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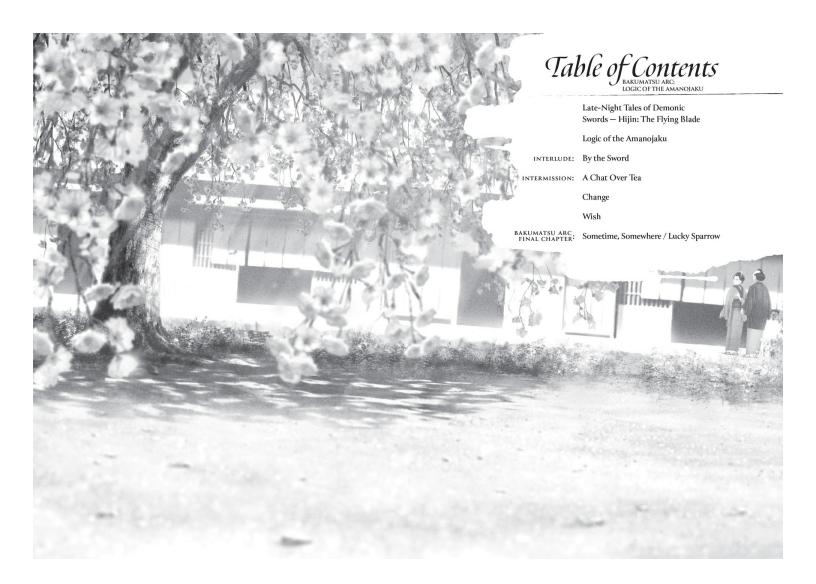
Sword of the Demons of the Demons Gentosho Hunter Gentosho



written by Motoo Nakanishi



Seven Seas Entertainment



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.

MIURA NAOTSUGU: Eldest son of the Miura family, who

are retainers to the shogunate. Works

as a secretary in Edo Castle.

OFUU: Sadanaga's daughter and a waitress at

Kihee. A demon.

STREETWALKER: A street prostitute in the Yoshiwara

area. Formerly a daughter of a samurai

family.

AKITSU SOMEGOROU The third person to inherit the

THE THIRD: name of master metalworker Akitsu

Somegorou. An artifact spirit user.

NATSU: Jinya's adoptive sister.

ZENJI: Manager at Sugaya, a store in

Nihonbashi. Prone to making gaffes.

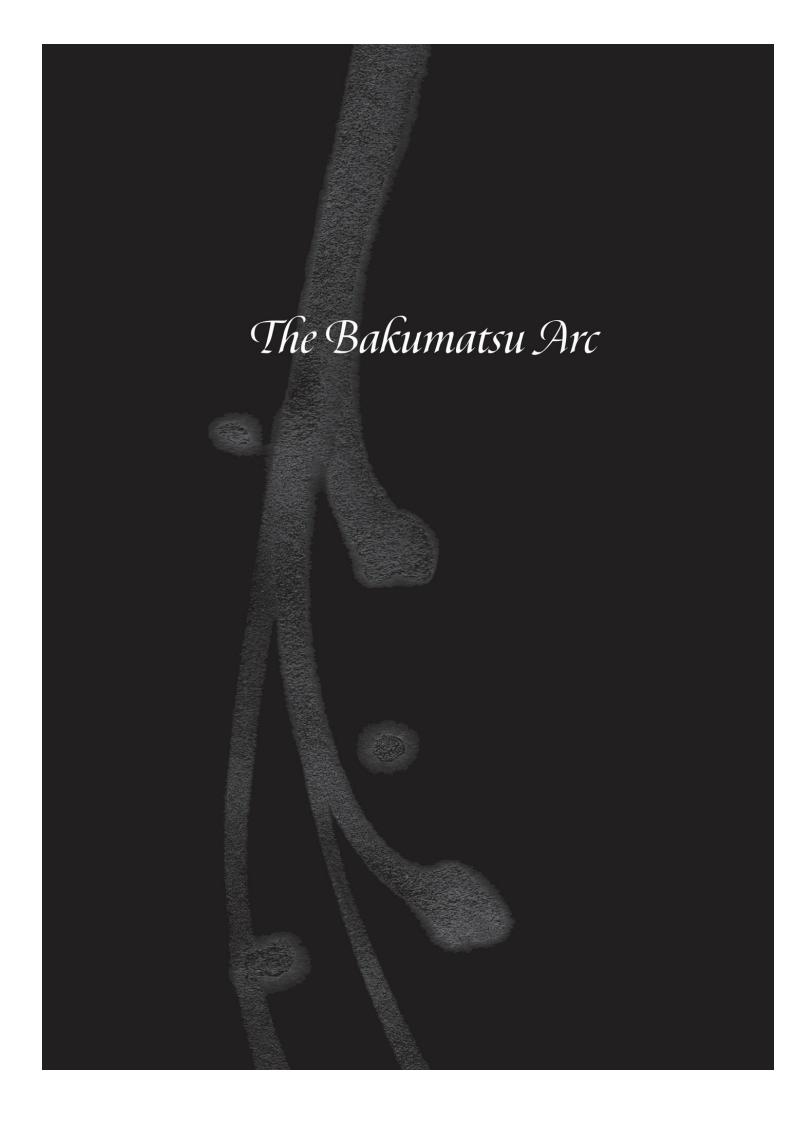
Suzune: Jinya's sister by birth. A demon, and

the one who killed Shirayuki, the

woman Jinya loved. Her whereabouts

have remained unknown since the

tragedy of Kadono.



Late-Night Tales of Demonic Swords: Hijin: The Flying Blade

1

WITHOUT THINKING, I reached toward the wound. The sensation of its texture intoxicated me, enveloped me. It was warm, yet cold. So strange, yet so lovely. Red flesh peered out from the slit in her skin.

It had only taken a single stroke of this bewitching blade, its luster more seductive than any woman I'd ever met. Blood dripped down along its beautiful edge, and my wife's corpse fell to my feet.

I was left in a trance with only the rough grip of the sword held tightly in my hands to serve as my link to reality. I had just killed my wife, and yet my heart felt aflutter as I looked at the blade glowing white in the twilight. My lips curled with rapture. There was no mistaking it.

My heart had been stolen by this demonic sword.

It was year two of the Bunkyu era (1862 AD). Six years had passed since the liquor incident, but Edo remained on edge. Tokugawa Iesada, the thirteenth shogun, had passed away, and the country seemed to be making trade agreements with foreign nations one after another.

The arrival of the Perry Expedition (1853 AD) heralded the decline of the shogunate's long-held stance of national isolationism. The shogunate saw the overwhelming power that western nations now possessed and felt they had no choice but to yield. Foreign influence was slowly seeping in and changing the country.

The Imperial Court voiced its opposition toward opening the country's borders, and many wished the emperor to retake control and overthrow the shogunate. There were also samurai who sought to open borders but were displeased with the shogunate's feebleness. While still faint, the voices of

revolution were gradually growing louder.

And in this chaotic world, demons continued to lurk within Edo unnoticed, creeping in the shadows...

Now was a time that would later be known as the Bakumatsu period, the dying years of the shogunate. The end of an era was near.

On one winter day, Miura Naotsugu was visiting a sword dealer not far from Edo Castle. A sword dealer was a businessman who sold swords, as one would expect, but they also acted as middlemen for people who wanted to commission well-known swordsmiths or needed an introduction to a sword sharpener. Many sword dealers plied their trade in a part of Edo called Atagoshita Hikagechou. Naotsugu always went to a shop called "Tamagawa" to get his sword sharpened.

"I see you're still keeping your sword in tip-top shape, Miura-dono." The owner of Tamagawa gave a businesslike smile as he handed the unsigned blade he had sharpened back to Naotsugu.

"Oh, no, I just never have a chance to use it."

"Even so, the fact that it hasn't warped or clouded anywhere shows just how regularly you tend to it. Many say the sword is the soul of a samurai, but you treat yours like it's your very own child. I'm sure your sword would thank you itself if it could speak."

Even though he was being praised, Naotsugu couldn't bring himself to feel proud. He drew the blade from its scabbard and checked its sharpness, his expression stiff.

"Is something the matter?"

"No," Naotsugu replied. "Your work was good. I just have my own misgivings because my sword is so unclouded..."

Naotsugu had turned twenty-seven this year. He had a wife now, as well as a child. Overall, life was smooth sailing for him. There shouldn't have been a single thing worth complaining about, and yet he felt a bit of gloom over how

pristine his sword was.

Be just and courageous, know benevolence and respect, swear loyalty to the Tokugawa, and be willing to fight in the Shogun's name. These were the tenets a samurai followed, and to live by them brought pride. It was for the sake of these values that samurai were willing to shed blood on the battlefield as warriors. Naotsugu had been taught by his mother that a samurai's worth was demonstrated through his sword, but he himself had never experienced combat. He'd once drawn his blade against a demon on a rainy night, but it was Jinya who had ultimately cut that foe down. Naotsugu's blade remained pristine because it was unused, and that made him wonder: Just how much worth did his unused blade have?

Foreign powers were encroaching on the country, and the world of the samurai was slowly beginning to change. Precisely because it was a time of transformation, Naotsugu couldn't help but question his own place in the world.

"Huh? What's the matter with an uncloudy sword?" the owner of Tamagawa asked.

"Nothing. At least, I hope..." Naotsugu replied evasively, returning his sword to its scabbard. He took a deep breath, but he didn't feel any better.

The shop owner noticed his customer's unhappiness and said, "Hm, that's quite the long face you got there. Maybe taking a look at a rare sword I have here will lift your spirits? How about it?"

It was odd to suggest that a person look at a sword to lift their spirits, but the idea was perfect for Naotsugu, who was an honest-to-goodness sword aficionado. In fact, the main reason why he tended to his sword so much, as the owner of Tamagawa had observed, was that it was something of a hobby of his.

"I'd hate to impose, but that would be wonderful," Naotsugu said.

"Oh, you're not imposing at all. I don't mind in the least, certainly not for an important patron of mine. Wait here one moment, I'll go bring it out." The shop owner disappeared into the rear of the store and soon returned with a long, slender box made of paulownia wood, which he carried over with exaggerated importance. Naotsugu found his expectations rising by the moment; this was

likely one of the shop's prized masterpieces. The owner continued to play up the item's significance, opening the box and taking out its sword with slow, deliberate motions. "The name etched on it is Kaneomi. His swords are sometimes called Demon Tachi Kaneomi."

The entire scabbard was made of iron. The moment it was handed to Naotsugu, he thought its tremendous weight would make it slip right out of his grasp. It had received the bare minimum of design work, giving it an unrefined, boorish appearance.

"May I draw it?" Naotsugu asked.

"Be my guest."

Naotsugu's poor first impression was forgotten the moment he drew the sword and laid eyes on its naked blade. It was thick and plain, but the craftsmanship was simply exquisite. The iron's captivating luster made it seem almost wet. Its curvature was deep, and it reached around two shaku¹ and four sun² in length. Even a layman could tell at a glance that this was a masterwork.

"Incredible..." Naotsugu murmured.

"Kaneomi was known as the best swordsmith in all of Kadono Village. This sword was made around Tenbun times (mid-16th century)."

"Really? This type of curvature is rare for a sword of that era."

The curvature of swords varied greatly depending on when they were made. In general, older swords curved farther back and were of the tachi long sword variety, like the one Naotsugu held now. Naotsugu's friend, Jinya, also had a tachi blade called Yarai.

Originally, all Japanese swords were straight. But as the country entered the Nara and Heian periods (710-794 AD; 794-1185 AD), swords began to be designed for one-on-one fights, causing their shape to change from straight to thick and curved in order to better cut through armor. Later, in the Nanbokucho and Muromachi periods (1336-1392 AD; 1392-1573 AD), uchigatana blades with shallow curvature became the most popular design. Naotsugu's own sword was of this uchigatana variety.

Tachi blades were robust and sharp, and uchigatana ones excelled at

thrusting. The curvature of a blade directly affected its durability and cutting power, so changes in design between time periods weren't mere whims but rather strategic decisions tailored for that specific era.

"Kaneomi's specialty was blades made with practical combat in mind," the shop owner explained. "This sword's deep curve and thick blade are meant for cutting through armor, and the simplicity of its temper patterns makes a slight yet important improvement in its durability."

"Yes, this is definitely a blade meant for fighting," Naotsugu agreed. "And yet it has such beauty. It's wonderful."

"The beauty of practicality, perhaps. No unnecessary flourishes or flashy temper patterns, just a sword purely devoted to battle. It's almost as if it embodies the spirit of the samurai of old. Perhaps it's just my fondness for the past speaking, but I do find these kinds of swords captivating in their own right."

Naotsugu was a man from an old samurai family, and so he admired the idea of an unembellished sword that was meant to be nothing more than a weapon. His earlier gloom had faded at some point, allowing him to look at the sword with unadulterated admiration. He said, "I'm surprised I haven't heard of this sword, since its creator was so well known."

"It's just not the type to be popular. A sword strictly meant for battle isn't of much interest to the people of the shogunate. Kaneomi didn't belong to any well-known school and had no successors, and there aren't many swords out there with his signature etched into them. His swords might be some of the best, but they remain hidden masterpieces."

Naotsugu thought it was a shame for such a great sword to remain unknown, but his interest was also greatly piqued by its lack of fame. These kinds of hidden secrets were just what tickled an aficionado's fancy.

Seeing Naotsugu hanging onto each and every one of his words, the shop owner lowered his voice and curled his lips into a smile. "That said, Kaneomi is somewhat *infamous* in his own right."

"What do you mean?"

"About four of his swords are considered to be special. If you had come just three days earlier, I'd have been able to show you one of those swords, but unfortunately it's not with me anymore."

"Interesting. These four swords are famous, then?"

"Oh, no. Not at all." The shop owner paused, then slowly whispered for dramatic effect: "But they *are* said to be demonic."

There were many legends that featured swords. There was the Douji-giri Yasutsuna, the "Douji-slayer" that was used to kill the demon Shuten Douji; Kogitsunemaru, named after the fox deity who helped forge it while in the guise of a child; and countless others. It was hard to say whether a sword became famous because of its legend or if a legend formed around a famous sword, but a famous sword always had a story to it, nonetheless.

Occasionally, however, there would be a sword whose history—legendary or otherwise—was mired in blood. Swords that brought their owners misfortune, swords that sought bloodshed and turned their owners into killers, and much more... These were known as demonic swords, and their tales were often told late at night as ghost stories.

"Demonic? You mean like Honegami Toushirou, the bone-eating sword?" Naotsugu asked.

"Ah yes, the Bone-eater, famous for crushing bones with a single blow. But no, not quite like that. These four swords of Kaneomi's are a little different, you see. Supposedly, Kaneomi met with a demon and borrowed its power to artificially make these swords demonic."

"...Is such a thing even possible?"

"Who knows? I'm certainly not one to say, but there's no lack of stories about this particular swordsmith. Some claim that quite a few demons supposedly visited his workshop. And there are many tales that say his wife was a demon, and he melted her down into iron and forged her into a sword. That's why Kaneomi's blades are sometimes called Demon Tachi swords. Well, I'm sure these stories were all embellished over time, but at the very least, it seems like Kaneomi really did try to make demonic swords."

The old Naotsugu would have written off such a thing as nonsense, but he could believe the tall tale now that he had a friend who was involved in such supernatural dealings. If demons existed, it was no stretch to think demonic swords did too. A wave of displeasure suddenly washed over Naotsugu. Would this supernatural sword claim a victim? He didn't realize it, but he was glaring at the shop owner now.

"According to legend, Kaneomi forged four demonic swords, then never made anything again. Some say he also forged one more sword—a nameless one—but there's not much to support that. At any rate, his last four swords are somewhat infamous among folks who have interest in such wicked things."

"And you had one of them here...and sold it *knowing full well* it was a demonic sword?" Naotsugu's question came on a little strong and judgmental, but the shop owner let it slide with a smile.

"Yes, a retainer of the Aizu domain living here in Edo bought it from me just three days ago. Please understand, Miura-dono, I am but a humble sword dealer. I must make my living selling all kinds of swords; some have a noble past, and some have bloodied ones. It's just the way things are when you're a merchant." The shop owner forced a stiff, professional smile. "Of course, I would never do anything morally objectionable for money, but a merchant I remain."

Naotsugu was suddenly reminded of his own brother Sadanaga, and of Jinya as well. The owner of Tamagawa was probably a similarly stubborn man who didn't bend his values for others.

"Why is the world full of such obstinate people?" Naotsugu sighed. He understood that the shop owner had simply done what he had to, so condemning him for selling a sword was senseless. For what it was worth, the man did take some responsibility for his action, perhaps out of guilt. He'd intentionally let it slip that the sword had been sold to a retainer of the Aizu domain living in Edo, information he generally wouldn't share with another customer. This was the most he could compromise for Naotsugu, and what Naotsugu would do with that information from here was up to him.

"Forgive me, we merchants can be a pain."

"No, it's all right. I've grown used to obstinance."

"That sounds troubling in its own way."

"Ha ha... Just out of curiosity, what was the demonic sword you sold called?"

"Ah, yes. Yatonomori Kaneomi was its name."

Naotsugu passed under the entrance curtains of the soba restaurant Kihee and was greeted with a familiar smile by Ofuu. He scanned the room and was not surprised at all to find Jinya there. Many years had passed since the two met, but the ronin still looked as youthful as ever.

"Oh, Naotsugu."

"Hello, Jin-dono."

The two exchanged brief greetings as Naotsugu sat down at a table. He ordered a kake soba, then thought for a bit before bringing up what he had just heard.

"A demonic sword?" Jinya repeated back.

"Yes. According to a sword dealer I often visit, one by the name of Yatonomori Kaneomi was sold three days ago. It's a bit outside the scope of your usual work, but I thought it best to inform you anyway."

Jinya remained in the kitchen while Naotsugu talked, not ignoring the man but rather immersed in cooking. His expression was deathly serious, as though he were fighting a demon. "I appreciate it. It's certainly an interesting topic, to say the least... Artificial demonic swords made by a swordsmith who married a demon... There might be something here."

"Sounds like you believe the tall tale. Have you seen one of those swords before or something?" Naotsugu asked.

Jinya removed soba dough from a kneading bowl, mashed it into one big clump, and then sprinkled flour over it as he rolled it into a circle. He was visibly clumsier with the process than the restaurant owner and had to stop every now and then to awkwardly make small adjustments to keep the dough in the proper shape. "No, I can't say I have. But objects can harbor emotions, so it's

not unreasonable to think a sword can become a demonic one after many years."

"Is that so?"

"It is. That Yatonomori Kaneomi was forged for that very purpose, wasn't it?" "I suppose so."

Jinya folded the dough, placed it on a cutting board, and sliced it into thin strips, which he then put into a pot over a fire. What he lacked in experience he made up with thoroughness, as he made steady progress throughout. Once he saw the soba finish boiling, his shoulders sagged with relief. "I'd like to check on the sword in person if possible. Ofuu, soba's ready."

"Got it! Here you are, Miura-sama. One kake soba." Ofuu brought it over with a sunny smile.

Steam rose pleasantly from the bowl. Restaurants generally pre-prepped their noodles, but these were made fresh. Between that and the cold weather outside, the hot noodles looked even more appetizing than usual. Still, Naotsugu couldn't help but ask the burning question on his mind. "Um, so... I've been wondering for a while now, but why are you the one making soba, Jindono?"

The restaurant went silent all at once. Naotsugu was beginning to wonder if he had asked something he shouldn't have when Jinya scratched his cheek and gingerly replied, "...Ofuu's father offered to show me how to make it, so I figured I'd give it a shot." He was as stony-faced as ever, but there was a hint of embarrassment—he even averted his gaze.

Naotsugu glanced toward the restaurant owner, who had been watching Jinya cook.

