way into Naotsugu's body and heart.

"I've told you this before, but your honesty is both a virtue and a weakness."

Naotsugu made no attempt to use his *Blood Blade* power here for a surprise attack. He had the ability to do so, of course, but the thought hadn't even occurred to him. That was just the kind of man he was.

With some relief on his face, he collapsed. **"Ah... I knew it. You really are strong."** His vacant eyes reflected nothing. A white vapor rose from his body as he lay on his back. Now on the verge of death, he looked up at the distant evening sky with some nostalgia.

"I won't apologize. This duel had to end in one of our deaths."

Jinya had used all he had, both techniques and powers. Not holding back was

the greatest respect he could have shown his friend, and Naotsugu understood that. He knew how kind Jinya had been, in his own clumsy way, and smiled.

“I know. A duel must have a winner. I gave it my all and lost, and that is fine. At least this duel had some meaning.” The man awaited his end, not entirely without regret, but still happy for a fate he could accept. **“Now I no longer have to bear the sight of this grotesque Meiji era. Truly, I’ve...missed my proper time to die.”**

Death or dishonor. To live past the moment one should have died could be an unsightly thing. Jinya understood that well himself. He neared Naotsugu and touched his body with his left hand. Naotsugu turned his head to look at Jinya, questioning him with his gaze.

“...I have lived seeking strength so that I may return to Kadono one day and stop the calamity that will appear there, the Demon God. And I still seek that strength now.” With a throb, his arm began to pulse. “This left arm of mine consumes demons and will consume you now for your power.”

“Ngh, gaaah...”

Jinya used *Assimilation*, a power that had once belonged to one of the demons that attacked Kadono. He felt something begin to flow into him. Pain and heat seared his insides as he absorbed fragments of Naotsugu’s memory.

“Ha, ha ha ha ha!” While they were connected, Naotsugu could also glimpse Jinya’s memories: The moment everything began for him, the fate he was born to, his many days of loss and gain—Naotsugu saw them all and laughed happily. **“Jin-dono, will my power be useful to you?”**

Jinya would continue to fight from here on out. That would not change, even if the era had no need for swords or vengeance. “Of course. Your ability will be of great help in this coming era. I expect your sword will even reach the Demon God.”

“Ha, ha ha. Is that so? To think my *Blood Blade* will one day be used against such a scourge of humanity. I pray my power will support you in the time to

come.”

Jinya felt intense pain as he saw Naotsugu’s inner thoughts. The sword he wielded had failed to protect a thing. He’d staked his life only to be rewarded with a cruel future. Neither the sword nor the samurai had any place in the time to come, and he knew deep down that that was for the best. Still, he had lost too much to accept it. He could not abandon the sword and live a life of peace, joining hands with the ones who mocked his comrades. That was one of the reasons why he’d done what that demon wanted. He wanted to show the world that his grief wasn’t his alone. He wanted to show the world that this new era of peace was built atop the corpses of countless unknown, forgotten samurai.

“Thank goodness. I may have failed to protect a thing...”

But perhaps what he really wanted was for someone to stop him. And if his journey had to end, he wanted it not to be at the hands of the changing times or the masses but by the sword, the very thing he held dear. His heart was full of regret, but here, at the very end, he had found some salvation.

“...but I see now that my struggle was not meaningless.”

As his body was devoured, Naotsugu expressed his highest gratitude. He saw the life he lived up until now as worthless, lacking any significant achievements, so he was overjoyed to discover his death would serve another person well. He closed his eyes gently, his earlier gloom gone from his face. The man who’d missed his proper time to die had found a second chance with his friend by his side. He smiled, as if to say it was all worthwhile.

After consuming Naotsugu entirely, Jinya put his hand over his heart. The sight the samurai had envisioned in his last moments was neither the evening sky above nor a tragic battlefield, but a soba restaurant filled with laughter.

Evening passed and night came, but Jinya still hadn’t moved. His body had changed once more. His skin remained as swarthy as before, but his right arm was now slightly thicker and had sharper nails. A change to make it easier to cut

himself, it seemed.

“Blood Blade... The ability to make swords using blood as a catalyst,” he murmured, staring at his arm. He wondered why such a power would take form. A demon’s power was created not from latent talent but from the demon’s wish. It came from the heart, from a desire to achieve something just beyond one’s reach. It was a samurai’s pride to risk their life for their beliefs, fighting to the very end—their very last drop of blood—if need be. Such a belief must have been what led to this ability.