"Oh, you know how it is. I just figured Jinya-kun here can't stay a ronin forever, so I've been teaching him how to cook so he can run the restaurant one day."

Jinya frowned at the restaurant owner's words. "I'm not going to 'run the restaurant one day,' I'm just trying out cooking because I thought it'd be interesting. It's the same with my flower lessons with Ofuu: a passing interest."

Naotsugu remembered Jinya had once said he was devoting himself exclusively to slaying demons to prepare himself for some objective, but he doubted that these side activities served to help the so-called Yasha guardian reach his goals.

"Although..." Jinya continued with a faint smile, "I suppose I did also kind of figure it would be a waste to turn down your kind offer." The gentleness in his voice was not lost on Naotsugu.

Around six years earlier, two regulars of this restaurant just suddenly stopped coming one day. Jinya had been acting like his usual emotionless self around that time, but he was clearly a little depressed. That must've been when the restaurant owner began offering to teach him how to make soba.

"You've gotten better, Jinya-kun," Ofuu said.

"You think so?"

"I do. You could probably open your own restaurant at this point."

"I doubt it, but thanks for the flattery anyway."

"I wasn't flattering you, though. I really mean it!"

It was no mystery to Naotsugu why the man who had constantly claimed to be unable to change his ways was doing just that. His good friend had been shown kindness by many. Gone was the Jinya who declined invitations to visit festivals; he was now someone who could allow himself to stop and breathe when he needed to.

"You two sure act like a couple," Naotsugu commented. The thought had sprung to mind as he watched their little back-and-forth. Jinya and Ofuu, running the soba restaurant together... He couldn't help but smile at the heartwarming idea.

"Oh jeez, Miura-sama. Don't tease us!" Ofuu said. She looked happy, her cheeks a little red. Perhaps the two really would marry one day. Naotsugu certainly wouldn't mind seeing that happen.

"Speaking of couples, how's your wife?" asked Jinya, likely changing the topic out of embarrassment.

"Oh, Kinu? She's well. Feel free to come visit some time; she'd love to see you."

"I have a hard time believing that..."

Naotsugu's family wasn't wealthy, but they were still samurai, so it shocked many when he married for love instead of political gain. It took some time for his mother to overcome her traditional values and accept Kinu, but she did eventually come around. Naotsugu and Kinu shared a close bond and had a four-year-old son. Together, they lived a modest but fulfilling life.

"Nonsense! She really is fond of you," Naotsugu said. "Incidentally, do you have any plans to buy a more permanent residence?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, it's worth thinking about. Settling down and starting a family is worth the effort, I promise you."

"I don't doubt you, but still..." Jinya shrugged, unsure what to say. He seemed indifferent to most things not related to slaying demons, which worried Naotsugu. Perhaps it was because he was married himself, but Naotsugu would have liked to see the man no longer be alone.

"That's a nice suggestion, Naotsugu-sama!" the restaurant owner said. "It just so happens I know a wonderful girl I could introduce you to, Jinya-kun. She's kind, easy on the eyes...why, I'd say she's a perfect match for you!"

"You never miss a beat, do you?" Naotsugu said with some exasperation, speaking for the room. The restaurant owner had been planning for a while now to get Jinya to marry Ofuu. He was probably teaching Jinya to cook out of the goodness of his heart, but the idea of Jinya taking over Kihee was definitely in his sights as well.

"Dad..." Ofuu sighed. But she didn't seem too displeased and merely smiled wryly. She was long used to this from her father. It also didn't hurt that she had feelings for Jinya, or at least that's how it seemed to Naotsugu.

Jinya asked, "I've been wondering for a while now... Why are you so desperate to get me and Ofuu together?"

"Well, because I'm her father, of course. Anyone would want their daughter to marry someone nice."

"But I'm a ronin without stable work. That's not exactly a good deal for her, don't you think?"

"That's why I keep saying you should take over my restaurant!"

"I can't do that, as I've told you many times."

"Bah... You really are an obstinate one, Jinya-kun."

Jinya didn't seem to notice Ofuu's feelings for him, which most would agree was just like him. Ofuu watched in amusement as her father and Jinya shared their frivolous back-and-forth.

"Your father never changes, huh?" Naotsugu said.

"Hee hee. No, he does not. But that's fine. This kind of stuff gives Jinya-kun a much-needed breather."

"You think so?"

"I do. He's always too tense, and he needs moments like these where he can let his guard down." Ofuu's gaze was soft, more like a mother's than a wife's. Her father and Jinya continued to go back and forth without end, but she showed no sign of wanting to intervene. This was part of their daily lives now, and there was no reason to put an end to it.

Naotsugu decided to stop letting his mind wander and got to work on his stillwarm noodles. "Mhm, that's good."

Just being alive meant one could enjoy such peaceful pleasures.

2

Sugino Mataroku constantly wondered to himself, just what was so wrong with things remaining the way they were?

"Give it your best today, dear."

"Of course."

Men were such simple creatures. Hearing those few words as he got ready in the morning was all Mataroku needed to face the day with motivation.

Mataroku and his wife worked at the same samurai estate. He handled a variety of affairs in a role similar to a manservant, and his wife worked as a maidservant. The Sugino family was impoverished, a samurai family in name only. They'd once lived lives comparable to commoners, but things changed when they were hired by the head of another samurai family they knew. The Sugino family received a new residence and a quality of life incomparable to their earlier situation. Though they were now busy, they were more than happy to work hard every day for their new benefactors.

"Oh, I heard Yasuhide-sama called for you yesterday. What was that about?" the wife asked.

"Oh, that? Eh heh heh heh. Jeez, where should I even start?"

"...Dear, you're acting as creepy as a cockroach right now."

"Hey, isn't that a little mean?!" Mataroku exclaimed. Being likened to a bug was quite rude.

"There's no need to shout. So, what was it?"

"Heh, Yasuhide-sama gave me a sword, if you can believe it."

"A sword?" This time, the wife was the one to raise her voice.

"Yeah, it looks like all my hard work hasn't gone unnoticed. He was like, 'I have decided to reward your efforts by gifting you a sword. Would you accept it?' And you'd better believe I did!" Mataroku's impression of the man he served didn't resemble him in the slightest. Still, Mataroku smiled broadly, his face wrinkled with joy.

To reiterate, the Sugino family was incredibly impoverished. Mataroku had been forced to sell his sword long ago for living expenses. The sword was considered the soul of a samurai, so the loss had weighed greatly on him ever since. Therefore, he was thrilled to learn that he would be receiving a new sword.

"The money's already been paid," he said. "All that's left is for me to go pick it

up at a sword shop called Tamagawa."

"I see... I was wondering why you've been so spirited lately."

"How could I not be?! I'll be getting my own sword soon! My *own* sword, honey!"

"I get that, but you're acting as annoying as a moth fluttering around my ear while I'm trying to sleep."

"Why do you keep comparing me to bugs?! It's upsetting!" he exclaimed. But this was their usual shtick, and he wasn't actually mad. In fact, the two had always been like this, even before they got married. They weren't the picture-perfect image of a harmonious couple, but there was joy to be had in things remaining the way were. Life was wonderful enough just living with his sharp-tongued wife, but now that he was also getting a sword again, he was ecstatic. He couldn't stop himself from grinning ear to ear.

"Anyway, I'll head out to get my sword now!"

His wife saw him off at the entrance as he left.

This was three days before Naotsugu visited Tamagawa.

After Chief Minister Ii Naosuke was assassinated in the so-called Sakuradamon Incident, Minister Andou Nobumasa rose through the ranks in the shogunate alongside Kuze Hirochika. Andou shared the late Ii's aim of opening the country's borders and was a proponent of the shogunate's survival and return to power. To this end, he supported a policy known as the "Union of the Imperial Court and the Shogunate," which sought to strengthen the country by coordinating the influence of the tradition-backed Court with the shogunate government. But the shogunate's influence eventually waned to the point of no return as they continued to prove politically weak, with the signing of the Kanagawa Treaty with the United States only being the start of the decline. They came to be seen as nothing more than a hindrance by the samurai, by both those in favor of and those against opening the doors of Japan to foreign influence. Many samurai in rural areas abandoned their lords around this time while domains like Satsuma and Choshu continued to stand in public opposition

to the shogunate. The end of the Tokugawa's lengthy reign was in sight.

Meanwhile, the Aizu domain, supporters of the Tokugawa since antiquity, were among the few who remained steadfast in their loyalty to the shogunate. In exchange for handling the coastal security of Edo, the Aizu were given control of encampments in Kamoi and Misaki, and their territory spanned almost the entirety of the sizable Miura Peninsula.

As the shogunate had lost the faith of the various other domains, the Aizu could be considered their last hope. This, in turn, made the retainers of the Aizu domain all the more fervent in their loyalty to the Tokugawa.

"Sugino Mataroku, you say?"

"Yes, he works at the Hatakeyama family's estate near Edo Castle. He bought a new sword just a few days ago. He must be the one the owner of Tamagawa sold that demonic sword to."

Jinya and Naotsugu walked west of Edo Castle in a place called Ushigome, a samurai residential area known for its hilly landscape. They were looking for the samurai estate of the Hatakeyama family residence.

Ushigome was filled with residences of feudal lords and direct retainers of the shogun, but a few commoner merchant homes that doubled as shops were scattered here and there as well, so commoners and samurai often mingled in the area. Gossip from samurai families naturally reached these commoners this way, allowing one to learn about the Hatakeyama family with surprising ease just by questioning the commoners passing by.

"The Hatakeyama family has a long history with the Aizu domain and was once in charge of Edo Port's security. The previous head of the family, Yasuhide, has passed on his headship to an heir and is living a quiet life of retirement at his secondary residence in Ushigome. Sugino Mataroku was picked up by Yasuhide to work for him. That's about everything I could learn," Naotsugu said.

"You've really done your research," Jinya said, impressed.

"Yes, well, Ushigome is a bit easier to get information out of than most places. There's also my job as a secretary, so I can get my hands on just about any document if I say I need it for cataloging."

"...I see you've grown rather lax about rules."

"And to whose influence do I owe that, I wonder?" Naotsugu let out a cheerful laugh. He used to be rather inflexible, but he'd grown capable of pushing boundaries as of late. Unlike demons, humans were capable of change. Perhaps this was a form of growth for Naotsugu as a person.

"Anyway, are you really sure you want to come?" Jinya glanced at the man from the corners of his eyes, trying to read his expression. Naotsugu was tagging along with Jinya, who'd come to Ushigome hoping to at least be able to see the demonic sword. Though Naotsugu had changed somewhat as a person, he was still an honest, diligent man at heart. It was strange for him to stick his nose in sinister affairs like this.

"I was the one who told you about the sword in the first place, so it's only right that I do," Naotsugu said. "What's more, I can't very well turn a blind eye when there's a chance someone might die." A bit sadly, he added, "...I can't do a whole lot to help, but at least information gathering is still on the table for me."

"I see. Still, this case is strange..."

"Is something about it bothering you?"

"There is. Our man only does odd jobs where he works, right? It's strange to think he'd be gifted a Kadono sword just for that..."

"Oh, you're right. Even putting aside the fact that it's a demonic sword, it's still strange to gift a weapon so specifically designed for practical combat." Naotsugu's face darkened after he said those words. He stopped walking, then brushed the hilt of his sword with his fingertips. "No, perhaps it's not so strange after all." Thin clouds tinted the sky above them in gray. As he looked up, a bird cried out...maybe a migratory one? His gaze wandered as if he were searching for it. "Have you heard of the Tosa Loyalist Party?"

Without saying a word, Jinya shook his head—he had the feeling that this wasn't a moment to speak.

"Just last year, Takechi Zuizan-dono gathered his fellow samurai from Tosa

and created a group known as the Tosa Loyalist Party," Naotsugu explained.

In year one of the Bunkyu era (1861 AD), Takechi Zuizan, living in Edo, formed the Tosa Loyalist Party as part of a political movement opposing the Tokugawa shogunate. But he was not the only one to make his own group, as many other young imperial loyalists had also been active behind the scenes in recent years.

"Our government's response to the arrival of the black ships back in Kaei looked weak even to me. It comes as no shock that many domains have grown disillusioned with the shogunate. The Tosa Loyalist Party claims to speak for the entirety of the Tosa domain, claiming the whole domain wants the emperor to take power. I'm sure many more samurai will join similar causes from here on out."

"You know quite a lot about this group."

"Yes, well, there are a number of samurai in service to the Tosa domain here in Edo." He sighed. "These days, many samurai believe our swords are not meant to fight for our lords but to fight for ideologies. Heh. Maybe the era of dedicating oneself to a lord is over." He smiled. Perhaps he intended it to be a wry, self-deprecating smile, but it was much too soft for that. "I do not believe that is the way a samurai should be, yet I'm not so sure I'd be satisfied remaining the way I am. Should I really support this politically weak shogunate that tramples over the pride of us samurai? I...don't know. I really don't know." Then he gasped, realizing the dissident nature of what he'd just said. "Forgive me. Please forget what you heard." He resumed walking, and Jinya soon followed. The bird cried out again, its high, shrill pitch more forlorn this time.

Jinya believed he understood where Naotsugu's worries came from. As a secretary, Naotsugu mainly drafted and organized documents. He never had a chance to fight despite being a samurai, so the sight of others acting for their country in such a clear-cut manner was probably rather enviable. But his worry was most likely based in self-doubt. Did his position as a samurai have *meaning*? He doubted it, especially in these turbulent times. He'd probably tagged along with Jinya to Ushigome in search of some purpose. He wanted to feel useful to someone. This was nothing more than a form of escapism, but Jinya could not fault the man. Jinya himself still hadn't found his answer after all these years and could easily relate to the impatience that Naotsugu felt.

"It's the same for me," Jinya said. "Sometimes, I'm not so sure what I'm supposed to be doing."

"...Even you feel that way?"

"Of course." Jinya lived without a true purpose. He blindly sought power so he could one day halt his sister in her warpath, but he couldn't even decide whether he would kill her or abandon his anger. To him, the sight of those young imperial loyalists betting their lives to stand against the changing times was equally enviable. "We can't change who we are so easily, huh?"

Weakly, Naotsugu murmured back, "...No, we cannot."

The two continued to walk, simply staring into the distance ahead of them.

Eventually, the estate they were looking for—the Hatakeyama family residence—came into view. The ridges of its roof bore tasteful, decorative tiles depicting demons and beasts, as was common for such luxurious homes. The two walked around the estate's outer wall and were met with an oppressively imposing front gate.

"This is it, then?" Jinya asked.

"Yes, this is the Hatakeyama residence. But there seems to be some kind of commotion..." Naotsugu remarked.

The two continued through the gate and approached the front entrance. As Naotsugu said, something seemed to be happening as the maidservants and manservants could be heard restlessly moving about. One manservant slid the entrance door open a crack and peered out at the two.

Seeing an opportunity, Naotsugu called out, "Excuse me, is Sugino Matarokudono in?"

The manservant stiffened. In a voice that hid none of his apprehension, he said, "O-oh, um, M-Mataroku, was it?"

"Yes, I am Miura Naotsugu. I'd like to speak with Mataroku-dono if it's at all possible."

"Ah... Um... Now's not really... Hey, you, come here." The manservant whispered something to someone, then retreated down the hallway. A new

manservant who seemed bewildered and confused took his place at the entrance. His gaze wandered about, and no matter how much Naotsugu called out to him, he gave no response.

Becoming impatient, Naotsugu was about to get more forceful, but then a well-built man appeared behind the manservant.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, Tsuchiura-sama..."

The towering man named Tsuchiura stood nearly seven shaku in height and had wide shoulders. His lack of a sword indicated that he was not a samurai, but his attire was still neat and tidy. His robes seemed a bit tight, however, due to his bulky physique. His hair was wilder than Jinya's, unbound and reaching his shoulders.

Tsuchiura scrutinized Naotsugu and Jinya. The manservant from earlier must have called for him, which meant he had to have some kind of high position within the estate...not that his appearance gave any clue as to what that position might be. If anything, someone of his build seemed out of place for a samurai estate.

The manservant who was waiting at the entrance said, "Um, these two say they wish to meet Mataroku..."

"Hmph. And what business might you two have with him?" asked Tsuchiura in a deep, hoarse voice as he fixed his glare on Naotsugu and Jinya.

Jinya stepped forward. "Please forgive our sudden visit. My name is Jinya. I've come because I heard Sugino Mataroku-dono bought a sword called Yatonomori Kaneomi. Would it be possible for us to meet with him?"

The large man thought for a moment, then gave a surprisingly calm response. "I see. Well, he's not here."

"When should we expect him back?" Naotsugu asked.

"Well... I do not believe he'll ever be coming back here," Tsuchiura said in the same mild tone.

"What do you mean?"

"Just this morning, Sugino Mataroku killed his wife, then fled from this place." Not a single hint of emotion could be seen in Tsuchiura's eyes as he spoke. Still, it was hard to imagine any reason for him to tell such a lie.

"Jin-dono..." Naotsugu said.

"It looks like we're just a little too late."

Kaneomi, a swordsmith from the tail end of the Warring States period, left behind four swords said to be artificially instilled with demon power. The exact details of how he forged these blades were murky, but the fact remained that they were considered demonic swords. And, of course, a demonic sword wasn't a demonic sword without a bloody tale to call its own.

3

T IS A PLEASURE to make your acquaintance. I am the lord of this estate, Hatakeyama Yasuhide."

They sat in a tatami-matted room whose lack of decoration gave it a utilitarian feel fit for a samurai. Across from Naotsugu and Jinya was the large, nearly seven-shaku-tall man, Tsuchiura. His lord, a narrow-eyed man, sat in a formal kneeling position.

"An honor. I am Miura Naotsugu. I work as a secretary for the shogunate." Naotsugu mirrored his position and politely bowed. As would perhaps be expected from a samurai allowed to work inside Edo Castle, his etiquette was exemplary.

Naotsugu and Jinya had hurriedly tried to leave the moment they heard Sugino Mataroku was missing, but Tsuchiura said Yasuhide was eager to meet with them and half forced the pair inside. Yasuhide only looked to be in his late thirties, far younger than someone who had passed along his headship and retired would normally be. The Hatakeyama family were longtime retainers of the Aizu domain, but Yasuhide didn't seem particularly

well built and looked rather meek, so he didn't resemble a samurai much at all.

"I am..."

"Jinya-dono, correct?"

Before Jinya could introduce himself next, Yasuhide said his name. This put Jinya on alert, making him tense his hand slightly.

Yasuhide continued, "I've had the pleasure of hearing the rumors of a guardian Yasha who hunts Edo's demons, slaying them with but a single strike..."

Jinya had been making his living as a demon hunter in Edo for a long time, so it made sense that many people had heard rumors of him by now. But such rumors would typically never reach a man of Yasuhide's high standing. His familiarity with Jinya meant he had gone out of his way to learn of him for some reason, and that was suspicious.

"So you've been snooping around," Jinya said.

Tsuchiura—acting as Yasuhide's guard—seethed, but Yasuhide raised a hand to stop the man just before he could stand.

"Jin-dono, please try and show some proper manners. Hatakeyama-sama, I beg your pardon for my companion's disrespect," Naotsugu apologized in Jinya's stead.

With the gravity the former head of a samurai family might have, Yasuhide slowly shook his head as if to say it was nothing. "Oh, I don't mind at all, Miuradono. Please do feel free to speak openly. I'm just a retiree; there's no need to be so humble." He was being magnanimous, or so it outwardly appeared. His stiff smile made it hard to fully read him. "There's no need to be so on guard, Jinya-dono. I had no ulterior motive in mind when I called you here. I simply wished to see the sword master I've heard so much of in person."

Jinya said, "I doubt I'm as interesting as you make me out to be."

"Oh, you're much too modest. I can just tell you have an inner strength beyond that of an ordinary man. I'm certain anyone would be interested to learn more about you." Yasuhide's phrasing seemed to carry hidden meaning. His narrow eyes opened slightly as though he were appraising Jinya. He really had been snooping around. Jinya didn't know where he'd gotten the

information from, but Yasuhide knew Jinya's true identity as a demon.

"Just what—"

"You two came looking for Sugino, didn't you?" Jinya had been about to interrogate Yasuhide, but the lord quickly changed the topic on him. Yasuhide then waited until he saw Jinya frown before he calmly continued, "He was a hardworking man, that one. But just this morning, he suddenly killed his wife and fled from here. I may have been the one who hired him, but I never thought he'd be capable of such a thing. The other manservants said that Sugino somehow got his hands on a demonic sword, of all things. Oh, I take it that's what you two were looking for?"

Jinya's attempted swing had been parried, and another strike came quickly before he could catch his balance. In a battle of swordplay, Jinya would likely come out on top, but in this battle of words, his opponent was stronger. The reins of the conversation were in Yasuhide's hands, and it didn't seem like they would be shared any time soon. Though retired, Yasuhide still possessed the shrewdness befitting the head of a family that had long served the Aizu domain.

"...It is," Jinya answered.

"Then you're just what the rumors say you are: a guardian of the people who slays the wicked spirits that would threaten the populace."

"Spare me the flattery." Jinya's voice was low and quiet, but a bit of irritation was mixed in. He hunted demons for a purpose born from unsightly emotions, and it was nothing to be praised for. The only reason he was even looking into this demonic sword incident was because he thought there was a chance he could devour the demon power in the sword, nothing more. Yasuhide didn't know such personal details about Jinya and likely meant no ill will, but his phrasing almost seemed to mock Jinya's nature.

"Oh? But you wouldn't abandon someone in need of saving, would you?"

"Well, no, I suppose not..." But this had nothing to do with Jinya's sense of justice, only his pride as a shrine maiden guardian. He would slay the spirits that threatened humanity. The shrine maiden he protected may have already departed this world, but his sworn duty remained. Jinya asked, "Moving on, what business did you have with us?"

"Pardon? I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"You don't expect me to believe you called us just to chat, do you?" With his eyes, Jinya urged Yasuhide to get down to business.

"Ha ha. I'd be just fine with a chat, personally, but yes, I did actually have a reason to call for you." Yasuhide let Jinya's rudeness slide with a smile, but then his expression suddenly turned stern. Any meekness he once had was gone; he now presented the image of a samurai. "I've heard you're a ronin. Would you be interested in placing yourself in the service of the Hatakeyama family?"

The suddenness of the proposition shocked both Naotsugu and Jinya, and the atmosphere turned tense.

Jinya said, "I may have been granted the right to carry a sword, but my status is no better than that of a commoner. I am not worthy of serving a samurai family."

"It's fine; it's not like you'll become an official retainer to the Aizu domain. You'll just be directly employed by me, so it won't pose a problem. In fact, Tsuchiura here is of a background similar to yours."

Jinya turned his eyes toward the giant man. From his wild, long hair and his bulky appearance, it was easy to imagine Tsuchiura was a hired commoner rather than a samurai. Of course, that was not quite what Yasuhide meant by "similar background."

"Similar background, you say..."

A faint, rust-like red gleamed in Tsuchiura's eyes. After a blink, his eyes were dark brown again, but that redness had unmistakably been present for a moment. From his ambient presence alone, Jinya could tell Tsuchiura was strong. He was likely a superior demon who had lived for many years. In other words, Hatakeyama Yasuhide knowingly employed demons despite being human himself, and what good could come from a man like that?

"Currently, our nation is at a crossroads," Yasuhide said, as though to justify himself. His voice was full of confidence and spirit. "From the moment the black ships arrived back in Kaei, foreign policy has pointed toward the country opening up. This direction has been made all but certain by the late Chief

Minister Ii Naosuke-dono and his spiritual successor, Minister Andou Nobumasa-dono. Many samurai have followed suit in supporting this coming change, but they are all gravely misreading the situation. It is undeniable that the treaties these foreign nations have forced onto us so far have been intolerably one-sided. They have not engaged in diplomacy with us, but *invasion*. If things are allowed to continue like this, our great nation will be made a colony of some foreign force. Our feudal system will collapse on its head, and the long-held peace the Tokugawa have maintained will be lost."

Naotsugu was absorbed in Yasuhide's speech. The shogunate had indeed been kowtowing to foreign nations' demands so far. It wasn't unimaginable to think the shogunate could fall apart at this rate.

Yasuhide continued, "And when the end of the shogunate comes, we samurai will fall along with it. The collapse of the feudal system will be proof that samurai are not fit to rule. In the wake that follows, a new government may form...but it will be one where samurai have been rendered unneeded and forgotten."

Naotsugu looked like he was about to object to something for a moment, but after a quiet groan, he slunk into silence. Yasuhide's feverish and lengthy speech seemed to leave no room for Naotsugu to interject. Of course, there was also the fact that Naotsugu himself couldn't deny the possibility of the future Yasuhide foresaw.

"Those fools who support opening our borders haven't considered that possibility for one moment. They think they'll remain in their privileged position even if the Tokugawa fall, but we who serve the Aizu domain are different. We hail from a proud bloodline that has overcome generations of wars to bring about a world of peace. We have a duty to protect this country, the reign of the Tokugawa, and the pride of all samurai. For us to survive, we samurai must repel these foreign barbarians from our lands...by any means necessary." Yasuhide's firm words were spoken with equally firm eyes. He meant what he said.

To put it plainly, Yasuhide was your stereotypical "Shogunate Faithful," a term used to describe an old-fashioned samurai who still supported the shogunate in the trying Bakumatsu times but also opposed the admittance of foreign

influences into the country. He wished for the feudal shogunate-based government system to remain as it was and wanted to protect the same nation that had existed since antiquity. This was a completely understandable desire for a samurai, one that nobody could fault him for...

He continued, "I am already retired, but I still worry for my nation's future. Your strength is great, Jinya-dono. Join me and use that strength to protect the Tokugawa's rule."

...But to go as far as employing demons? That changed things.

There were more than a few people both faithful to the shogunate and opposed to foreign influence. It was perfectly logical not to want to risk opening the borders and having the familiar system collapse, after all. But such Shogunate Faithfuls had one fatal flaw in their logic. The reason why there was such support for opening the borders in the first place was because the arrival of the black ships in the Kaei era had displayed the sheer might foreign nations now possessed. If it came down to it, it was clear that a direct invasion could not be overcome. That was why the shogunate wanted instead to open its borders, gain as much knowledge as it could from the western powers, and then use that knowledge to put the shogunate itself back on an even playing field.

Despite the Shogunate Faithfuls' insistence on keeping out foreign powers, they had no practical solution to the shogunate's lack of power to accomplish that goal. Hence, many who were against foreign influence called for the emperor to assume control from the shogunate while the shogunate leaned ever closer toward opening the country's borders. The numbers of the Shogunate Faithful were clearly fated to dwindle away in the near future.

That was why Hatakeyama Yasuhide was trying to employ demons as a force to flip things around and fight the foreign powers. It was an insane idea, to say the least.

Yasuhide asked, "Jinya-dono, please let me hear your thoughts. What do you think is best for our nation?"

"Unfortunately, I am not very knowledgeable about such things. Whether it be opening the borders or repelling the foreigners, I haven't the slightest interest either way."

"I see. So you don't care what happens to this country?" Yasuhide's voice carried a bit of disdain, which probably couldn't be helped. While his methods might be questionable, he cared about his country's future and was striving to change it. Jinya's lack of interest likely came as an affront to him.

But Jinya didn't take back his words, merely closing his eyes and saying, "I once met a demon who spoke of something similar. She said this country would adopt advancements from the outside world and develop from there. But the changing times would be too fast for demons to keep up with, so they would dwindle away until they're only remembered in folktales."

"What an interesting demon. We samurai have been told we'll be made irrelevant as well. But that's all the more reason you should work with me." Though it was left unsaid, Yasuhide clearly meant that demons and samurai were in the same boat, as both were in danger of being left behind by the march of time.

"I'm sorry. I can't see us working together," Jinya stated flatly.

"...Do you find something wrong with my aspirations?"

Jinya slowly shook his head.

Yasuhide continued, "I've heard you only slay demons that bring harm to mankind. Are you someone who only uses his strength to protect the weak?"

"As if." The idea was almost laughable. Jinya had long ago lost the right to say he protected anyone. The sister he once held dear had become a demon. He had killed his mother and father with his own hands. He had trampled over many in pursuit of a goal defined by hatred. It would be an affront for him to say he did what he did in the name of protecting others. "I understand what you aspire toward, and I don't think any less of you for the means you use. But just as you have your own goals, I have mine. My goal may be a trivial, personal matter compared to your grand aspirations, but it is all I have. No matter what you say, I can't abandon the life I've lived up until now."

"I don't know what this goal of yours is, but I have no intention of getting in the way of it. I just want a few moments out of your terribly long life. Would that be too much to ask?"

"I'm sorry." Softly, Jinya gave a firm refusal. It was impossible to tell what Yasuhide thought of his resolve, as he just looked back at Jinya with an utterly serious expression. His means aside, Yasuhide had shown Jinya proper respect. It was only fair that Jinya return the favor by not beating around the bush with his refusal. He continued by saying, "But even if our separate goals could be put aside, I still could not work for you."

"Why is that? I thought you saw no fault in my aspirations."

"Our world is one of ups and downs," Jinya continued. "As you've said, this country may one day be invaded by foreign forces and ruined. I do see the honor involved in taking up arms to resist such a fate, but it would be wrong for me to play a part in that. Regardless of the result, such a thing should be carried out by the hands of your kind alone."

What Jinya meant by "your kind" was not lost on Yasuhide. Jinya had no intent to blame anyone for using inhuman means to carry out an earnest goal, but was that really a decision one should make for their entire country? Great moments in human history were accomplished by human hands, and that was not something the inhuman should intrude on.

"That's why you won't aid me?"

"Yes. What's more, I haven't even found the purpose for which I wield my blade yet myself. A man like me has no place in fighting for a future." That would be blasphemy against truly patriotic people, and therefore Jinya couldn't align himself with either side of the border policy issue.

"Is there any chance I could change your mind?"

"If my mind could be easily swayed, we wouldn't be speaking in the first place." Even Jinya found his own stubborn nature exasperating, but he'd come this far without changing.

Yasuhide let out a laugh, understanding that there was no way to sway Jinya. "Ha ha, you're an interesting one. You won't work with me, not because it goes against your morals or your ideals, but because it would be in bad taste?"

He summed it up well. If Jinya lived for morals or ideals, he could perhaps

compromise a little to fight for his country. But Jinya had only fought for one thing so far: to grow stronger. He had lost and regretted much in the process, but he wouldn't stop for the wishes of another.

"I don't think there is anything tasteful about what I do...but I cannot fight for a cause I do not myself believe in," Jinya said.

"Well, that's a shame. I can see there's no changing your mind."

"I'm sorry. I don't think there's anything wrong with your aims; I'm just stubborn in my ways."

"There's no need to be so humble. I know it can be hard to abandon something you're set on." Yasuhide's words seemed to hint that he knew this was the nature of a demon, but Jinya didn't mind the comment. He had a feeling Yasuhide could say those words so naturally because he too had something he couldn't give up. That understanding erased any annoyance Jinya might have felt, and even made him feel some sympathy for the one who shared his situation. "Still...as things are, we might be enemies when we next meet." Yasuhide smiled. His voice showed none of its earlier disdain, but in its place, his now sharply narrowed eyes bore an intense, unclouded will.

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Jinya said.

"As do I, but I have no intention of changing my path." Yasuhide would stop at nothing to achieve his goal, even if some of the populace were killed by demons in the process. The paths of the man who employed demons and the guardian Yasha who slew them might cross one day, and if they did, Jinya would likely fight regardless of what that meant for the country's future. Both sides had something they couldn't give up on; if the other got in the way of that, they would have to fight one another.

"We're both quite stubborn, aren't we?" Jinya said.

"I couldn't agree more. But you can't live the way you wish without being stubborn."

"Indeed."

There would be no conflict for the moment. Tsuchiura didn't so much as twitch.

Yasuhide let out a satisfied sigh, and the conversation came to a natural end.

Jinya silently met Yasuhide's gaze one last time, then brought things to a close. "Naotsugu, we should be off soon. We have a demonic sword to pursue."

"O-oh, right. Well then, Hatakeyama-dono, the two of us shall take our leave now."

"I see. Tsuchiura, if you would." As the two men stood, Yasuhide gestured for Tsuchiura to show them to the entrance. Tsuchiura likely had some misgivings toward Jinya for showing his lord disrespect earlier, but he let none of it show and obeyed his orders.

As he left the tatami-matted room, Jinya couldn't help but think the two had a strange relationship, being both man and demon.

"Oh, one more thing," Yasuhide said as they left. "Sugino was apparently a bit fond of Tomizen. Some Tosa folks, including Takechi, like to go there. Now, it'd be nice if this could be settled without making any real fuss..."

"Tsuchiura-dono, isn't it?" Just as Naotsugu was about to go through the front gate, Jinya turned around like he'd just remembered something he wanted to ask.

"You needn't be so humble toward me."

"I see. Allow me to just call you Tsuchiura, then. May I ask why you've chosen to serve Hatakeyama-dono? I can't help but get the impression you're like me in that you don't care much about the border issue."

Throughout the whole discussion, Tsuchiura had watched Jinya closely, sitting with his weight low and slightly forward so he could react instantly in case Jinya showed any sign he would attack Yasuhide. Jinya thought such a position went beyond the norm for someone simply acting out of duty, but at the same time, it didn't look like Tsuchiura had some sinister plot in mind. Just what could make him serve Yasuhide like a human might do?

After a silence, Tsuchiura narrowed his eyes and said, "I've been betrayed by humans before... Or perhaps I should say I had my trust broken." His voice

carried no emotion. He seemed to reflect on a nostalgic—and slightly bitter—distant memory. "It's an old story now. I was betrayed and sank into despair, and then Yasuhide-sama found me."

Truth be told, Jinya hadn't actually expected Tsuchiura to answer. The large man's expression was sincere, without a hint of deceit. Then again, demons couldn't lie in the first place, so his words could be nothing less than truth.

Tsuchiura continued, "He said to me, 'We demons and samurai are both relics of the old world being tossed aside by the march of time. That makes us something like brethren. Why don't we join forces?' And so, I decided to serve him... I've put my trust in him." He put emphasis on the word "trust," showing just how much resolve he had. Jinya didn't know just what had happened in the man's past, but Tsuchiura was obviously acting out of true loyalty rather than some whim. This was also clear from the animosity he directed toward Jinya, though it was kept hidden under a veil of calm.

"I have to say, I didn't expect you to actually answer me," Jinya remarked.

"I suppose I felt some sympathy toward you because we're so similar." Tsuchiura's animosity didn't fade, but his voice did soften slightly. Despite the glare he still fixed on Jinya, he seemed to find common ground with him. "Man and demon are incompatible. As someone who lives among humans, I'm sure you know that all too well yourself."

Stay away from me, you monster!

The voice of a young girl echoed from deep within the recesses of Jinya's mind. Having lived among humans, Tsuchiura had probably experienced similar pain before. His eyes wavered slightly for a moment, reflecting a glimpse of his troubled past.

"But in spite of our differences," Tsuchiura continued, "Yasuhide-sama accepted me. The significance of that is clear, I'm sure."

Rejection for being a demon brought pain, but acceptance despite being one brought joy. That was all the reason Tsuchiura needed to serve Yasuhide, and it was also why he was so willing to share this information with Jinya now.

"I appreciate you telling me all this, but I still cannot work for Hatakeyama-

sama." With his expression unchanging, Jinya firmly continued: "And as I said earlier, I may not care about what direction this country takes, but if you employ demons to senselessly harm people, then I will have no choice but to unsheathe my blade."

"I see," Tsuchiura said. He briefly closed his eyes, seeming to hesitate. "In deference to my lord's wishes, I will not raise a hand against you now." From the way they stood facing one another, it was clear any sympathy the two had shared in the previous moment was gone. The *demon* before Jinya bared sharp, unconcealed hostility. "It's fine if you simply watch from the sidelines. But if you dare to get in Yasuhide-sama's way..." His expression changed to that of a starved beast, and the malice exuding from him was genuine.

The air was tense enough to prick the skin.

"I feel the same way. If you two get in my way..." Jinya met Tsuchiura's gaze and moved his left hand onto Yarai at his hip. The cold touch of metal sharpened his mind.

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"I'll kill you."

"You're dead."
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4

STILL REMEMBER that warm yet cold texture. I was probably done for the moment I let it intoxicate me.

I've been possessed by this demonic sword. I've killed my wife because of it, and I must continue to kill. Not by my own free will, but because I must continue to follow its commands.

"You sure took a while. Did something happen?"

"Nothing worth mentioning."

Jinya met up with Naotsugu, who had already passed through the gate. Together, they left the Hatakeyama estate behind. The demon named Tsuchiura was immensely devoted to Yasuhide. If the latter did in fact end up using the supernatural to achieve his political aims, then Jinya might have to face them someday. Their very short discussion had made that clear.

Jinya avoided giving a direct answer to Naotsugu on what he'd talked about with Tsuchiura, and the two made for Kihee. As always, there was no better place for them to talk.

"That Hatakeyama Yasuhide is a bit...shady, I suppose." Naotsugu wasn't the type to speak ill of others behind their back, but it seemed he had to slightly vent his frustration as the two walked along. Jinya hadn't told him of his true nature, so Naotsugu had no way of fully knowing what had actually been discussed. Even so, Naotsugu could tell Yasuhide was a zealot of sorts who was attempting something questionable.

"I agree, but he was interesting, in his own way," Jinya said.

"...Really now?"

"Don't give me that look. Sure, he was shady, but I don't exactly hate strong-willed people like him." Jinya's encounter with Yasuhide had been short, but he felt he had pretty much grasped the man's character. Yasuhide was the type of man who was willing to do anything to achieve his goal. Such a trait probably appeared unsavory to Naotsugu, but Jinya was quite fond of it.

Using demons to try and resist the change of time was certainly an insane idea, but the Shogunate Faithfuls had been driven far into a corner. Jinya did think Yasuhide's choice was questionable, but he also sympathized with him. Still, he was certain he and Yasuhide were incompatible as people.

"That Tomizen thing he mentioned at the end," Jinya began. "Do you have any idea what that was about?"

"More or less." Naotsugu seemed a bit sulky, perhaps because Jinya had said he approved of Yasuhide. He took a deep breath, then met Jinya's gaze and returned to his normal self. "Tomizen is a restaurant in Fukagawa. It's not the kind of place commoners can easily afford to dine at, but the prices aren't outrageous. It's decently popular, if I recall correctly." Jinya had figured it was something of that nature, but it was still a surprise to hear Tomizen was just a restaurant. Some of what Yasuhide had said didn't make sense, then. "So, what was all that about Sugino Mataroku liking the place?"

"Ah, that... I'm afraid I don't know myself. Perhaps he just meant Sugino-dono was a frequent patron there?" Naotsugu bit his thumb as he slipped into deep thought.

Jinya racked his brain as well, but nothing came to mind.

"How about we try visiting it, for starters?" Naotsugu suggested.

"Good idea. Do you know where it is?"

Thinking could only do so much good. It was better to lay eyes on the place first.

Dining in Edo was generally rather rustic, but this was the beginning of the Bakumatsu period, when high-end restaurants with actual cuisine, tatamimatted dining rooms, and tasteful gardens on display began cropping up all over the place. It wasn't just busy areas like Ryogoku and Fukagawa either; even touristy towns on the outskirts of Edo began to feature luxurious restaurants where more cultured people could dine. Just as the people of Kyoto were known for their overindulgence in clothes during this period, people look back on Bakumatsu Edo and remember the excess of food brought on by the sudden developments in dining culture.