Jinya thought of Naotsugu and murmured, “You wished to live by the sword, down to the very last drop in you...” But it was not meant to be.

Change could be dazzling, so much so that it made one become dizzy and forget what was already there. Flowers by the roadside are a perfect example. When it came time to bloom, those whose spot had been stolen had no choice but to wither away without bearing any fruit. Similarly, the samurai were left in the dust by the changing times, their hopes left unknown to all.

“...Farewell, Naotsugu. Our end may not have been the best, but I am happy to have known you.”

Jinya turned away and left the Yamashinagawa River behind. There was a time when he, Naotsugu, and Zenji would drink the night away together, but now he was alone. That thought made him a bit sad.

He looked up at the night sky and saw the soft glow of the moon, its outline hazy. Continuing to walk under the moonlight, he touched his cheeks and found they were moist. Surely it must’ve been the work of the summer night dew.

And so things came to an end.

The flower scattered, but no one could stop it from blossoming.

Somewhere, in a corner of this new world, the vain flower still quietly bloomed.

Interlude:
Streetwalker in the Rain — Continued

S*EPTEMBER 2009.*

Apparently, to read is to glimpse into an author's heart.

Thanks to the many donations received by Modori River High School in Hyogo prefecture, its facilities were better than other local high schools. The library boasted a particularly impressive collection, so Jinya liked to spend his free time reading there. He felt a bit amused by the fact that he was little different from a normal high schooler now, considering his colorful past.

He was browsing the books after classes when he happened to meet Miyaka's eyes on the other side of the shelves. They were chatting a bit, keeping their voices low, when she remembered something she'd heard before.

"Whether it goes unnoticed or not depends on the reader, but books are always written with lots of heart. That's why the truly interesting stories aren't contained in the words written down but lie somewhere between the lines...or something like that."

She spoke a bit uncertainly, as she was just paraphrasing what the student library aide, Yoshioka, had told her. Yoshioka was a close friend of Miyaka and Kaoru's. She was a meek girl but also a voracious reader who spent every free moment she had in the library. Jinya talked to her every now and then, occasionally getting book recommendations from her. The theory of hers that Miyaka paraphrased was a bit abstract, but Jinya felt he understood the idea perfectly.

"But I don't think I can read that deeply myself," Miyaka said. She hadn't been much of a reader until lately, so Yoshioka's words were still a bit beyond her.

Jinya chatted with Miyaka a bit more, until eventually they parted, and he

returned to browsing the bookshelf. He was looking for the book that the play they saw in May was based on. Luckily, he found it in no time at all.

The title was *Streetwalker in the Rain*, and it was a collection of memoirs written by a real street prostitute named Kinu, adapted into contemporary Japanese. The contents mainly detailed her meeting with her husband Miura Naotsugu, their life together, and the turbulent period between the Edo and Meiji eras. The author's personality was on full display in her writing, making for a fairly amusing read for a memoir.

The memoirs were by no means famous, but some buzz had formed after they were made into a stage play, leading to demand for the contemporary Japanese adaptation now in Jinya's hands. The adaptation was apparently handled in a way that preserved the original meaning well while working in some charm, causing the book to be well received.

Jinya was eager to read the book. He'd been thinking of reading the memoirs of the woman who called herself "Streetwalker" for a while now. He was indebted to the streetwalker in many ways, but she'd remained a mystery to him throughout their acquaintance with each other. She consoled him and gave him that push he needed at times, but they were never really close enough to learn more about one another. Jinya was older now and had become able to allow himself small joys like reading, so he felt it was almost fate that he'd learn about *Streetwalker in the Rain* now that he was more capable of seeing the things he couldn't in the past.

If words were truly written with the author's heart, then he might discover new meaning in events he'd seen as insignificant before. Feeling some hope, Jinya opened the book in the library.

My husband passed away, my son grew up splendidly, and then I was met with days of idleness. I realized that my life's journey was reaching its end and figured I might as well leave something behind, so I took to the brush to write a

memoir. My life may not have been the most exciting, but at least my years have given me no shortage of things to write about. If I'm to begin anywhere, I must first speak of a time when Tokyo was still known as Edo.

The image most deeply rooted in my mind is without a doubt Edo in the rain. Looking back, I feel as though the rain is where everything began for me.

I am known as Kinu. I was born to a samurai family but defied my parents and failed to make an advantageous marriage. We were a poor family, so destitution came quickly, and I went from the daughter of a samurai family to a lowly streetwalker.

A streetwalker is what we call the lowest of prostitutes, paid only twenty-four mon for a night with a man. One must eat, however, so I sold my body every night for such a price.

One night, I was waiting out the rain under the eaves of some place when a samurai approached. He was a strange samurai, respectful even to me, a lowly streetwalker. He asked if he could share the eaves I was under until the rain stopped. I told him he could do as he pleased as they weren't mine to begin with. A woman like me has no place she belongs, I said. Self-abasing words, certainly, but as a streetwalker I felt them true. He just smiled softly, however.

"What a sad thing to say. A lady of your beauty is not meant to be as gloomy as these skies."

That was how I met Miura Naotsugu Arimori, the man who would become my husband.

Miura was a handsome, upright man. He was daring yet thoughtful, quick-witted and good with the sword, and he did not lord over the meek and humble. He was a paragon of what it meant to be a samurai, which was why he even spoke to me, a lowly streetwalker looked down on by all.

He was not good with low-brow jokes, though. He made the most troubled face whenever I teased him. I found that face too cute to stop, however, and I put him on the spot with my teasing many times. He never did get fed up with

me.

After that rainy night, we met numerous times. I would be lying if I said I was not conscious of our difference in status, but I had completely fallen for him.

—*Memoirs, Streetwalker in the Rain*

Kono Publishing

Jinya grimaced soon after he started reading. There was no law that said text had to be completely accurate, but Kinu's version of Naotsugu was so exaggerated that it made Jinya suffer second-hand embarrassment.

That aside, the start of their romance just about matched the way he had heard it. In other words, the contents of the book were real, barring some dramatization. As he continued to read, he saw many conversations he actually remembered. His adoption of Nomari was included, as was how busy he became following it. He was depicted in exactly the opposite manner, though.

"Ehe, eheh heh, why, if it isn't Miura-sama! Are you going to have some soba? Say, you wouldn't mind treating me to a bowl while you're at it, would you?"

In Kinu's memoirs, Jinya was an impoverished man who constantly showered Naotsugu with flattery to try and get free meals. The same was true in the stage play, but his character was even more foolish in the memoirs.

"Goodness, how can he be so shameless?"

"Now, now. Jin-dono may be like that, but he is still my friend."

It was something of a running gag in the memoirs for Jinya to act like a fool, the streetwalker to complain, and Naotsugu to soothe her. Reading this was irksome at first, but Jinya found himself immersed in the story before he knew it. He saw the life of the couple play out in his mind.

"Streetwalker-dono, will you do me the honor of wedding me?"

Back when it was still the Edo period, Naotsugu courted the streetwalker. Marrying out of love was rare for samurai in those days, as marriage was a political tool to form connections between two families. Jinya remembered Naotsugu's mother, an old-fashioned woman, being heavily against the marriage. In *Streetwalker in the Rain*, Naotsugu adamantly insisted he'd marry Kinu, declaring her the only one for him. He even went so far as to dramatically declare he was prepared to leave the household if need be, acting much like the protagonist of a novel.

There was no telling if these events actually happened as described, but Jinya did remember a period where Naotsugu was head over heels for Kinu. Jinya felt guilty for peeking into his friend's private love life, but he was amused just the same.

He continued reading and eventually came across something peculiar. The book mentioned that Jinya was a demon, and also explained just what a demon was.

...By no means was Edo a world of glamour alone. There are many who lead difficult lives here, as I once did. With so many people gathered together, there are bound to be a few who are different from others, such as those known as demons. No, they are not as frightful as they sound. "Demon" is what the elite call those below commoners, those so lowborn they are not even fit to be deemed human. "Demon" is a label given to those who don't fit in with the world's order.

According to her memoirs, demons were not a kind of spirit; rather, it was a moniker imposed by the powerful onto a group of marginalized people. There might have been *real* spirits among those people, but the majority of so-called demons were merely persecuted humans.

Jinya's true identity in the memoirs was not that of a monster but of an unfortunate soul pretending to be a ronin. The time she consoled Jinya at the Miura estate was changed to depict her sympathizing with Jinya because she'd been similarly persecuted.