Tomizen was among the more affordable of the various high-end restaurants of Edo. Perhaps because of that, many lower-rung samurai and commoners dined there, giving the place good business. Even now, many of the inner tatami-matted dining rooms were filled with samurai holding banquets. Jinya and Naotsugu could hear their voices from their comparatively small room.

Jinya took a bite out of his salt-grilled beltfish. The wafting savoriness of the skin contained just the right amount of fat, and it was perfectly salted as well. "It's delicious..."

"...Yes, I suppose." Naotsugu gave a noncommittal response as he sipped his fishhead soup. Its seafood aroma was just as excellent as its flavor proved to be.

"They have a good selection of drinks as well," Jinya said, referring to the alcohol.

"Absolutely. But it seems like this place really is just a normal restaurant."

Naotsugu seemed a bit put-off. He had come to this place with a sense of vigilance, expecting something more because of what Yasuhide had said. But it was nothing more than a restaurant. Sugino Mataroku was nowhere to be found, and there was nothing for them to do but eat. A waitress told them that Mataroku did visit from time to time, but that was only when the Hatakeyama family held banquets; he was no regular customer.

"Well, now what?" Jinya murmured. Impassively, he downed his cup. Sure, the food and drink were delicious, but that alone didn't make their visit worthwhile.

"It would be nice if we could find him soon. Sugino-dono killed his wife, which points to the sword, Yatonomori Kaneomi, being a genuine demonic sword."

"Right. We need to find him before he kills again. But how?"

"If only we had a clue where he could be."

Silence fell between the two, making the din of their surroundings stand in a starker contrast. The lighthearted energy of the other rooms made their own moods even gloomier.

"Shall we go?" Jinya suggested.

"Let's."

A bit dispirited, the two got up from their seats. The noise in the restaurant felt terribly distant. They slid the door open and exited into the corridor, but Jinya stopped in his tracks when he saw two men approaching.

"Sensei's sure takin' his sweet time to show up! He not comin' today or what?"

The two men weren't looking ahead as they walked and almost bumped into Jinya. Though they stopped before actually colliding, one of them stumbled back in an exaggerated way, and Jinya bowed his head slightly in apology. "I'm sorry."

"Naw, naw, it ain't nothing worth apologizin' for. We were the ones not lookin' where we're going! Ga ha ha ha!" The man gave a boisterous laugh. He wore a gray hakama with a black haori robe. He and his friend had clearly had plenty to drink, as they were both red in the face. "I know! Why don'tcha two come live it up a bit with us, our treat?"

"Huh?!" The other man, shorter in stature, gawked at his friend's sudden proposition.

However, the man with disheveled hair and a thick Tosa dialect paid him no mind. "Don't go gettin' bent outta shape. Our meeting wi' these folks here might just be fate!"

"I don't know about that..." the shorter man replied with some bewilderment. With his thumb, he slid open a door leading to a room that had been particularly boisterous for quite a while. They seemed to be having a party of sorts and had plenty of alcohol and food ready.

From the man with that disheveled hair's carefree attitude, Jinya understood he had no ulterior motives with his invitation. Still, his friend seemed clearly against the idea—in fact, he was even grimacing.

"Oh, thank you for the offer," Jinya replied. "But we actually have some business to attend to."

Naotsugu wasn't the kind of brazen man who would take up such an offer, and Jinya wasn't the type to enjoy drinking with strangers. They quickly moved to leave before they got dragged into something, but then they remembered what they were there for.

"That right?" the disheveled-haired man said. "Well, sorry for almost bumpin' into ya anyway."

"No problem. Actually, while I have you, can I ask you something?"

"Course ya can!"

"Do you know a man named Sugino Mataroku?"

The man tilted his head back and forth, left and right. This continued for a while until he suddenly stopped. "Naw, can't say I do!" The energy with which

he said no was almost refreshing. Even after being stared at for a few moments, he didn't fidget a bit, so Jinya figured he was telling the truth.

"...I see. Well, thank you anyway."

"Nah, it was duck soup."

Jinya hadn't a clue what that phrase meant, but he assumed it was something along the lines of "Don't worry about it."

"I hope you enjoy yourselves. Take care."

"You too, pal!" The man marched on into the room. His friend bowed his head slightly before following him in.

The disheveled-haired man was quite uninhibited, if that was even the right word to describe him. He seemed fairly good-natured, but also the sort who was a handful in his own way. Jinya was left with a strange feeling as the man marched away. "What a boisterous fellow," he remarked.

"Ha ha, indeed."

A roar of laughter could be heard as soon as the man entered the room, and Jinya stood where he was for several seconds. The man's Tosa accent made him think of the Tosa Loyalist Party.

"He was from Tosa... Maybe he's one of those samurai against foreign influence," Naotsugu said, apparently thinking the same thing. With a narrowed gaze, he looked at the paper sliding doors of their room. Perhaps those young imperial loyalists were beyond that wall. His expression darkened, and Jinya didn't know what to say to comfort him.

The two casually asked a waitress about the men they'd met as they left.

"Excuse me, but would you happen to know who those men in the back room are?" Jinya asked.

"I'm sorry? Oh, those are some regulars of ours. They're always talking about something that's a bit beyond me as they drink...something to do with standing up for their country?"

"I see. Do you know who the one they call 'Sensei' is?"

"I do. He's not exactly a regular, but he has come by quite a few times. I believe his name is Takechi-sama. All those folks seem quite fond of him."

"It sounds like they're all from the same hometown. Is that correct?"

"I don't know... A lot of them do have that Tosa accent, though."

The two left the restaurant after their questioning to find that darkness had already fallen. The inside of the restaurant had been warm, but a cold winter wind chilled them now.

"What made you ask that one question earlier, Jin-dono?" Naotsugu inquired with passing curiosity as they walked along.

"Hm? Oh, well, that man we bumped into seemed to be from a fairly high-ranking family, as well as a regular at that place, right?"

"Right."

"I thought it interesting that such a person still had someone he respected enough to call 'Sensei.' If we assume that means he's their leader, then they must be organizing something after all. Sugino Mataroku might have been visiting Tomizen to try and get in contact with them; at least that was my idea."

Assuming the big group really was the Tosa Loyalist Party and that The disheveled-haired man they bumped into was one of their members, it made sense to think they would know Sugino Mataroku's name if he were trying to get involved with them. Unfortunately, the disheveled-haired man said he didn't recognize the name. It looked like things wouldn't be that easy.

"Interesting," Naotsugu murmured. "It's not impossible that Sugino-dono would try and get in touch with loyalists in times like these."

"But it looks like that wasn't the case."

"Right. Sugino-dono is serving the Aizu domain, after all. Even if they agree on keeping the borders closed, the Aizu are against the idea of overthrowing the shogunate..." Naotsugu stiffened and stopped in his tracks. Jinya halted as well, wondering what was going on. With his gaze cast down in thought, Naotsugu said, "Right... The Aizu and the Tosa disagree on that issue. It would make sense for them to see the other side as an obstacle..." He spent a few more moments

in silent thought. His shoulders trembling with realization, he continued, "This is just a theory, but if we assume the ones gathered in the back of that restaurant really are from Tosa, then they're probably the members of the Tosa Loyalist Party." Though they shared a similar political view on the border issue, the Tosa disagreed with the Aizu on whether the shogunate was fit to rule. Sugino Mataroku served Hatakeyama Yasuhide, so it wasn't unthinkable for him to also be a Shogunate Faithful. Mataroku might very well view those of Tosa as the opposition. "Jin-dono, that man with a heavy accent said something about his sensei being late, right? We can assume that he's someone important. What if Sugino-dono tried to do something to him as an enemy of the Shogunate Faithfuls?"

"...I think I see what you mean."

"If my guess is correct, then this Sensei person coming into harm's way would cause their movement to lose steam. He's probably the one whose name Hatakeyama-dono let slip, Takechi Zuizan."

Takechi Zuizan, the central figure of the Tosa Loyalist Party. The Aizu and Tosa domains were both staunchly against foreign influence, but they had drastically different aims. The Aizu wanted to aid the shogunate and uphold the tried-and-true system while the Tosa wished to put the emperor in power and undo the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate. Takechi was a clear symbol of the pro-imperial movement, so much so that he would certainly be a likely target.

"So you think Sugino Mataroku is after him?" Jinya asked.

"It would make sense. At the very least, it narrows down our search."

It is worth mentioning some events that would be remembered much later in the far future. In October of year two of the Bunkyu era (1862 AD), a meeting occurred between the Tosa Loyalist Party and other anti-foreign influence groups in Fukagawa, Edo.

Takechi Zuizan advocated for the entire Tosa domain to support the emperor and paid careful attention to the loyalties of the various domains. He sent members of the Tosa Loyalist Party all over the country to look into the situation, one of those members being the famous Sakamoto Ryoma. Ryoma investigated various domains under Takechi's instructions, but in February of

year two of the Bunkyu era, his duties ended, and he returned to Tosa. Around the same time, word arrived in Tosa that the Satsuma feudal lord Shimazu Hisamitsu was leading an army to Kyoto, which was a clear sign of support for the emperor in opposition of the shogunate. However, the Tosa domain didn't follow suit. Dissatisfied by that, a number of imperial loyalists left the Tosa Loyalist Party and went to Kyoto to join the Satsuma domain's loyalist movement. Ryoma was one of these people, parting from the Tosa domain on March 24 of that year.

In October that same year, Takechi came to Edo accompanying an imperial envoy. There he met with Ryoma, who had also just arrived. This meeting is considered one of the critical events of the Bakumatsu period and is commonly known as the "Fukagawa Talks."

Of course, these are all accounts known in posterity, their significance yet to be known at the time of our story. At the current moment, Takechi Zuizan and the Tosa Loyalist Party had little influence to speak of. But it appeared as though Hatakeyama Yasuhide saw something in their future and wanted to nip it in the bud.

"You think there's going to be an assassination attempt?" Jinya asked.

"I wouldn't normally make such a leap in thought. But seeing as Sugino-dono has a demonic sword in his possession, he could possibly go as far as murder."

"Right. I suppose we can't rule anything out when the supernatural is involved."

After obtaining a demonic sword, Sugino Mataroku might act on his former beliefs and impulsively attempt an assassination. It was all quite possible, but some points were still unclear.

"I'm surprised you thought of that," Jinya said.

"It was through no merit of my own. Hatakeyama-dono intentionally said things that guided us to this conclusion." Naotsugu seemed a bit irritated. "He knew we would put two and two together if he let some information slip."

"Supposing that's true, why would he do it?"

Naotsugu bit his lip in frustration. "I don't know, but it's clear Hatakeyama-

dono sees no value in Sugino Mataroku anymore. Something bugs me, though. Hatakeyama-dono had no way of knowing we'd show up at his home, yet we were invited in to talk to him. He even tried to hire you."

Come to think of it, it was indeed incredibly strange to try and hire a ronin who'd just happened to show up. Jinya nodded, agreeing that something felt off.

With some anger in his expression, Naotsugu continued. "Considering all that's happened today, it seems like Hatakeyama-dono knew about you from the very start, and not as a ronin, but as someone who handles supernatural occurrences. In all likelihood, he's been meaning to meet with you for a while now. That's why he *called you over*."

"What? What do you..." Jinya remembered the reason why they'd visited in the first place, and then everything suddenly clicked into place. "...The demonic sword was just bait."

"Most likely. I told you about the sword by chance, but even if I hadn't, he probably would've circulated the rumor himself."

"In other words, Hatakeyama Yasuhide doesn't give a damn about the demonic sword itself."

"Right. It was nothing more than an excuse to get you to meet him. Suginodono was probably just a convenient tool to him as well."

It would be fine if Mataroku succeeded in killing Takechi Zuizan; but it didn't particularly matter if he failed, as Yasuhide's main objective was already fulfilled.

"If he knew Sugino Mataroku would go as far as to try and assassinate someone, then that Hatakeyama Yasuhide really is a sick character," Jinya said.

"Yeah. The fact that he's being left to his own devices must mean the Shogunate Faithfuls are really backed into a corner. This government might actually be done for." Naotsugu clenched his teeth. As the head of a samurai family, he seemed bitter about the situation. Or perhaps he was simply airing his disappointment with the Tokugawa. "Sorry. I got a bit emotional there."

[&]quot;Don't worry about it."

"So, what will you do now?" Naotsugu asked this question precisely because he'd listened to the discussion between Jinya and Yasuhide. Jinya had no interest in either side of the border issue, but if he pursued the demonic sword and stopped Sugino Mataroku, he would indirectly be taking a side.

After some hesitation, Jinya thoughtfully said, "If this were just an assassination plot that happened to involve a demonic sword, I wouldn't step in." He was no saint. Even if Mataroku murdered a political enemy, Jinya wouldn't particularly care. For what it was worth, he thought assassination was a reasonable means to achieve one's goals. He was only looking into this case to see whether anything supernatural was going on; he had no intent to force his own values onto anyone. "However, this is a different situation. Since it looks like this demonic sword is directly influencing Sugino Mataroku's actions, I cannot turn a blind eye. What's more, I do not approve of Hatakeyama Yasuhide using people like disposable pawns, no matter what greater purpose it might serve." Yasuhide's methods bothered Jinya. Using inhuman means to manipulate normal people made Yasuhide no better than the wicked spirits Jinya had slain up until now. He would not stand by as innocents died.

Jinya clicked his tongue at that thought. What was he doing trying to be a hero now? He was not a man who could claim he acted for the sake of others. "...I take it back. I just don't like the way he does things, and I have use for a demonic sword myself if it's genuine. That's all."

Jinya could sympathize with Yasuhide to an extent and didn't particularly hate his type, but Jinya just couldn't change from what he knew. That was all. Nothing more, nothing less.

"In other words...?" Naotsugu urged.

"We're back to square one. We'll pursue the demonic sword."

He would not waver.

Subconsciously, he moved his left hand toward his sword.

Several days passed. It was October in year two of the Bunkyu era.

A man walked along a riverside path leading to Fukagawa. A shiver ran

through his body, starting from the point where his left hand tightly gripped the sword at his hip. The sword was Yatonomori Kaneomi, an artificial demonic sword made by the swordsmith Kaneomi in the tail end of the Warring States period. The man had already tested its strength, and he was confident. With this sword, he could slaughter all those fools who sought for the emperor to take power.

...Why, dear...?

The voice of his wife echoed in his ears. It didn't matter, but he had killed her under the control of the demonic sword. He couldn't stop himself from killing anymore. He would kill, kill, and kill some more, before ultimately being killed himself. That was the only way to be freed from the sword.

He was walking toward Tomizen. He'd heard that Takechi Zuizan would visit today, and he was not going to let the opportunity slip by him. Although he was similarly opposed to foreign influence, Takechi mocked the shogunate. He was a traitor trying to upend samurai society. The man's lord had mentioned Takechi would become a problem one day if left to his own devices, so he would kill him today. He had a reason to kill, and that made it right. At any rate, he just needed to kill before the lack of killing ruined him.

"Just to put it out there..."

The man stopped in his tracks. A voice as cold as iron called out to him just as he was about to cross the bridge spanning the Fukagawa River.

"I don't think assassination is cowardly or anything of the sort. Swords are made for killing. No matter what circumstances they are used under, a sword that kills is being used for its purpose, and so I see nothing particularly wrong with assassination. That said..."

A nearly six-shaku-tall man emerged from the twilight. He slowly drew the sword at his hip and directed its tip forward.

"Sorry, but I can't let you do as you please."

There was no room for doubt. This man was an enemy.

 $T_{\text{WO FIGURES STOOD ALONE}}$ in the night. A hushed river flowed just beside them on the riverbank.

Jinya stood with his back to the bridge spanning the Fukagawa River, and Sugino Mataroku glared at him with loathing. Mataroku had to cross the bridge to reach Tomizen, but he could tell Jinya wouldn't simply give way.

Jinya took a low stance, readying his sword behind him and to his right. He maintained his distance while keeping his blade out of direct sight and paying close attention to Mataroku. This stance was flexible, allowing Jinya to react according to his opponent's actions. Meanwhile, Mataroku held his sword in front with both hands, the blade pointed directly at Jinya's eyes. This stance was considered the fundamental of fundamentals and was said to be perfect in both offense and defense.

The two had both already made up their minds, so words were unnecessary. Their confrontation would last but a moment, after all.

The first to move was Mataroku. He stooped low and approached directly, throwing caution to the wind and lifting his sword high above before swinging it down.

But he was too slow. To Jinya, an experienced demon fighter, Mataroku's strike seemed harmless. Still, he wouldn't let his guard down. Even if Mataroku were weaker and slower, there were still ways he could kill his opponent. Jinya himself had used many different methods to kill demons far more powerful than him in the past.

Jinya evaded the coming attack with a half step to the right, then swung horizontally in a short arc. Mataroku had no way of knowing this, but Jinya wasn't out to kill—he wanted the sword. He aimed for the blade collar just above the sword guard, intending to knock the sword out of Mataroku's hands. But Mataroku seemed to predict this, or perhaps he just reacted quickly. He rotated his wrist, changing the angle of impact so he could endure the strike on the blade collar. He then slid his blade until its sword guard was pressed against Jinya's own. The two had reached a temporary deadlock.

Jinya could have relied on his demon strength to push Mataroku back, but he

instead maintained the locked position and observed Mataroku's form. Mataroku was fairly well trained in swordsmanship for a manservant, but his skill level was about average at best. However, that was precisely what was so odd. There was a clear gap in skill between the two, and Mataroku had to know it, but he seemed self-assured—no, arrogant even—as though he were certain of his victory.

Why? The question popped into Jinya's mind, but he couldn't linger on it long as Mataroku made his move.

Mataroku briefly stiffened, then eased for an instant and took a step back. He slid his sword in through the gap that formed between them as if he were threading a needle, slashing horizontally at Jinya's flank.

His movements weren't bad, but he was still too slow. The strike was too stiff as well, and it was easy to see through.

Metal clashed with metal. Jinya blocked the blow with his sword, but Mataroku didn't seem intent on giving up. He brandished his sword aloft and attacked once more. However, his movements were wasteful. He left too large of an opening and made his target too obvious.

Having seen this much, Jinya reasonably assumed that his opponent had made a poor attack. This was an opportunity, then. He would avoid the incoming blow by a paper-thin margin and grab one of Mataroku's arms, aiming to disarm him without any blood being spilled. The time Jinya had to form his plan was short. Mataroku's blade descended, nearing fast. Jinya kept his right foot in place and stepped far back with his left. The blade would slide down right in front of him, just shy of kissing his skin. He reached out with his left hand, ready to grab Mataroku's wrist.

But then the man grinned.

A chill ran down Jinya's spine. He quickly pulled his arm away and tried to fall back, but this time he was the slow one. He had dodged the tip of the blade by a hair's breadth. The blade couldn't have touched him—no, it *didn't* touch him, Jinya was sure. And yet, blood danced through the air. The blade that hadn't reached Jinya tore through him nonetheless. He felt his chest burn as though he had been tied against a searing-hot iron pole. Without letting the pain show on

his face, he retreated from Mataroku.

Mataroku didn't make a follow-up attack, perhaps because he couldn't, and simply stepped back and observed.

"So that's a demonic sword..." Jinya murmured. He touched his wound, which continued to bleed. It was a clean cut, resembling one made by a bladed object.

He was untouched by the blade, yet still cut. Such a thing was impossible, but it made sense that a blade beyond normal understanding would do just that. True to its title of *demonic sword*, Yatonomori Kaneomi was a blade that harbored the power of a superior demon.