On the surface, such a thing might seem normal, but Jinya actually knew Kinu. She was once involved in an incident with a genuine spirit, so she must have known demons were real. Why would she go out of her way to explain things as she did?

At first, he thought it might be out of consideration for him, but if that were the case, she wouldn't have mentioned anything about demons at all. He read on, searching for a clue, but suddenly came to a stop.

Around the end of the Edo period, Naotsugu left for Kyoto. Kinu came along, making no effort to stop him. Their story beyond that point was something Jinya knew nothing about.

This story took place back when they still lived in Edo. Naotsugu was everything to Kinu, who had become a prostitute after her family was ruined. She longed to stay with him forever, even though she knew her presence lowered his standing.

"Dear..."

"Kinu."

The Miura estate was an old home in the southern part of the samurai residential district. Naotsugu was fond of their garden and often went to the veranda to look at the seasonal flowers. Today he was watching their son Tadanobu swing a wooden sword out in the garden. Tadanobu practiced hard, having been inspired by someone. Naotsugu looked on with a warm smile.

"You know, I think of this place as my own little garden of happiness," he said. Kinu didn't press for an explanation. Instead, she held his hand and felt him squeeze hers back. "I used to think people were such sad creatures, forced to live life while leaving so much behind. But lately I've come to realize that life might not be so bad if I have you there to look back on distant memories with."

Naotsugu had told her about his older brother before. Apparently he had left

the home a long time ago, so long ago that the family hardly mentioned him at all now. Naotsugu seemed to see something nostalgic as he looked at their garden. She couldn't bask in that memory together with him, but she could nestle close to comfort him like she was doing just now, and that was a happiness of its own.

"Father, what's wrong?" Tadanobu asked, noticing the distant look in his father's eyes.

"Oh, it's nothing. Your swings have improved, Tadanobu."

"I'm still nowhere near where I need to be. Oh, I know. Let's call Jinya-san over again. And, um, Nomari-san too while we're at it." Tadanobu was fond of the ronin. He swung his sword so much because of his influence and was always asking to be trained by him. He had something of a crush on the ronin's daughter also, which was making him blush slightly now.

"Not a bad idea. I might as well ask Jin-dono if he's interested in marrying his daughter into our family while I'm at it."

"Dear..." It would not be good for the Miura family's reputation to take a wife from a non-samurai family for two generations in a row. Of course, Kinu was the first woman from such a family who'd married in, so she had no real grounds on which to chide him and kept her tone soft.

He smiled and said, "I know. But I have a feeling the coming era will be one in which people marry out of love, not status."

Looking back on it, that might have been more of a declaration than a prediction. *This will be the kind of future I'll shape*, he was saying. Naotsugu was a samurai loyal to the Tokugawa, yes, but he was also a kind man who wished for people to be happy.

Eventually, the turning point came.

"I'm thinking of going to Kyoto."

In the waning years of the Edo period, Naotsugu observed the shogunate's

weak stance toward foreign influence and decided that continuing to serve it would not benefit the people. Through the connections of an acquaintance, he was going to Kyoto with the aim of overthrowing the shogunate.

“I’m sorry.” His short apology was loaded with various meanings. He felt remorse over leaving his wife and son behind and pain over betraying the Tokugawa. But he did not take back his words, instead standing tall with his chest puffed with pride.

Kinu didn’t have a hint of hesitation in her. With a graceful smile, she said, “Then I shall join you.”

He was shocked. He had probably planned to leave her behind in Edo to take care of their son. These were turbulent times, and he was throwing himself straight into the thick of the action. He might not come back alive, but he at least wanted to show he loved her by keeping her safe.

“Kinu, the place I’m going will be full of danger. I can’t take you with me. Instead, live a happy, safe life here for me.”

“There is no happiness for me in a world without you by my side. Please, allow me to stay with you until the end.”

She did not hate her life in Edo. Her friendly conversations with the ronin were quite enjoyable. But even so, she could not imagine life without Naotsugu. She hadn’t known joy—in fact, she hadn’t even truly lived—until she met him.

“...Are you sure you want to come?” he asked.

“I am. If you love me at all, then don’t ask me to live on. Ask me to die together with you.”

“Kinu...” He cast aside his indecision and took her hand.

And so Miura Naotsugu joined the Satsuma-Choshu army, eventually fighting in what was later known as the Battle of Toba-Fushimi.