"The power to send a slash flying... Quite the parlor trick," Jinya mused. The effect was simple, but that didn't mean it wasn't effective, as had been proven just now. Mataroku's usage of it wasn't terrible either. Instead of using it as a projectile weapon, he intentionally deployed it at the moment Jinya tried to let the sword narrowly miss him. Most people would assess the sword's length and be killed the moment its strike suddenly increased in reach.

Jinya's survival seemed to come as a surprise to Mataroku. He gawked, bewildered by the way Jinya stood like nothing was wrong as he continued to bleed. "What the hell? How are you alive?!"

"I happen to be a little more robust than most people."

"Fine. I'll just keep cutting you, as many times as it takes. I need to keep cutting...keep cutting or else..." Without closing the distance, Mataroku vigorously swung the demonic sword, Yatonomori Kaneomi. The air roared as a transparent slash, denser than the surrounding atmosphere, flew toward Jinya. The distance between the two was less than three ken. Now Mataroku was using the sword as a mere projectile weapon.

Jinya took a step forward, dodging while closing the distance. But as he stepped, Mataroku unleashed another slash. Jinya had no time to dodge the second flying attack and instead slashed it back by sheer reflex, his arm going slightly numb. He didn't understand the principle behind it, but the impact felt like being struck by iron, as a genuine sword blow would. The intervals between the attacks were short. It seemed all one had to do was swing the sword to

send a slash flying, meaning Mataroku could continue to swing effortlessly at empty air while Jinya had to bear the brunt of defending. Rather than the attack's speed, the frequency at which Mataroku could make it was the real issue at hand.

As he made these observations, Jinya continued to move about. He tentatively moved closer, but a flurry of attacks came the moment he tried to step forward. The distance between them was currently greater than three ken.

Jinya was greater in terms of strength, speed, skill, and experience; but Mataroku had the demonic sword, and that alone turned the tide in his favor. That said, Jinya remained confident in his victory. Without feeling pressured at all, he continued to block the flying slashes as though he were merely whittling away at a familiar task. The situation demanded an answer, but Jinya had plenty. He could use *Invisibility* to hide himself, then strike; the three black dogs his *Dog Spirits* produced would make quick work of Mataroku all on their own; he could close the distance in an instant with *Dart*; and *Superhuman Strength* would let him swat aside the flying attacks with ease. If he wanted to, Jinya could easily flip the situation on its head.

But he chose not to, and instead he made the effort to block the incoming slashes while slowly inching closer. He didn't want to use his demon powers simply because he didn't like the look in Mataroku's eyes. Mataroku had kept a smirk on his face from the very start of the fight, as though to say: *Your sword is no match for mine.* Jinya couldn't accept that. His knuckles turned white as he tightened his sword grip.

Jinya was fond of his own sword, Yarai. It had once been kept in the shrine of the iron-producing village Kadono as an object of worship, representing their Goddess of Fire. It was said that it wouldn't rust even if a thousand years passed, and that it harbored a soul. It had been entrusted to him more than twenty years earlier by his village chief, and it had remained his dear partner over the long years.

But above all else, Yarai was Kadono's treasure, watched over by generations of Itsukihime. The Itsukihime who acted as caretaker of the sword would take the "ya" kanji of the sword's name, meaning "night," and change her own name to include it as "ya" or "yo." She would then devote herself solely to the village,

praying for its prosperity.

In the past, Jinya had once found their foolish tradition to be beautiful and sworn to protect it. Even now, after he'd lost everything, he could not forget those feelings that started it all for him.

Mataroku's gaze seemed to fling mud at those feelings now. Jinya would not let Yarai be disgraced by the likes of a demonic sword. He was ignited by a youthful fury drawn from his early years.

"I'm surprised you can block so well with that blunt stick of yours. But I'm going to kill you. I have to kill you..." Mataroku remarked in passing, perhaps growing irritated with their deadlock. The mockery in his voice only made Jinya's will stronger. As one who continued the naming tradition by bearing "ya" in his name, Jinya would take Yarai and defeat this man.

Three ken away.

Flying slashes approached Jinya, audibly slicing through the air. He evaded the attacks while keeping his center of gravity forward, his stance kept low as he dashed ahead.

Two ken.

Mataroku fired off a slash as Jinya gained ground, but such an attack couldn't make Jinya falter anymore. He swapped Yarai over to his left hand in a backhand grip and slashed with all his might, continuing to quickly approach Mataroku.

One ken.

Mataroku raised his sword once more. Jinya had just left himself vulnerable with a big swing. The next flying slash would kill him before he could ready Yarai to block it. Mataroku seemed to realize this and was about to swing his demonic sword down at a distance Jinya couldn't avoid.

Jinya felt no fear. Everything had gone precisely as he'd predicted, to the point that it was practically a snooze.

"Wha...?!" Mataroku stiffened with surprise. There was a lull after a swing during which one couldn't immediately react, and that was why Mataroku was

so sure he had seen an opening. But his strike aimed at Jinya's cranium never fired.

"So long as you can't swing, your sword is just an ordinary sword." Jinya had no need to reposition Yarai. By smacking the base of his sword hilt with the palm of his right hand, he could forcibly thrust his sword forward without even using his left arm. Of course, he couldn't aim, but he didn't have to be accurate. He just needed to take his target by surprise. He was certain Mataroku would be thrown off by the unexpected strike, opening the necessary gap. Without letting the momentum die, Jinya changed his sword's thrust into a swipe aimed at the demonic sword.

"Ngh?!"

Due to the difference in their strength, Mataroku was unable to bear the brunt of the swipe, and his intended blow was diverted to the side. At this distance, any openings were decisive. The arrogant expression on Mataroku's face had changed to a look of fear. The two of them were both defenseless, their stances broken.

"Gah..."

And in such equal situations, the stronger side prevails. Jinya's strike came before Mataroku could right himself, and a single horizontal slash across the torso was all it took. Jinya felt the weight of the impact clearly through his sword. Mataroku fell to his knees, then collapsed to the ground.

Jinya struck with the back of his sword. He might have broken a few of Mataroku's bones, but the man would keep his life.

Jinya looked down at the collapsed Mataroku. Only after confirming that he was fully unconscious did Jinya relax his stance and let out a deep breath.

"You're still too green." It was unclear if those words were meant for Mataroku or for Jinya himself for giving into anger unbecoming of his age. Feeling a bit silly, Jinya cleared his throat and picked up the sword Mataroku had used.

Yatonomori Kaneomi. The power of a demon resided within it, so perhaps Jinya could devour its powers. He used *Assimilation* to connect his

consciousness to the sword, and his vision went white.

"Is this it, Kaneomi?"

"Yep, that's the tachi sword I forged with your blood worked in."

"It's a nice piece, but will it really have demonic powers?"

"Dunno. Maybe it will after a hundred years, just like demons do if they live that long. I haven't the slightest clue, to tell the truth."

"...How noncommittal."

"But it'd sure be nice if they did, huh? Something new, born from the union of man and demon. Now *that'd* be worth seein'."

"What was that question you asked me again? Are humans and demons doomed to forever mistrust and hate one another?"

"Yato, look... I'm just some oaf who can't do nothin' but make swords, so I can't give you an answer. But you and I managed to get married, didn't we? I'm sure the day will come when our separate kinds can get along."

"You really think so?"

"I do, and that's why I made this sword. If it gains power after a hundred years, it'll prove I'm right... Too bad I won't be around to see it for myself, though."

"Sorry, Yato. Think you could check how things turn out for me? If it does gain power, I want you to have faith. Humans can be stupid and make mistakes from time to time, and demons might be inflexible and clash, but I'm sure we can all still find peace together."

"...Kaneomi."

"Y'know what... I think I'll make about three more of these swords with your

blood mixed in. Yeah, and I'll name all four of them Yatonomori Kaneomi, using both of our names. Please, keep track of what happens to these swords, to this joining of man and demon."

"...All right. I'll make sure to see where your hope leads."

"Thanks. And I'm sorry for pushing something like this onto you."

"It's no problem at all. It's a wife's duty to fulfill her husband's wishes, after all." The demon smiled. Something about her smile seemed familiar to...

A sound like the shattering of pottery brought Jinya back to his senses.

"What was that...?" he murmured. He'd seen a man and a woman talking...a demon named Yato and her human husband. Were those the memories of the sword?

Naotsugu had told Jinya that Kaneomi borrowed the power of a demon to artificially create demonic swords. But from the memories Jinya had just seen, Yatonomori Kaneomi didn't seem as sinister as he'd first thought. It seemed more like the husband wanted to leave something behind for his wife because he knew he would depart this mortal coil first.

"How ironic." The sword, forged with the aim of joining demon and man, had fallen under the control of Hatakeyama Yasuhide, the human who used demons as tools in his petty schemes.

Jinya had won this fight, but that brought him no relief. The memories of the moment Sugino Mataroku killed his wife flowed into Jinya as well and darkened his mood. As though to cast away those memories, he stared at Yatonomori Kaneomi. It had a familiar dull gleam. That simple shine, characteristic of Kadono tachi blades, calmed his heart a little.

"...Three more, huh?" There were three more swords named Yatonomori Kaneomi somewhere out there. Jinya committed that fact to memory, then picked up Kaneomi's fallen scabbard and sheathed the sword.

Stillness seemed to ripple through the night. The men of the Tosa domain should be living it up at Tomizen right about now, but that had nothing to do

with Jinya. He cast his gaze over the bridge once, then turned and left the place behind.

This would go down in history as the night of the Fukagawa Talks, but the fight behind the scenes would not be recorded anywhere.

"So, it was just as we expected."

"Yeah, Sugino tried to go to Tomizen."

The next day had come. Jinya finished his lunch at Kihee and sipped tea as he filled Naotsugu in on what happened, skipping some details.

Naotsugu listened with a conflicted expression. As a samurai loyal to the Tokugawa, he probably had his own thoughts about assassination. "So, what did you do with the sword?"

"I sold it to the sword dealer, the one called Tamagawa, if I recall correctly. Got a pretty hefty price for it."

Naotsugu's eyes shot wide open. "What?! Jin-dono!"

"Calm down. The sword is powerless now. It's no demonic sword anymore, just a regular one. And it doesn't look like the owner of Tamagawa ever intends to sell it again. He said he'll use it to decorate the shop for a while, then have it enshrined somewhere later."

"...Really?"

"Yeah. Tamagawa is where the sword was first sold, right? The owner probably bought it back to apologize for what happened. He's a good man." Perhaps it was simply part of the trade, but it appeared there was an unwritten code a merchant had to follow.

Naotsugu let out a relieved sigh before turning a bit grim. "Still...this world is full of terrifying things. To think there was a sword out there that could drive someone to such madness."

Jinya raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Huh?" Naotsugu said, confused. "Er, Sugino-dono killed his wife under the

influence of the demonic sword, right? I was just saying how terrifying that is."

Jinya slowly shook his head. "That's not quite right. Sugino's actions weren't caused by the sword."

The truth came as a surprise. The demonic sword was so central to the case that one would naturally think it was also the cause. But after devouring Yatonomori Kaneomi, Jinya had learned what really happened.

A bit gloomily, he continued: "Yatonomori Kaneomi is a real demonic sword. But the only power it has to speak of is *Flying Blade*, the ability to create flying slashes. It has no ability to influence a person into killing another."

"B-but Sugino-dono killed his wife."

That was true. Sugino Mataroku had indeed killed his wife.

Jinya recalled the memories he'd seen when he devoured Yatonomori Kaneomi.

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"...Why, dear...?"

"Wh-wha..."
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Fascinated by the sword in his hand, he'd wanted to test its edge out. That was all, and yet blood was flowing out of her for some reason.

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"Why...?"
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"N-no, I... I didn't mean to! I couldn't have!"

Couldn't have? But then who killed her?

It was obviously him, wasn't it? He, who was so overjoyed to have a sword again that he wanted to use it.

"H-hey, stay with me! No, why... Why did I..."

He caught his wife in his arms—but he couldn't bring himself to cast the sword aside.

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"No... No..."
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Then he remembered the rumors about Yatonomori Kaneomi.

"I-It's not my fault! R-right, it's this demonic sword's fault. This sword cut her. It wasn't me... Yeah, I didn't do anything wrong. This sword would make anyone want to kill. That has to be it!"

And so that became his truth. The reason why his heart was sent aflutter by the sight of the naked blade, and the reason he was intoxicated by the sight of her wound, was all the work of something inhuman.

Backed into a corner, Mataroku let impulse take over and yelled, "My wife has been killed by this demonic sword!"

And that was it. The demonic sword itself had never been at fault. Mataroku's wife had been slain by his own hands.

"Naotsugu, you claim to be a sword aficionado, but do you collect them just for show? If you got your hands on an exemplary piece, wouldn't you want to use it, even just once?"

Everyone had a desire to test their new swords out, although most people stuck to cutting bundled straw posts. Understanding what Jinya was getting at, Naotsugu grimaced. "You don't mean..."

Mataroku didn't kill his wife because he was under the spell of a demonic sword. He killed her simply because he was overjoyed to have a sword again and wanted to test it out.

"His wife just happened to be the closest person around. That's all."

"That's sickening..."

"But he couldn't handle that truth, so he convinced himself the sword had controlled him. Perhaps that was when Hatakeyama put the idea in his head."

From there, Mataroku sought out victims to prove to himself that the sword was what made him kill his wife. That was when Hatakeyama Yasuhide suggested Mataroku kill Takechi Zuizan, an obstacle to his own plans. Yasuhide gained a disposable pawn, and Sugino found a target to kill.

"...So Sugino-dono wasn't trying to commit a political assassination?"

Naotsugu asked. "He just wanted an excuse to kill and Hatakeyama-dono

provided one?"

"That's my theory, at least. I can't be sure."

"No, I believe you... As tough as it is to say."

If Jinya's theory was correct, then this case was full of sick irony. A husband killed his wife, and then, out of love for her, insisted his sword had urged him to do it. A man claimed he wished for a better world, then encouraged another to commit murder. One had to wonder just who was more sinister.

"A sword is just a sword; it can commit no fault on its own. If there is fault to be had, it would come from the hearts of men," Jinya grumbled.

Naotsugu hung his head, his shoulders looking weak. But he soon raised his face with a fierce, determined look on it. "You once told me you can't change from the way of life you know, Jin-dono." He continued, his voice firm. "Well, I think it's time for me to choose the way I want to live from now on."

Jinya didn't ask what he meant, and Naotsugu didn't say another word. Nothing more needed to be said. It was clear a spark had ignited in Naotsugu.

Clouds resembling blots of ink drifted high up in the distant winter sky.

Some days later, a retainer of the Aizu domain was killed. He had attacked a retainer of the Tosa domain with a wooden sword but was slain instead. His motive for the attack remained unknown, but he was said to have spoken a strange phrase as he took his last breath, tears in his eyes and a smile on his face:

My heart was stolen by a demonic sword.

1

T'S ALL A LIE.

It was July in year three of the Bunkyu era (1863 AD).

"Argh, my back's killing me."

Evening had long since arrived. Jinya, between bites of his kake soba, glanced up at the groaning man standing in the kitchen. It was the restaurant owner, who smacked his back two or three times. Most of the work in a soba restaurant was done standing up, and age seemed to be catching up to the now fifty-something man. His complaints about his sore body had increased lately.

"Are you all right, Dad?" Ofuu hurried to his side.

"Nothing to worry about, I'm still kickin'...ngh..." He tried to put up a tough front, but the pain was too great.

"Maybe you should rest for a while."

"No, I'm fine."

"Just sit down for a little bit. It's not like there are any other customers around."

The man sighed. "All right, but only for a bit." He seemed reluctant, but the worry in Ofuu's eyes gave him no choice. He left the kitchen and sat down by Jinya.

Jinya glanced at the man's face and saw that he had more wrinkles than before, a keen reminder of the passage of time. It had still been the Kaei era when they met. Jinya originally chose to visit Kihee because it got so few customers, but he never expected he would become a regular. He looked around and noticed that the restaurant was as dead as ever, then felt a bit emotional. "It's hard to believe it's almost been ten years already..."

"That long, eh? If only you showed your age a bit more, then we could both

grumble about how old we've gotten!"

"Sorry."

"Hey, I was just kidding."

Their back and forth was nothing more than idle banter, not meant to be deep. But Jinya felt the man's words contained an echo of his true feelings.

Jinya looked no different than he did at eighteen. Being able to retain one's youthful appearance was no doubt a deeply enviable thing for many people, but as someone whose body would never age, Jinya himself couldn't understand where that envy came from.

"Ah, jeez. Sometimes it feels like I'm the only one gettin' old," the restaurant owner carelessly said.

Jinya glared at him. The restaurant owner gawked back, confused for a moment, then realized the implications and looked Ofuu's way. She was near tears with a complicated expression on her face.

Ofuu had left her garden of happiness and chosen to live alongside her father, a human. But a demon's life span exceeded a thousand years, so she would remain young while her father gradually aged. One day, her father—her savior—would inevitably depart this world, and she would only be able to look on as he did so, then spend the rest of her eternity without him. Her face was awash with sadness, probably because she knew this lonely future was fast approaching.

"Sorry, Ofuu. That was inconsiderate of me," the restaurant owner said.

"It's okay, Dad. I know you wouldn't say something like that to be mean."

Ofuu smiled to try and show she was fine. Unfortunately, her expression wasn't very convincing.

"I'd like to pay," Jinya said, loudly setting his bowl down to clear the awkward air.

The store manager got up, more than happy to have the tension broken as well. "Right, that'll be thirty-two mon."

Jinya raised his eyebrow slightly at the price. Thirty-two was almost double

what it had been when he first started eating here.

The restaurant owner smiled wearily and gave a short bow in apology. "Sorry. The prices of things have gone up lately, so we have to raise our own prices to get by."

The unrest brought by the arrival of the black ships in the Kaei era still showed no signs of ending. The conflict of the samurai competing to either overthrow or protect the shogunate had only intensified. Meanwhile, prices had risen steeply, making life oppressive for the common folk.

Understanding the nature of the times, Jinya paid without complaint. Nobody was at fault or to blame here; this was just the way things were.

"Much appreciated. You know, I've never seen you troubled for money. Almost makes me jealous," the restaurant owner joked.

"I guess I've had a lot of work lately," Jinya mused.

The wicked ran rampant when there was unrest among people. As the worries of the Edo citizens grew, so too did the number of supernatural incidents. Jinya had been working nonstop lately, which showed just how bad things had become.

"You got more work today, then?" Ofuu asked.

"Yeah." Unconsciously, his hand moved to grip Yarai's scabbard. He was no closer to finding any answers to his doubts, and the things that needed to be cut down had only multiplied. At this point, he felt nothing in particular regarding the lives he reaped. Ofuu understood that and felt a bit saddened by his situation.

"You really don't change, huh?" she said. "Can't you ease up and live life slowly for a while?"

"Unfortunately, I can't change the way of life I've chosen for myself so easily. I have no wish to do that, anyway." Even if he could now let his guard down more than before, his ultimate goal still hadn't changed one bit. His own inflexibility was galling, even to himself.

"You really are obstinate," Ofuu said with an exasperated sigh. Still, her tone

was gentle.

"Sorry. That's just the way I am."

Their exchange ended as it always did, with neither side relenting their position in the slightest. Still, she didn't seem too displeased, and he didn't feel annoyed at all. No matter how much she chided him, talking to her always set him at ease. Perhaps it had something to do with how much more mature she acted than him.

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"Do take care, though," she said.
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"I will."

"Don't let your guard down, all right?"

"I hear you."

"And when you're done, come straight back here to tell us, no pit stops."

"...I'm not a child."

She was his senior by many, many years, but she did *look* younger than him. That was why he felt so awkward whenever she fussed over him like a mother hen. He could never quite get used to this treatment.

"I'll be fine," he said. He turned and left the restaurant as though he were running away. He was running away, actually. He couldn't bear any more of her kindhearted fussing.

"Oh jeez, that Jinya-kun... Take care! And come back safe." Without moving to stop him, she said her usual goodbye.

He didn't look back or respond, simply flipping up the entrance curtains and wordlessly passing under them.

This was nothing unusual for them. It was a night like any other.

The temple town of Yanaka was home to Mizuho Temple, which was abandoned after its chief priest passed away. Once, long ago, Jinya had visited that place.

Rumor had it that a demon lived in the temple, one that abducted and

devoured people. Nobody had actually been reported missing so far, but there were many eyewitness accounts of demon sightings there. These eyewitnesses all fearfully claimed to have spotted a man-eating demon living there. Hoping to settle the situation before something terrible happened, one of the chief priests in the area called for Jinya to deal with the creature, bringing us to the present situation.

A different man-eating demon once used to live in the temple. Jinya entered its grounds as though retracing an old memory.

Slowly, he proceeded through the dilapidated temple grounds. The moment he reached the main building, the smell of dust assaulted his nose. Although the putrid smell of corpses and blood was absent, the rumors still proved true. He stiffened and glared at the figure in the center of the main temple.

"Urrrgh..."

It was a fox far bigger than any man. Its silver fur shone conspicuously, even in the darkness. Its keen eyes were, as expected, red. It was almost certainly the rumored demon.

"Are you the man-eating demon?" Jinya asked, to be sure.

The demon didn't respond. Instead, its perceptive eyes narrowed even more sharply, and six balls of fire suddenly appeared in the air.

That was as good as an answer—the balls of fire were likely the demon's power.

Jinya unsheathed Yarai while keeping his eyes on the demon, then assumed a stance with his sword positioned behind him.

He felt no heat from the blazing fires. The two glared at one another, both motionless.

It was July, the height of summer, and yet the temperature seemed to drop slightly.

"Grraaaah!" The silver fox let out a piercing roar.

Two of the balls of fire shot forth, moving straight toward Jinya. He dodged to the side with room to spare; the balls of fire were fast, but they only came in straight lines. Evading them would be a simple task...or so he thought. Before he realized it, the balls of fire hanging above the silver fox had multiplied many times over. The fox barraged him, releasing them at a rapid pace. Jinya couldn't approach like this. He stared the fox down and saw it glare fiercely back. It apparently had no intention of letting him get close. It fired fireball after fireball, and it took all Jinya's energy to dodge. He couldn't risk a close call with the flames, but continuing to dodge by such wide margins would eventually exhaust his stamina and cause him to leave an opening. That was likely the silver fox's aim.

"But things won't go the way you want them to," Jinya murmured, his expression unchanging. His blade couldn't reach from this distance, and his stamina wasn't infinite. But his opponent had made a fatal error in assuming it was the only one capable of attacking from a distance.

Jinya stopped moving and raised his sword aloft. He took a deep breath and calmly observed his target. He gripped his sword hard enough for his hand to creak and aimed for the base of the silver fox's throat. He would finish this in a single strike.

He swung his sword down diagonally. It looked like he was simply slashing at nothing, but the moment he swung, his blade emitted a transparent slash of different density than the air that sliced through empty space. This was a power he had previously devoured: *Flying Blade*, the ability to send slashes flying.

The silver fox froze in surprise. The slash that came from Jinya's sword threaded its way between fireballs and accurately struck its throat.

"Augh..." The sound of cutting flesh could be heard. The silver fox had probably never expected a long-range attack. The slash landed on its victim with no resistance, and blood danced in the air. That was the end of it. The silver fox groaned, still upright but unable to move.

Jinya felt a bit surprised that this was all. It didn't seem like the silver fox had laid a trap, but he remained vigilant as he approached. "Before you go, tell me your name."

Still standing upright, the silver fox managed to weakly say, "Yuu...nagi..."

Jinya committed the name to memory. With this, he had killed another. He

reached out with his left hand and said, "I see. Farewell then, Yuunagi. Your power is now mine to devour."

The moment he touched Yuunagi, his left arm began to pulse like a heart. *Assimilation*, the ability to absorb characteristics of other living things. Using it, he could take for himself the demonic powers of the demons he devoured with his left arm. He could use this ability without transforming into a demon now, perhaps because he'd grown accustomed to it.

Ba-dmp. He connected to Yuunagi through his left arm. Its memories—as well as something else—became his, all coursing through his veins. Assimilation allowed him to make other living things a part of himself. This let him gain some of the memories and knowledge of those whom he consumed. He disliked this process, as it felt like he was peering at another person's innermost secrets. It didn't help that it made his consciousness murky too. This time was much worse than usual, however. His world spun as though he were drunk.

"You wanted to be saved from a demon...but help never came."

Fragments of memories appeared, then faded. Eventually, things became clear. The foreign object in his body had assimilated and stabilized, but his head still felt like it was spinning.

"Alone. A child you hated. But why?"

Something big had been absorbed. The flow of memories halted, and his world contorted in on itself.

Waaaah! Waaaah!

Somewhere in the distance, a baby cried.

And then, night broke.

"Oh, Jinya-kun. Come on in," the restaurant owner greeted him.

On the day after he eliminated the demon, Jinya visited Kihee as usual and found a familiar face already there.

"Hello, Jin-dono."

Jinya's old friend Miura Naotsugu was already finished with his food, and he leisurely sipped his tea.

"Day off?" Jinya asked. It was still early afternoon.

"Yes. Thought I'd come here to relax."

"Didn't feel like bringing Kinu-dono along?"

"I invited her, but she said no."

Jinya was secretly happy about that. He found Kinu, Naotsugu's wife, a little tough to deal with. He just didn't know what to say when he was around her.

Naotsugu, who knew this, smiled wryly at Jinya. Naotsugu was typically as serious as they came, but he showed his true self at Kihee. This place made him feel comfortable enough to let his walls come down.

"Welcome back." Ofuu was all smiles as she approached them. It was in her nature to worry while Jinya was away. She knew he had slain countless demons over the years, but that didn't stop her from being concerned. Seeing him arrive safe and sound at the shop filled her with joy from the bottom of her heart. "Did everything go okay? You didn't get hurt?"

"I'm fine," Jinya said.

"Ha ha, this is Jin-dono we're talking about here. It's a sure thing that he'd be all right," Naotsugu said.

"I know he's strong, but I still wish he wouldn't put himself in harm's way so much. There are a lot of people who would be sad if something happened to you, Jinya-kun." Despite her youthful appearance, Ofuu acted very maternal. Her true age would place her closer to a grandmother, of course...but Jinya wouldn't be caught dead voicing that thought.

"She's right, you know. You shouldn't be making the missus worry so much," Naotsugu said with a teasing smile, looking off to the side.

Ofuu looked in the same direction. "...Indeed. She was even more worried than me."

Jinya didn't have a clue what the two were talking about. He followed their gaze and saw a woman holding a baby sitting there...just like always.

"Tell him off a bit more for me, would you? It wouldn't hurt him to at least consider the feelings of the people he leaves waiting for him."

She wore a red kimono robe with golden threads, the collar kept loose. Her black hair was set with three combs and six small hairpins. Jinya had to assume from her appearance that she was a prostitute, but none of the others seemed to think twice about her presence. She was smaller than Ofuu and appeared daintier. Her skin was sickly pale. Occasionally, she would rock and soothe her baby, but her expression remained just as stony as Jinya's own, as if she were tired of a chore. When her baby did stop fussing, however, she smiled sweetly.

"You have it rough, huh, Yuunagi-san?" Ofuu said.

"Really. Such a tactless husband I'm stuck with," Yuunagi replied.

"But I'm a little jealous. Jinya-kun is kind in his own way, and your baby is so cute."

"How about taking the little one off my hands, then? I've always hated children myself."

"Oh... You know you shouldn't say that."

"Yes, yes, no need to nag."

Ofuu chided Yuunagi, but it went in one ear and out the other for her. Despite what she said about hating children, Yuunagi handled her own with care and love.

Jinya watched the two women talk. It was a heartwarming conversation, but he felt a strange sense of vertigo for some reason. "Yuu...nagi...?"

He had heard that name before, the one Ofuu said. But when? It felt like a fog was clouding his mind. Just what felt so off about the scene he was looking at?

In a daze, he stared at Yuunagi. She noticed and tilted her head at a slight angle. "Is something wrong, dear?"

Jinya's world seemed to spin again.

Dear. Right. She, Yuunagi, was his wife.

He felt like he was standing atop clouds, distant from reality. The ground felt

unreliable beneath his feet. In the past, he had wished for this: to marry the woman he loved and live happily in peace with her for the rest of his days. This, here and now, was what Jinya had wanted.

"...Oh. Sorry. I guess I blanked for a moment there." He answered by reflex, like a hasty attempt to avoid something. He hung his head slightly. The baby in Yuunagi's arms opened its droopy eyes a tad and looked at him. He asked, "Um... Who is this?"

"Seriously, what's come over you, dear? She's your daughter, of course."

It didn't feel real to hear it was his child, but if Yuunagi, the mother, said so, then it must have been so.

"It's about time for us to give her a name. I'm not too good with that sort of thing, so I want you to think of something," she said.

Of course. Now it made sense. He couldn't remember his daughter's name because she didn't have one yet.

"Oh. Sure," he said evasively, earning himself a look from Yuunagi. There was a touch of worry in her eyes.

It was probably a husband's job to lessen his wife's worry, or something like that. He smiled awkwardly at Yuunagi.

"Is something wrong? You've been acting strange," she said.

"I'm fine."

"Is that so...?" She didn't seem convinced, but she didn't press him further either.

She never did. She acted strong of heart, but she had always been a delicate soul.

His head spun. Did "she" really refer to Yuunagi...?

"Don't worry about me. It's nothing serious." He cut the topic short to stop himself from thinking, but his evasiveness only deepened Yuunagi's doubts.

"Hmm... I don't know if I trust you. You do keep a lot of secrets."

"Yuunagi..."

She giggled, perhaps finding Jinya's flustered look to be amusing. "Hee hee, I'm only kidding, sheesh."

Her smile felt both familiar and new. His mind seemed to teeter at the strange sensation.

"I wasn't worried about you one bit." But despite her claim, she *did* seem fairly worried.

"So not even the great demon hunter is a match for his wife," the restaurant owner teased, seeming to think Jinya's agitation was caused by their power dynamic as a couple.

"Apparently not," Naotsugu agreed. He and the restaurant owner seemed to accept what they saw as natural.

And, of course, that's what it was. This was just another ordinary slice of their lives. It was weird for Jinya to think something was wrong, yet he just couldn't wipe away the uncanny feeling he had.

"...Jinya-kun? Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing."

Ofuu worried about him like she always did, but that was just her usual kindness. She showed no indication that she thought anything was odd about the situation.

"Ol' Jinya-kun's been hunting demons for a couple of days in a row now. Maybe fatigue's finally caught up to him?" the restaurant owner suggested.

"Could be," Naotsugu agreed. "Jin-dono, you should try and relax for the rest of the day."

The two men grinned and looked over at Yuunagi. They were clearly encouraging Jinya to get some quality family time.

"But..."

"No buts, Jinya-kun. You need to show your wife some proper love and care now, all right?"

"Not you too, Ofuu..." Apparently, no one was on Jinya's side. He let out a sigh

and looked over to see Yuunagi with a teasing smile on her face.

"Why not? I see no reason not to take things easy for once."

That was how their day began. A day that was nothing special. A day like all the others they'd had.

2

What follows is a tale from the past.

Once upon a time, there was an old lady who was washing clothes in a river when a melon came floating down. The old lady picked the melon up and brought it home. Her husband, an old man, sliced it open, and inside was a cute little girl. The elderly couple decided to name the girl Urikohime, based on "Uri," the word for "melon."

Urikohime was raised with love and care by the old couple. Eventually, she grew up and became a weaver, supporting her elderly parents that way.

One day, Urikohime was working the loom while the elderly couple were away. A wicked Amanojaku demon then appeared and tricked Urikohime into letting it into the house. Now, typically demons could not tell falsehoods, but the Amanojaku was different in that it specialized in deceit and could lie.

The Amanojaku made Urikohime bring it a kitchen knife and a cutting board, then skinned her and ate her flesh, leaving only some fingers and blood behind. Then, the Amanojaku donned Urikohime's skin and disguised itself as her. Eventually, the elderly couple returned home. The Amanojaku, tricking them into believing the fingers were potatoes and the blood alcohol, fed Urikohime to them both.

And so, the Amanojaku went on to spend its days as Urikohime. Eventually, an important person appeared saying he wanted to make Urikohime his bride. The Amanojaku, still disguised as Urikohime, went along with it and became the important person's bride. But as the two traveled to the new husband's estate, a crow appeared and cried out, "An Amanojaku is riding Urikohime's cart."

Confused, the husband took his wife and washed her face as soon as they arrived at his estate. To his shock, the skin of Urikohime came off, revealing the Amanojaku.

The Amanojaku then fled to the mountains, and its whereabouts since then are unknown.

This has been the tale of "The Amanojaku and Urikohime" as passed down since antiquity.

—The Amanojaku and Urikohime

Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan

Jinya ordered his usual kake soba, taking a late lunch. He was long since familiar with the taste now. It wasn't especially delicious, but the flavor suited his palate more than other restaurants' food did. Yuunagi had already finished her meal and simply sat at his side holding her baby without saying a word.

"Still, to think Jinya-kun would go off and get hitched," the restaurant owner mused. "I was so sure he'd marry Ofuu and take over the business one day."

"Dad!" Ofuu exclaimed.

Jinya paused, his expression tense. That was one hell of a thing to say with his wife right next to him.

"Oh, really?" Jinya was sure she'd get angry, but Yuunagi showed nothing more than genuine interest in the topic. He snuck a side glance at her face and saw she looked a bit impish.

"I was even teaching him how to make soba with that day in mind. Ofuu tried her best to spend time alone with him as well, but I guess it was all for naught," the restaurant owner said.

"Wh-what? No! I'm just teaching him about flowers!" Ofuu insisted.

"It's suspicious how flustered you're getting..." Yuunagi teased.

Jinya resumed eating as the three chatted noisily. This was a hard topic for

him to sit through, even as a non-participant. It'd end worse for him if he tried to jump in, though; that much he could clearly see.

"Y'know, I've been wondering. Just how did you nab such a stubborn-as-iron man?" the restaurant owner asked.

All eyes turned toward Jinya. He wished they'd leave him out of this, but it seemed he wouldn't be so lucky.

"Good question. Perhaps it's because we've known each other for so long?" Yuunagi spoke with a distant look in her eyes, as if she were thinking nostalgically about the past. Just what *had* led to her becoming his wife? Jinya tried to remember, but his mind grew dizzy.

"You've known Jin-dono for quite a while, then?" Naotsugu asked.

Yuunagi nodded with an impish smile. Jinya's mind was too hazy to remember himself, but he decided that if she said that was the case, then it must be true.

"We grew up in the same hometown," Yuunagi said. "I first told him how I felt on a small hill that overlooks the river there. I asked him to make me his bride one day, but I never thought he'd actually go through with it."

"I see... How nice, young love. I might even be a bit jealous," Naotsugu joked.

Ba-dmp, ba-dmp. Jinya's heart raced. Just where had she pulled that story from?

"Ah... So you've known each other since you were kids. Yeah, that's hard to beat," the restaurant owner said with a slight smile.

But that couldn't be. Jinya was sure he'd spent his childhood with someone other than Yuunagi.

"Your hometown was Kadono, right?" Naotsugu asked.

"Yes. We lived in the same house but were apart for a while."

"Then you know what Jin-dono was like when he was little?"

"Of course. Even as a kid, he was just as stubborn as he is now. He would rather stick to his familiar way of life to the bitter end than act on his feelings for someone else."

"So Jinya-kun's always been this awkward with himself. He must have caused you no end of trouble," Ofuu said.

"That he did. But I don't hate the trouble he gives me, or else I wouldn't have stayed with him so long. What's more..." Yuunagi continued to speak of the past Jinya couldn't remember, but he didn't say anything. After a brief pause, she smiled and let out a soft sigh. "I just know he can't do anything without me."

Jinya's heart nearly leapt out of his throat. What? No. That's...

"Just kidding. None of that just now was true."

He felt like cold water had suddenly been dumped on him. Yuunagi's nostalgic face had now been replaced by a mean, impish grin. She stuck her tongue out at him teasingly.

"...Huh?" When he belatedly realized that she was just stringing them along, the restaurant owner's jaw dropped. The others seemed similarly stunned. The sudden shift was too much for them to follow.

"It's not very polite to stick your noses into the love lives of others, you know?" Yuunagi said. She was clearly enjoying this. As she said, some things weren't meant to be pried into.

Jinya was in shock, though. Her lies had been drawn from something terribly dear to him.

"Shall we head out?"

His stalled mind was yanked out of its daze by her teasing voice. She rocked her baby a few times, then slowly stood up.

"...Yeah." There were a lot of questions Jinya wanted to ask, but the sight of Yuunagi smiling as she held her young daughter in her arms stifled any words that might have come from him. He didn't want to break her peace by interrogating her now.

Jinya, Yuunagi, and their daughter crossed under the entrance curtains together like they always did, but something nagged Jinya at the back of his mind. His closeness with Yuunagi was comforting, yet within it all was a contradictory sense of loneliness.

Not a single cloud dotted the clear blue sky above. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with hot air. The oppressiveness of the sweltering summer days still to come was at the forefront of his mind.

Just as the others had urged him to, he decided to spend time together with his family. That said, there wasn't anywhere in particular they could go. Neither kabuki nor rakugo theater were places to take a baby, and they had already eaten. The best they could do was aimlessly walk around Edo. But that seemed to be enough for Yuunagi, evidenced by the slight smile that graced her face.

As they walked around, they happened to come across a book-lending store. Yuunagi wanted to look at the latest popular books, so Jinya held their daughter and waited outside the store.

Their daughter's skin was still plump and soft. She wasn't even old enough to hold her own head up yet. She seemed so fragile, like she'd fall apart in his hands at any moment. Perhaps that was why his arms were more tense than usual. The sight of him holding a baby so stiffly looked comical, so much so that a number of people at the store—all female customers—actually giggled at him. He felt like crawling into a hole.

"We have two popular new books, Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan and Tenmoku Lovers' Suicide. The first is quite popular because it includes more modest ghost stories like 'The Amanojaku and Urikohime' and 'The Invisible Demon of the Temple Town,' which haven't been made into plays and the like. The second book is just what it sounds like; it details the anguish of a wife whose husband has departed the world before her."

"Hmph. Neither of these books are really ideal for a young couple."

"Indeed. Then what about..."

Yuunagi continued to talk with the book-lending store's owner. This kind of store was exactly what it sounded like: a shop that did business by lending books. Books, especially bound ones, were an expensive commodity that few commoners could get their hands on. That was why book-lending stores came into existence, loaning out picture books, cheap paper sheet books, rakugo playbooks, and so on to provide easily accessible entertainment to the

commoners of Edo.

"I see. Thanks for your help. I'm a bit busy today, though, so I'll do my borrowing next time."

"I understand. Thank you, and please do come again."

Yuunagi asked a lot of questions, but she'd never been interested in borrowing anything from the start. Such a thing wasn't uncommon, though. The store owner was completely used to this kind of browsing and saw her off with a deep bow.

"Thanks for waiting," she said. Jinya handed her the child, but she frowned slightly and didn't take her. Biting her lip slightly, she said, "I'm not good with... I hate this child." She turned her face away from her daughter, expressing annoyance. "But it's fine. It's not like I can just saddle you with her." She relented and took the baby, and the two began to walk around Edo some more.

The child seemed happier in her mother's arms. Yuunagi herself still seemed be in a bad mood, however.

"Why do you hate her? She's your daughter, isn't she?" Jinya asked.

"No, she was just some abandoned baby. I didn't bear her myself, and I have no attachment to her."