All Kinu could do was see him off and await his return. She prayed for his safety, hoping he would not meet his end at the point of a blade or a bullet. The

stress was too much for her to bear alone, but thankfully she had Tadanobu to support her.

After many sleepless nights, the country finally saw dawn. The Emperor was restored to power, and the Meiji government was formed. The times were changing, but she didn't care in the slightest about all of that.

"Dear, you're back."

"I am, Kinu. And now the peace we longed for is here."

The only thing she cared about was that her husband had returned home safe and sound. They could live in the new era together as a family now.

But their happiness did not last long. Slowly, things began to fall apart.

"Dear? Is something the matter?"

"O-oh, sorry, I didn't notice you there, Kinu."

Their new home in Kyoto was by no means luxurious. With the end of the feudal system, their privileges as a samurai family were revoked and they were instead assigned to the warrior social class, which was merely an empty title. Some samurai who played major roles in the war managed to land work in the new government, but Naotsugu was not among them and instead lived in town with the commoners.

As a former street prostitute, Kinu found their new life to be no problem whatsoever. In fact, she was happy to have a smaller home, as it meant the three of them could be closer together. The only change she did not like was that Naotsugu had become extremely reluctant to be touched. She knew him well enough to be sure he hadn't had a change of heart—he was simply afraid of something. But even when she asked what that might be, he would not say.

"Dad, let's go for a walk!"

"I'll stay here. You two go on ahead."

The first to adapt to the new era was Tadanobu. His manner of addressing his parents grew casual to match the way commoners talked. He also studied new

things and began thinking about making money to support the family. He seemed to still have some lingering affection for Nomari, but he otherwise grew into a lively young man.

Since Kinu was no longer a lady of a samurai family, she eventually stopped speaking so formally as well. She was used to casual speech anyway. She also began to smile more now that she didn't need to keep up appearances.

"Are you sure? It's not every day the three of us can go out together," she said.

"Sorry, I'm actually feeling a bit under the weather. You two have fun for me."

On the other hand, Naotsugu frowned a lot more now. Kinu never asked why, sensing that doing so would hurt him. They might've been slightly estranged now, but they still loved one another. That she was certain of, even if they no longer touched each other.

An obedient wife would probably wait until the day her husband chose to open up, but Kinu was too sharp for that. She intuitively knew that he was waiting for a particular moment, and that the two of them would be through when that moment came.

"Naotsugu-sama, I put some tea on," she said, sitting down beside him.

"Thank you."

Their slightly estranged life together continued, until one day they were looking out on their garden like they used to. The garden was a lot smaller than it had been in Edo, but it had water irises planted that were sure to bloom wonderfully come early summer. But Naotsugu probably didn't see his memories reflected before him in the garden like they had been in the past.

He suddenly stood up and walked from the veranda off toward the garden, turning slowly to look back at Kinu with the evening sun behind him. She understood that the time had come.

"Is this goodbye, then?"

He was bewildered. He hadn't expected her to see right through him. She spoke before he could only out of stubbornness, not wanting to hear him end what they had built together.

"You noticed?"

"More or less. This world is too unbearable for you to live in now, right?"

The all-important samurai were gone, and their swords had been taken away. To the commoners who'd been discriminated against all this time, this change was a wonderful thing. But to Naotsugu, a samurai to the core who had tried to be the foundation for the coming era, this new world seemed twisted. He couldn't help but mourn the peace that had come.

"There's something I have to tell you while I still can. Something I couldn't bring myself to say before. I'm no longer human anymore. I have no right to live with you," he said. Indirectly, he called himself no different than those unfortunate people who were discriminated against by all. "I will be leaving to challenge a peer to a duel now, in the hope that this worthless blade of mine can have some meaning in my last moments."

He spoke with the same determination he had shown that day long ago, and so she accepted his will with an expression befitting a lady of a samurai family. "May fortune favor you in battle. I will be praying you reach the end you seek."

"...I'm sorry, Kinu. I haven't been a good husband. I've done nothing but follow my own wishes this whole time."

She leaned against him as if to say otherwise. He stiffened but did not pull away. She committed this moment to heart, hoping to remember his warmth for as long as she could. "Don't be stupid. I asked to stay by your side knowing full well what kind of man you were."

"Ah, of course. Of course," he said sentimentally.

"So go ahead and do as you please. My feelings for you won't change."