"So she was an abandoned baby..." Jinya mused. Now that he thought of it, he felt like that might have been the case...although his head hurt when he tried to think deeply about it. Even though they were his wife and daughter, he couldn't remember anything about them at all. "Then why..."

"Say, why don't we stop somewhere to rest? I'm a little tired."

He wanted to ask why she took the girl in, but she interrupted him and headed for a nearby teahouse. Judging by her gait, she didn't seem particularly tired.

"Two teas and a plate of dango. Oh, and some isobe mochi if you have that." She quickly ordered and then sat on the long bench in front of the teahouse, all without even asking Jinya a single thing.

Left with no choice, Jinya resigned himself and sat down beside her.

"Someone's grumpy," she teased with a giggle.

"I'm not grumpy or anything. I'm just...confused. I feel like everything you say is a lie."

"Well, you know what they say: All good women lie." She easily admitted she told lies.

Jinya wanted to follow up with a question, but it never came. For some reason, he couldn't bring himself to ask that one decisive question. Eventually, the moment passed and his window to ask disappeared.

"Thanks. The isobe mochi is for him," said Yuunagi when the isobe mochi and tea arrived shortly afterward. Isobe mochi was a favorite of Jinya's, even more so than soba.

"I'm surprised you knew I liked this stuff."

"What're you talking about? You're the one who told me, remember? You could rarely eat mochi in the iron town you grew up in, so it became a favorite of yours, even more so than soba. C'mon, let's eat."

Yuunagi was a woman full of mysteries. She spoke of a past he vaguely remembered, then called it all a lie she made up. She claimed to hate her daughter, but still took her in as an orphan and raised her together with Jinya. He had no clue just what about her was truthful and what was not. But one thing was clear: It was strange that Yuunagi could *lie*. After all, she was...

Waaaah! Waaaah!

She was...what, again?

He questioned himself subconsciously, but no answer came as the thought was erased by a distant wailing.

The baby began to fuss in Yuunagi's arms.

"Ah, jeez... You can be such a pain." Yuunagi's voice was exasperated but full of gentleness, and her half smile warmed Jinya's heart. The sight of a mother rocking her crying child was beautiful. No matter what Yuunagi might ultimately be, she was unmistakably the child's mother. How could she show such love otherwise?

"Something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. She was his wife and their daughter's mother. There was no need to challenge that right now.

"Well, you sure are staring a lot," she teased him.

"It's nothing, really," he insisted. "Where should we go next?"

"We don't have to have a specific destination. Just aimlessly walking around town is good for me."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm happy enough just spending some time as a family for once."

"All right, wandering around it is."

All of Jinya's doubts had vanished and been replaced by the relaxing warmth a real family might provide. A slight smile graced his lips.

"It's about time we gave this girl a name," Yuunagi said. "Any ideas, dear?"

"Hm... Is there any kind of name you want in particular?" he replied.

A name was something that stuck with a person for life; it was well worth careful consideration. Coming up with a name would be a challenge, but it would be a happy one. Jinya felt as though he had been dunked into pleasant, lukewarm water.

"I'll leave everything up to you to decide," she said. He saw her smile and thought he wouldn't mind if this moment lasted just a bit longer. He truly wouldn't.

But a nostalgic voice echoed in his mind: "I see. Then it was my stubborn, unwilling-to-change self who dumped me."

The emotions he felt in that moment, however long ago it was, still lingered in him. The warmth it gave somehow made him see a parting of ways in his future.

"...And with its identity revealed, the Amanojaku fled to the forest. The end."

While they were chatting at the teahouse, the two eventually began talking about the books Yuunagi saw at the book-lending store they visited. One of the stories in the books she skimmed, "The Amanojaku and Urikohime," stood out to her, so she recounted it to Jinya. He was already familiar with it, as the story was a fairly well-known one. There were many variations of it, but the one he knew was pretty much the same as the one she told him.

"It's an interesting story, don't you think?" she said.

"You think so? Seems pretty run-of-the-mill to me."

"Nonsense. You just don't know how to appreciate a good tale. You have to think deeply about these kinds of things. For example...why do you think the Amanojaku killed Urikohime?"

In folk tales, people were often killed by demons. It was simply a common theme. Jinya had never once thought to question why someone died in a story.

"...Why?" he parroted back.

"Yeah. There's no real answer, so go ahead and just say what you think."

"Hmm... Maybe it had a grudge against Urikohime?" Grudges were the first motive that leapt to mind when murder was involved. Jinya himself had to admit he lacked imagination.

Yuunagi grinned when she heard him give the easy answer. "Oooh, maybe. It would be kind of interesting if the two actually had some kind of conflict going on behind the scenes."

"What about you? Why do you think it killed her?"

"Me? Well... Hmm..." She hung her head slightly, thinking for a time. Then she lifted her head with an impish grin on her face. "The Amanojaku fed Urikohime to the old man and the old lady, right? Then eating Urikohime couldn't have been its goal. Its goal must have been to switch places with her instead."

"I see. But why?"

"Easy: to get married. The Amanojaku must have been a woman, and she

knew the man in the story wanted to marry Urikohime from the get-go. She got jealous of Urikohime marrying into money and decided to swap places with her."

If that were the case, then the Amanojaku was very worldly for a demon. That would be amusing in its own right, but something about all this struck Jinya as odd. No matter how much one imagined what went on behind the scenes of a story, the truth could never be known. So what was the point of talking about it, then?

"Oh? Not convinced? I'm pretty confident I've hit the mark, myself," Yuunagi said.

"Ah, yeah. You might've."

"Right?"

She was probably joking, seeing as she didn't take offense at his dismissive reply.

As the conversation died out, Yuunagi's eyes fell to the baby in her arms. Even though she'd said she hated her daughter, her gaze was soft. Jinya really thought motherhood suited her.

"...An Amanojaku, huh?" she murmured, curiously looking his way. As though the idea had just sprung to mind, she added, "I really do hate children," seemingly hinting that those were words befitting an Amanojaku.

He smiled in amusement and finished off the last of the green tea in his cup.

She heaved a sigh and slowly stood up. "Shall we?"

"Yeah."

The two left the teahouse behind.

Sunset was still a while away, so they would have time to look around town some more. At that thought, a memory from the distant past flitted through his mind. He could swear he had spent time walking around without a particular destination, just like this, together with someone before. Spurred on by nostalgia, he glanced to his side. Everything felt uncertain and unclear, but his wife was unmistakably there beside him.

"Oh, this is cute." They came across a store that sold hairpins and other small trinkets with a variety of goods on display outside. Yuunagi handed her baby to Jinya and picked up a netsuke sculpture, eyeing it closely. "This one's a lucky sparrow, I think."

The netsuke sculpture depicted a plump sparrow. There was some charm to it, but Jinya didn't find it cute at all. He didn't have any issue with the quality of its craftsmanship or anything; it simply reminded him of the kinds of weapons a certain man would use.

"Hey, did you know?" Yuunagi began. "Sparrows can turn into clams."

"What?"

"Heh. Nah, just pulling your leg."

That last exchange was meaningless, but Jinya didn't really mind, even if she had lied yet again. If anything, he should have been happy that he could enjoy such meaningless talk, but strangely no happiness came.

"Why the long face?" she asked.

In truth, he already knew. That was why he felt sad even though they were sharing what should have been a happy moment.

He looked up at the sky and saw that evening was near. Their day was already coming to an end.

Side by side, the two walked along the main street while their daughter slept serenely in Yuunagi's arms. They were the very image of a family. They continued to walk peacefully without a destination in mind.

She looked around more shops without buying anything, he bore her teasing with a wry grin, and together they looked happily at their sleeping daughter. Jinya was forty-one years old now. If he had actually aged properly, then this kind of future just might have lain in store for him.

The sky began to glow a reddish orange. The evening color was faintly unnerving despite its beauty, and soon that warm glow would melt away into night. Perhaps that knowledge was what made it look so forlorn.

"...An evening lull." Yuunagi narrowed her eyes up at the sky, and Jinya looked at her in confusion. "That's what my name means. Down by the coast, the breeze blows inward from the sea during the day and out to sea at night. In the evening, right when the directions change, there is a lull for a few moments where the wind stops, and the ocean waves are still." On her face was a gentle smile instead of her usual impish one. "That moment is called an evening lull—a yuunagi. Oh, and I'm telling the truth this time, just so you know."

She strung her words together as though reciting a poem. Jinya raptly absorbed what she said and tried to envision what she saw.

"I just happened to remember it when I saw this sky. The ocean was motionless and clear like the surface of a mirror. So beautiful... I'd love to see it again sometime. Together with you, if possible."

Perhaps the windless sky with its clouds at rest did resemble the evening lull of the ocean.

Yuunagi's eyes moistened with nostalgia.

"Are you crying?" Jinya asked.

"No. The evening sun just stung my eyes a bit."

Another lie, but Jinya didn't say anything. Why should he ruin the moment when he could bask in the evening lull a little longer instead?

"The evening lull of the sky, huh?" he said thoughtfully. "I guess that makes the evening sky yours alone."

"What the heck? Since when are you so cheesy?" she shot back.

Even he had to admit it wasn't like him to say such things. The two stifled their laughter and continued walking. Eventually, they reached a floodplain along the Tamagawa River. Jinya looked around and saw it was deserted except for them, the softly flowing river, and small flowers basking in a reddening sunset.

"How beautiful..." Yuunagi murmured.

Light pink, white, yellow. The myriad colors of the flowers added to the beauty of the windless sunset. Drawn in by the atmosphere, the two stepped

down onto an embankment overrun by flowers.

"These are beauty-of-the-nights, also known as whitepowder flowers. They bloom from summer to autumn," Jinya said.

"Why are they called whitepowder flowers when some of them are yellow, red, and so on?"

"Their seeds have a white powder inside. Children like to play with them and pretend it's makeup. These flowers also only start blooming in the evening for some reason, which is why they're called beauty-of-the-nights."

"You sure know a lot."

"I'm just repeating what I've heard from other people." He didn't say from whom. He wasn't so tactless that he'd bring up another woman's name at a time like this.

Yuunagi gazed at the flowers swaying in the sunset without asking any more questions. Jinya was left astonished by the beauty. He tried not to think about whether it was the flowers' beauty or hers that had him so captivated.

"What a strange flower it is, blooming in the evening like that," she said.

"Yeah. Apparently, nobody knows why they do it."

"Maybe they're trying to show off."

"Ha, maybe."

The sun continued to sink on the horizon as they joked.

"...Today was nice, Yuunagi." Jinya's words were completely unconnected to the conversation leading up to that point. He was reluctant for things to be over, but night would arrive soon. Their sweet dream had to end.

"Where'd that come from?"

"I just felt like saying it."

"With that stone-cold face? Doesn't feel all that sincere to me..."

"Sorry, I can't help my face. But I meant what I said."

He couldn't rid himself of the unease he'd felt all along, but the day had still

been pleasant anyway. He got to walk the streets of Edo with his wife and daughter, ending with a stroll home while gazing at a peaceful sunset. Some might find such a day ordinary, but to him it had been blissful.

"...I used to dream about something like this," he began. "I wanted to marry the woman I loved and grow old together with her. I think I would've been happy if I did."

But he didn't. They couldn't change from the paths they'd chosen.

Yuunagi didn't say a word, silently listening as he began his sudden monologue.

"...Hey, do you think you could call me by my name just once?"

Silence. Thinking back on it, he realized she had only ever called him "Dear." He had to hear her say his actual name—to be sure, to know beyond a doubt who the man she had spent all this time with was.

Eventually, perhaps because she couldn't bear the silence, Yuunagi gingerly spoke up. "...Jinta. There. Was that what you wanted?"

She said it so indifferently, but hearing his name spoken anguished Jinya even more than he expected it would. She gazed at him calmly. Really, she was just trying to soften the blow with that look, but he understood she meant well by it. Such compassion from her deserved to be answered in kind.

She claimed to be his wife and had said the baby in her arms was theirs. In that case, he would continue to be a husband and father they could be proud of.

"I see. Thank you." He was a little happy that he could manage some genuine gratitude in this situation. He felt as though it proved he had become a real family with these two during their short time together.

"The truth is, there's so much I regret." There wasn't much time until the sun fully set. He began to speak in an emotionless voice as the final moment approached. "If I had done things differently, then maybe Shirayuki would still be alive. Maybe we could have had children and grown old together, but we didn't. I was too slow. I've been too slow so many times now, always late to arrive when I'm needed the most."

It wasn't just Shirayuki. There was the father he had abandoned, and the girl who could've been his second sister if things had been different. He'd only wanted to protect her, but he was too late and had to kill his father and earn her hate. Jinya had taken what he wanted to hold dear to him and trampled it with his own feet.

"Maybe things could have ended differently with Shirayuki. With my father. With Natsu. I've been regretting that I couldn't do more for so long."

No matter how much he lamented, he couldn't forget his failures. They remained embedded deep inside him like a thorn, reminding him from time to time how pathetic he was.

Perhaps what he saw now was no different.

"Is this your power? Or is this...a manifestation of my regret?"

He would never meet Shirayuki or Natsu again, meaning the one here with him now could only be Yuunagi.

"I've known for a while now. You're not the one who's been lying this whole time."

Yuunagi couldn't possibly know the name "Jinta." Even if this impossible situation were caused by some demon's skills, there was no way for them to know something he'd discarded.

"...I'm the Amanojaku."

This had all been a lie from the start.

"Dear..." Yuunagi said.

"You couldn't possibly be here in the first place. I..." How could he have forgotten? He had cut her with *Flying Blade*, then with his own hands...

"No," she interrupted him, slowly shaking her head. Still feeling ashamed of what he had done, Jinya looked at her and saw her tenderly smiling back at him. "That didn't happen."

"But..."

[&]quot;Because the truth is, I was nowhere to be found from the start."

He had no clue what she was saying.

"Everything's been a lie," she continued. "Me being your wife, our memories together, even the fact that I'm here now...all lies. You didn't kill me, so don't let it weigh on you."

"What ...? I ... "

"But you know? I'm glad it was someone like you who came." As she said that, she handed her child to Jinya. He took the baby and glanced down at her. She was sound asleep. He looked up again and saw Yuunagi with a tender expression a mother proud of her child's growth might make. "I...hate children. So, I leave her to you."

He didn't say anything in response. The sight of her melting away into the sunset was too breathtaking. Any words he could say would only blemish the beauty he saw now.

She sighed, as though exasperated by his silence. "You'll be fine. I know she'll be safe with you."

She looked at him with a moist gaze that a true wife might give her husband. Her smile—kind, but equally weak—seemed to escape his grasp now.

"So long. I'm sure we'll meet again sometime."

With a much too peaceful smile, she left behind one last, gentle lie.

And then the evening lull of the sky faded into night.

Waaaah! Waaaah!

Somewhere in the distance, a baby cried.

Jinya was in the main building of Mizuho Temple. It was late in the night. A long time must have passed since he fought the fox demon.

He was in his demon form for some reason. His skin was swarthy and resembled dull iron. Under his sleeve, his left arm was grotesquely swollen and dark red. His right eye was malformed and red all the way to the sclera. The area around his eye looked as though it were covered in a black metal mask,

only serving to make his malformed eye stand out more conspicuously. But there was another change. He touched his hair and saw it shone silver, even in the darkness.

He calmed his heart and returned to human form. Closing his eyes, he dredged up his memories of the demon he'd just devoured.

"...Falsehood. An ability to create illusions that can deceive others... But the illusions rely on the user's memory and cannot create anything they can't imagine."

This was the power the demon had used just now. Yuunagi's power.

The silver fox and the balls of fire were both illusions made by Yuunagi. Without realizing they were illusions, Jinya cut them down together with their creator, then absorbed her ability with *Assimilation*. By doing so, her power became his. But due to some error, or perhaps because of her strong emotions as she died, he was drawn into an illusion made by *Falsehood*.

The Yuunagi with whom he saw the sunset in his illusion was an amalgamation made from his memories of Shirayuki and Natsu, one that had nothing to do with the demon he killed.

"Because the truth is, I was nowhere to be found from the start."

Her ability was to give shape to thought in order to deceive people. At first glance, one might think that this skill was meant to hide the truth, but that would be slightly off the mark. The true nature of her ability was the capacity to lie.

"I was tricked..."

Jinya had received this job request because a man-eating demon had supposedly made Mizuho Temple its nest. But there were no corpses to be found in the main temple, much less any smell of blood. In other words, the man-eating demon itself was nothing more than a creation of *Falsehood*.

She must have had a reason to go this far.

Waaaah! Waaaah!

The voice of a baby echoed through the temple.

Slowly, Jinya neared a Buddha statue enshrined toward the back. He strained his eyes and saw something wrapped in cloth and hidden underneath the lotus leaf pedestal. No, it wasn't "something," exactly...

"No, she was just some abandoned baby..."

It was an abandoned baby.

Mizuho Temple was a ruined and unattended temple. If not for the demon rumors, Jinya would never have come here, and the baby would have surely died.

"I see. You were quite the Amanojaku."

It all made sense now. Yuunagi wanted to tell someone a baby had been abandoned here, so she crafted a grand lie to lure in Jinya, the man who chased rumors of demons. The Amanojaku in the story wore Urikohime as a guise, but Yuunagi took the identity of the Amanojaku.

She claimed to have been nowhere to be found from the start, but Jinya believed that was untrue. So he spoke quietly, but in a voice she could hear. "You were here, I'm sure of it... You were unmistakably this girl's mother."

He picked up the abandoned baby. Even with her ability to lie, Yuunagi couldn't fully hide her love for this child. She and the girl likely had no blood ties, but she'd still gone through the pains of finding someone to entrust her to. How Yuunagi became a demon was a mystery, but she had certainly become a mother, and that was something worth celebrating.

"She wanted me to name you, didn't she?" Jinya looked down at the baby in his arms. What kind of name would be good for her? *Perhaps one that would link her to her mother,* he thought before saying the first name that came to mind. "The flower that blooms in the evening lull... Nomari. How about we make that your name?"

Nomari was one of the many names for the flowers Jinya and Yuunagi saw on the embankment. The baby seemed to like the sound of the name. Her still-small eyes were moist, but she—*Nomari*—smiled.

"One day, once you've grown bigger, I'll tell you all about your mother."

He would let her know about the mother who lied to protect her child and all the love she had shown her. He wondered what kind of face Nomari would make then. He tried to envision it, a soft smile on his face.

On the day after he eliminated the demon, Jinya visited Kihee as usual and found a familiar face already there.

"Oh, Jinya-kun. Come on in," the restaurant owner greeted him.

"Hello, Jin-...dono?!" Naotsugu froze up mid-greeting when he saw the adorable baby in Jinya's arms.

"J-Jinya-kun? Wh-where'd that baby come from?" Ofuu asked, her eyes wide.

"Hm? Oh, right..."

Now then, how should he respond? He could say he just picked her up somewhere, but that wouldn't be right; perhaps it would work for a dog or a cat, but not for a baby. He really didn't want to have to talk about Yuunagi, though.

"Seriously, what's come over you, dear? She's your daughter, of course."

A soft whisper tickled his ear. He looked around the restaurant but, of course, Yuunagi was nowhere to be found. Still, he felt as though she were here, pushing him forward with an impish smile on her face. So he made up his mind. He had been entrusted with this child, and there was only one answer he could give.

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

He heard a voice in the distance and smiled softly. He wore a sunny expression unthinkable for his usual self. Proudly, he said, "She's my daughter."

This is what you wanted, right, Yuunagi?

Interlude: By the Sword

1

"THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING WITH US!"

Right next to Modori River High School in Hyogo prefecture was a large waterway called the Modori River. The path leading up to the school gate was lined with rows of gingko trees, making the trip to school a rather scenic sight indeed. But if you walked the other way down that path for a bit—perhaps fifteen minutes from the school—you'd find Aye-Aye Mart, the convenience store I'd been working at for a little while now.