He left without looking back, and she did not stop him. His uncertain steps

had become confident now, causing her to feel more relief than sadness.

She knew that, most likely, her husband would die. But she also knew that he would meet a more fulfilling death this way than if he tried to live only to wither away.

“Naotsugu-sama...”

Even so, she could not prevent a single tear from rolling down her cheek.

The two never saw each other again. She did not remarry and lived the rest of her life loving him alone.

“Oh, is that *Streetwalker in the Rain*?”

He looked up to see Miyaka standing right next to him. He’d been so engrossed in the book that he hadn’t noticed her until she spoke.

“I’ve read that. It’s pretty good. What part is your favorite?”

“I’m still not finished, but I guess the part where Naotsugu leaves.”

Having finished reading the farewell scene, Jinya let out a sigh. Unable to bear the Meiji era, Naotsugu left his wife and son behind. The scene was depicted emotionally from the streetwalker’s perspective. However, the reason Jinya chose it as his favorite wasn’t because it was so striking, but because it finally revealed to him why the streetwalker might have portrayed demons as a discriminated group of people.

The scene depicted Naotsugu as saying that he was no longer human and therefore deserved to be loathed by the streetwalker. That proved she understood what was going on at the time. Then perhaps she described demons in the way she did, while not outing anyone, in order to declare she loved her husband no matter what he was—her final act of pride as his wife. Who could be sure?

However, one thing was clear. On that distant night when Jinya and Naotsugu dueled, Jinya had been fighting not only Naotsugu’s determination but also the

streetwalker's love he bore.

It was all in the past now, though. Knowing wouldn't change a thing. Even so, Jinya felt as though he had glimpsed a small part of the author's intentions. He had read between the lines of *Streetwalker in the Rain* and found it was full of heart.

"The part where Kinu confesses her love is great, huh? My favorite part is this one here, though." Miyaka turned the pages, then pointed to a scene where Kinu, now without Naotsugu, fondly thinks back on the past. She reflects on her time in Edo, recounting not a memory with her family but a conversation with Jinya the ronin.

"That damn streetwalker..." Jinya murmured under his breath with a grimace on his face. He hadn't expected a flattering depiction, but *this* was just cruel.

Jinya the ronin had a daughter he adored in the story. That much was acceptable, since it was true, but he was depicted as being so overly doting that he yelled, "Noooo, no, no, no! You can't have her! I ain't wedding her off to nobody! My little girl's staying with me forever!" while rolling around drunk and stark naked. The difference between the unflattering depictions of him and the embellished ones of Naotsugu was like night and day. This wasn't even on the level of teasing anymore—it was straight-up harassment. She went on to mention the time he supposedly cried his eyes out when they reunited in Kyoto, how he didn't even know things that were common sense to children, and so on.

"He's, uh...quite the character, isn't he?" Miyaka said, stifling laughter. She more or less knew Jinya's background.

"I can't believe the nerve of that woman," he muttered in disbelief.

Unable to contain herself, Miyaka burst out laughing, causing all eyes in the library to turn toward her. She hurriedly straightened herself out, but the corner of her lips still trembled.

"At least one of us is enjoying themselves," he said. "Anyway, I think I'll head

home for the day.”

“Huh? But you still haven’t finished the book.”

“I’ll borrow it. I’m interested in reading what happens.” He quickly checked the book out, then put it in his bag. He was interested in the story of Kinu, of course, but what he really wanted to do was see exactly how he’d been mocked. “What you said earlier turned out to be true, by the way.”

“That so? Not my words, though, so don’t thank me.”

He smiled softly, thankful to learn from Miyaka one joy of reading. Despite his objections, it’d be a waste to get caught up in the surface-level depictions and miss the streetwalker’s deeper intentions. Tonight, he would lay off the drinking and read deeply. He had a feeling this book was full of kindness that had been overlooked.

Footnotes

Twin Shizuka

[\[1\]](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One shaku is equal to 0.9942 feet.

Interlude: A Tale of Candy Apples and the Heavenly Maiden

[\[2\]](#) An object of worship, typically housed in a shrine, believed to contain a deity's spirit.

[\[3\]](#) A time measurement used only in the Edo Period. One koku equals roughly two hours.

[\[4\]](#) In Japanese, the kanji that make up names can have different readings. The “Shira (白)” part of Shirayuki becomes “Byaku (白)” in Byakuya.



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