The way I came to work here is rather simple, actually. An old colleague of mine worked in the area, so I stopped by and happened to see this place was looking for a manager. Then, next thing you knew, here I was. Truth be told, I've never really been the working man type. If I had my way, I wouldn't work a day in my life. But if you don't work, you can't eat. That was why I begrudgingly became the manager of this Aye-Aye Mart and have spent most of my days working ever since.

To my surprise, the job was actually quite interesting. My favorite thing to do was work the register. I hired part-timers, of course, but I still liked to do this a lot myself. You just get to see so many different kinds of customers working the register.

Because it was so close, we got a lot of teachers and students from Modori River High School coming in. Students especially came in droves during the morning hours to buy snacks and lunches, then again after school for more snacks. It was no exaggeration to say students were some of our best customers. Of course, not all teachers and students were alike. People would buy very different things, which made observing them interesting in its own right.

"Smokes."

For instance, this teacher here came by every morning, slammed a newspaper down, and curtly said "Smokes," like I would've memorized what brand he wanted just because he came in every day. But these kinds of conceited customers were rather common, so it vexed me not.

"You're getting that again?"

"Yeah, it's suuuper yummy. You should try some too, Miyaka-chan."

"Uh... I think I'm good."

Up next were two girls, one tall and one who looked like a child. They were high schoolers in the same year, but they seemed like polar opposites personality-wise. The young-looking one bought a new product called "Fresh Cream-stuffed Apple Pie" and some "Gorgeous Milk Candy." The apple pies had only been put on the shelves recently, but they were selling pretty well with female customers. Maybe I could do something more there, business-wise. The tall girl bought some energizing mint gum. I supposed not all young girls liked sweet things.

"Just this."

The next customer was a man in a student uniform. He always came in to purchase lunch before school, but today he was buying "Katoo's Pre-cut Mochi." He'd bought this product plenty of times before, but I just couldn't help but question him every time.

"...Why this?"

"Huh? Like I've said before, it's going to be my lunch. We live in a wonderful era where you can eat isobe mochi whenever you want now."

...This one definitely had screws loose in the head. Just what kind of high schooler ate a bag of mochi for lunch? Incidentally, on days he didn't get mochi, he bought things like instant cup soba and sweet red bean bread. His diet was terrible...not that the health of my customers was any of my business.

"Excuse me, this please."

Up next were more high schoolers, a rather intimate-looking boy-girl pair.

"You've been getting a lot of boxed lunches lately, Natsuki."

"My parents are off on a trip, and Ha-chan's not coming by today."

Our boxed lunches sold out almost every day. Boxed lunches were the savior of people around the world who couldn't cook, student or otherwise.

As you could see, we got all sorts of patrons. The only reason a man like me had been able to hold down a job for so long was probably because these people could be so interesting.

Lately I'd been thinking about how all these customers had their own unique ways of living their lives. The pair of girls who came in, the boy who bought a boxed lunch, even the oddball who ate mochi for a meal...they all had their own worries, joys, and goals. It might not look like they put much thought into what they bought, but they each had their own reasons for choosing what they did. It was a shame I could never delve that deep into their minds, but it was nice to think that I'd grown enough to understand that there were countless lives being lived beyond my own.

That said, there was no real grand takeaway from all of this. If there was any real lesson to be learned, well...I suppose it would be that the life of a convenience store manager was full of small joys as well.

"Welcome!"

Another customer just came in. I wonder what they'll buy.

I put on a business smile and continued going about my work. My busy morning had only just begun.

Year one of the Genji era (1864 AD), March.

It was late at night. Three men swaggered along the street of the samurai neighborhood, the only light coming from the brightness of the stars. The men, young and hot-blooded, had left a meeting only moments ago.

"The damn shogunate's as good as dead! If we samural are ever going to stand up for ourselves, the time is now!"

"Hey, man, be quiet. You never know who might overhear."

The three men were patriotic souls who were willing to take up arms and

overthrow the shogunate for the sake of their country. They had met many times with like-minded samurai who also wanted the borders to open but disagreed with the shogunate's weak diplomatic stance. They hadn't taken direct action yet, but their patriotic spirit was unmistakable. The three walked along, the alcohol they drank fueling their spirited debate, until suddenly they came to a halt.

"Keh, keh keh..."

No moon graced the night sky, only a canopy of stars. Spring had ended, but it did not feel like summer yet; they were still in that transitional period where the season remained ambiguous. As a warm wind kicked up a cloud of dust, an eerie laugh came from a figure standing in the twilight.

The three men tensed up. "Who goes there?!" one said.

The figure slowly approached. Through the dim darkness, they saw he was a man in his early thirties, around five-and-a-half shaku in height with fairly narrow shoulders, indicative of a weak physique. But his neck was abnormally sinewy, meaning he must have put himself through extensive training. The man stared at the three with crazed eyes and a naked blade in his hand.

The moment the three laid eyes on the blade, their tension heightened. One of them bellowed, "What the hell do you think you're doing?!" But as soon as he spoke, his head fell to the ground.

"Was it not clear the moment you saw my sword? You're all much too impure..."

"Wh-what?!" The men hadn't taken their eyes off the mysterious man for a single moment, yet he had closed the distance and slashed before they could even think to react. His behavior was almost supernatural. None of it felt real, but the spreading pool of blood and the decapitated head rolling on the ground were unmistakably genuine.

The three men had encountered something inhuman and unknown.

"You bas—"

They didn't even have time to draw their blades. With one stroke of the sword, the second man was slain.

"Aaa..."

The third followed soon after, managing only the beginning of a scream. In no time at all, the corpses numbered three.

The man looked down at them with emotionless eyes. "Impure, all of you," he murmured lazily.

Having lost interest, he turned his back on the corpses and faded into the dark.

"Keh, keh keh..."

Only eerie laugher remained under the moonless night sky.

Jinya was in the inner part of Kihee, using the tatami-matted bedroom in the restaurant owner and Ofuu's home. He soothed his baby to sleep, then laid out a cotton fabric under her bottom. He stuck a small cloth under her, then wrapped the cotton fabric around to hold the cloth tightly in place.

"You've gotten better," said Naotsugu, Jinya's close friend of ten years now.

"I suppose so," Jinya replied flatly. He didn't stop moving his hands as he talked. His eyes were deathly serious, but he was only changing the baby's diaper. This had been a challenge for him at first, but he'd grown used to the process. After finishing, he picked up his beloved Nomari.

"Da-da."

"What's that, Nomari?"

Now wide awake, the baby stared at her father. He rocked her in his arms a bit, making her smile, and the sight made him smile back.

"Wow, you've really become a father," Ofuu said with a sigh of wonder. "You surprised us when you showed up and announced she was your daughter out of nowhere, though."

"He sure did," Naotsugu agreed.

Perhaps it was strange to see a nearly six-shaku tall, muscular man who made light work of demons play with a baby now.

"I get it. Even I think it's strange for someone like me to be raising a kid," Jinya said. He hadn't told them anything about Yuunagi, just that someone had entrusted him with their daughter under unusual circumstances. He would one day tell Nomari about her mother and how she lied for her sake, but the tale of a mother's love was his to keep secret until then.

"Well, I wouldn't say it's strange, exactly," Naotsugu said. He knew the difficulties of taking care of a baby firsthand. He'd even gotten on his hands and knees before to beg his wife Kinu to teach him how to do things for their own child. Naotsugu understood Jinya was serious about raising Nomari, so he offered Jinya advice frequently.

"Yeah..." Ofuu seemed hung up on something as she looked at Jinya and Nomari. Jinya's relationship with both Naotsugu and Ofuu had changed slightly since he began raising a daughter.

"Hey, Jinya-kun, is now a good time?" The proprietor popped his head in from the restaurant.

"Hm? Oh, sorry to borrow your bedroom."

"Nah, don't worry about that. You, uh, got a 'customer' asking to meet you, though," the restaurant owner said with some hesitation.

"Oh?" Such a thing wasn't rare. A fair number of people came to Kihee looking for the legendary demon-slaying Yasha guardian. "All right, I'll come right now."

"Thanks. And, uh, sorry."

Jinya found it strange that the restaurant owner looked so hesitant, but that didn't stop him from heading to the restaurant with Nomari in his arms.

"Ah, there you are, Jinya-dono. Sorry for visiting unannounced."

Jinya froze the moment he laid eyes on the visitor. Waiting for him was a man who clearly hailed from a high-ranking samurai family. He wore an excellent but modest haori robe, and two swords hung at his waist. He was the Shogunate Faithful, Hatakeyama Yasuhide.

"Hatakeyama-dono..."

"It's been a while, hasn't it? I'm glad you seem to be doing well. Is that child yours?" Yasuhide's relaxed manner of speaking reeked of a facade. It was no wonder the restaurant owner had been so perturbed. A man of his standing wouldn't typically visit a commoner's soba restaurant either. It was strange that he'd come here.

"Why are you here?" Jinya asked.

"Why, there's only one reason anyone would seek out the demon-slaying Yasha." Yasuhide boldly smiled. "There's a demon I'd like you to slay."

"Okada Kiichi, my strongest subordinate. He's done a lot of work for me before, fighting on behalf of my cause."

Naotsugu didn't know Jinya's true identity, so Jinya couldn't have him hearing his conversation with Yasuhide. Since it was past noon, Naotsugu didn't mind heading out when Jinya asked. Ofuu and the restaurant owner made themselves scarce as well, taking a break in the bedroom. Only Jinya and Yasuhide were in the restaurant, seated across from one another.

"Kiichi has never once hesitated to cut someone down, by assassination or otherwise. But he's been making trouble for us these days, killing people beyond just foreigners and our political enemies. He started with political allies as well as ronin, and now he's started killing women and children as well. He's nothing more than a deranged murderer at this point."

Yasuhide spoke eloquently. His emotions remained unreadable, as if he were wearing a noh mask. "I can't let him run rampant any longer. I'm prepared to make sacrifices to protect samurai society. I'll even challenge the very gods themselves if I must. But I cannot approve of senseless slaughter like this. That said, I doubt my words can reach him anymore, and I don't know many people who could stop him by force. That's why I've come to you." He paused there and stared at Jinya. "I'm not asking you to become my sword. I just want to put an end to this before any more innocents die. Can you lend me your aid this once?" He bowed his head to Jinya, a lowly ronin.

Outwardly, Yasuhide *seemed* earnest, but there was—and always had been—something fishy about him. Jinya didn't particularly dislike the man and his

dedication to his way of life, but he did believe they were incompatible as people. Jinya just couldn't accept how Yasuhide used innocent people like pawns.

"...I don't get it. What do you gain from all this?" Jinya asked.

"From these killings?"

"No, from this. What do you gain from coming to me?"

Yasuhide had a demon working for him, as well as a great deal of influence. He had no reason to seek Jinya out and pay him to do this job. There had to be some other reason he was going out of his way.

"Couldn't you have asked that man who works for you to do this? Tsuchiura, I believe his name was?" Jinya said.

"I do trust him, but this case is, well... At any rate, he's an associate of Kiichi's. I can't very well ask him to kill one of his own now, can I?"

Yasuhide's composed reply only increased Jinya's suspicion. Normally it'd be the other way around. If one of your own people was causing trouble, you'd want to eliminate them without letting outsiders learn about it. Only a fool would go around revealing their faction was having problems.

The lack of logic in Yasuhide's words made Jinya glare, but Yasuhide showed no sign that he cared.

"You're as untrustworthy as ever," Jinya said.

"Oh, I'm hurt. So, how about it? Will you take the job?"

Jinya couldn't give a firm answer right away. There may have been a murderer on the loose killing indiscriminately, but he couldn't just play along without all the details. He said, "Let me get one thing straight: Is this murderer really a demon?"

"Yes. He's a lesser demon with the strength of a human and no particular abilities to speak of. However, his skill with the sword could pose a threat even to a superior demon. Your ordinary methods might not work on him."

Kiichi was a demon, so this job did fall within Jinya's usual scope. But hearing that Kiichi was only a lesser demon—that is, one without a unique power—

meant there wasn't much actual incentive to take the job. The biggest problem, however, was that Jinya simply didn't trust Yasuhide as a person.

So, should he take the job or not? Jinya pondered it for a while as the two sat in silence.

Yasuhide finally chimed in with a suggestion. "I see you cannot give me an immediate reply. How about this, then? Three nights from now, I will summon Kiichi to...let's say, Edobashi Bridge. I'll say there's a worthy opponent for him, which will surely entice him to come."

Jinya suspected Yasuhide had planned things to turn out this way from the start. He spoke without a pause to think and even seemed to be enjoying it all.

Yasuhide continued, "If you decide to take the job, then go to Edobashi Bridge that night. If not, then feel free to ignore everything and I'll send Tsuchiura to take care of things instead. Anyway, that's all from me." He stood up and made for the exit without looking back. Jinya watched him go, looking at his narrow shoulders from behind and thinking he had a weak physique yet looked oddly strong.

"Hatakeyama Yasuhide... Just what are you plotting?"

"Why, nothing but a better future for this country, and the samurai, of course."

Yasuhide left those words behind, then departed for good. His steps were confident. In him, Jinya could see the absolute ideological conviction that he wished he possessed himself.

2

IN THE GARDEN of the Hatakeyama family home, there was a white magnolia tree. From March to April, buds covered in silver fur would form on it to bloom facing the sky. Despite the size of the flowers, they would only open slightly, as if they were modest about their great beauty.

"Incredible, isn't it, Tsuchiura?" Seated in a tatami-matted room, Hatakeyama

Yasuhide stared at the naked blade of the short sword in his hands.

"Indeed. Is this...?"

"Yes, it is a Kadono blade." He flicked it lightly with a finger, producing a sonorous reverberation. He seemed to enjoy this greatly, but Tsuchiura listened on with a scowl. "A sword dealer paid me a visit here just the other day and sold me this. I've heard Kadono was home to some of the best blacksmiths in the country, and it seems that was no mere rumor. The sword's design looks simple, but it is actually rather tasteful."

Tsuchiura didn't say a word, merely hanging his head slightly. He was quite familiar with the quality of Kadono tachi blades, but that was precisely why he remained silent.

"Keh, keh keh..." A man with crazed eyes flung the sliding door open, and his eerie voice spoke up in Tsuchiura's stead. "You have a good eye, Hatakeyamadono. There's nothing impure about Kadono blades. They've earned their fame." It was Okada Kiichi, who assassinated political opponents under Yasuhide's orders.

"Kiichi, you've returned."

"I've seen your order through, Hatakeyama-dono. They were far from worthy opponents, but I put up with the tedium for your sake."

"Is that right? You seem to have enjoyed yourself quite a bit before coming here, though?" Yasuhide said challengingly. Kiichi's skill was great, but he was simply too bloodthirsty. Yasuhide had ordered him to assassinate some samurai who were in favor of opening the borders, but Kiichi had also killed people with no connection to the targets. Even worse, he didn't seem ashamed of his actions in the slightest.

Kiichi smiled. "Keh, keh keh. I couldn't help it. I am a killer. Killing is what I am meant to do."

"You're scum." Tsuchiura gritted his teeth with displeasure. The two were both loyal to Yasuhide, but some things just couldn't be overlooked. Tsuchiura glared without even trying to hide his animosity, but Kiichi brushed him off as if he were a child.

"What's the matter, Tsuchiura? Do I displease you?"

"Naturally. Your sick, senseless murders will only bring trouble to Yasuhidesama."

"You're as impure as ever. You bog yourself down with too much excess."

Their back-and-forth couldn't even be called an argument. No matter how much hostility Tsuchiura bore, Kiichi paid him no real mind.

Kiichi continued, "Besides, I get the feeling Hatakeyama-dono is more than happy to take on the trouble I bring him."

Yasuhide neither confirmed nor denied the loaded statement, but the tense atmosphere did relax somewhat. "Anyway, there's something I must ask of you, Kiichi. I need you to kill a certain man."

"Fine by me. Another one of those weak anti-shogunates?"

"No, this time you'll have a worthy opponent. Perhaps you've heard of the Yasha guardian who hunts Edo's demons?"

"...Oh?" That immediately caught Kiichi's attention. The atmosphere in the room seemed to grow thick and unpleasant as his lips curled into a twisted, sinister smile.

Two days had passed since Jinya met Yasuhide. With only one more day left before the arranged date, Jinya was slurping soba at Kihee.

"There, there." Ofuu held Nomari while Jinya ate. Nomari was sound asleep, perhaps more comfortable in the arms of a gentle woman than those of a stoic man.

"Sorry for the trouble," Jinya said.

"Oh, it's no problem at all. It's not like we have any other customers."

Whenever Jinya went demon hunting, Ofuu would look after Nomari. He appreciated her help, but he also felt a little guilty relying on her so much.

The restaurant owner wasn't teasing them like he always did. Thinking that was strange, Jinya peered into the kitchen and saw the man was as pale as a

ghost even though he was right next to the lighted wood stove.

"Dad?" Noticing something was off, Ofuu called out to her father, but he didn't reply. She called out again, but still no answer. Then he wobbled slightly on his feet, seeming like he was about to teeter over. "Dad?!"

"Whoa?! Y-yeah?" He finally responded the third time she called his name, but he remained pale. Jinya knew the man was getting thinner with age, but when he looked at his wrists now, he couldn't believe how slender they had become.

"I've been calling your name for a while now. Did you not hear me?"

"O-oh, sorry. I blanked a bit." His voice lacked vigor. His health had been worse lately. It wasn't something as simple as fatigue getting to him either; old age was creeping in. Of course, one grew older as time passed, but the difference between his current and former self made his present state that much harder to accept.

"Maybe you should rest a bit," Ofuu suggested.

"No, no. How are we supposed to make ends meet if I don't work?" He smiled cheerfully, or at least tried to. Weariness was etched too deep in his face, and his muscles were too stiff. "Hey, I'll be fine, so don't make that face."

"But, Dad..." Ofuu's eyes moistened slightly.

Unable to stand up against that look of hers, he bashfully scratched his head and relented. "Bah... All right, I'll close shop early today. How's that sound?" Though stubborn and willful, he had a weakness for his daughter.

She gave him a big nod. He sighed in exasperation, but he couldn't conceal his happiness. A true father.

Jinya finished his soba as he watched the two, then pulled out some coins. "I'll leave the money here."

"Ah, hold on one second, Jinya-kun." Jinya had been about to take Nomari and leave, but Ofuu didn't hand her over just yet. With some worry, she looked over at her father. "Um..."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Go see him off."

The two had some kind of wordless understanding that outsiders like Jinya didn't grasp. He was a bit baffled, but Ofuu quickly turned to face him with a gentle smile.

"Want to go for a walk together?"

After they left Kihee, she took him to a pottery shop near the Kanda River. He didn't particularly mind coming along, but he didn't know why she'd brought him. He just idly stared at the various things on display while she carefully examined different containers.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, holding out a smallish rice bowl.

"It's all right, I guess," he said. He didn't really understand what made a bowl good or bad, so he kept his response vague.

"Da-da."

"What's that, Nomari?"

Nomari fussed a bit in his arms, smiling innocently. Despite all his brusqueness, Jinya couldn't help but find his daughter adorable.

"Heh heh, I see not even you can stand up to your daughter," Ofuu said.

"That's nothing to tease me about."

"Who said I was teasing?" With her heart warmed by the father-daughter interaction, she returned to choosing a bowl, carefully picking all the options up and examining them closely. "Oh, what about this one?" She showed him a second bowl and asked for his opinion again. This was another smallish one, but with a deeper and wider bottom.

"I'm not really sure what to make of it. Actually, I don't even know what you need it for."

"It's going to be Nomari-chan's bowl. The ones in our restaurant are too big for her."

Jinya was surprised, especially because Ofuu said it so casually.

She continued, "With a bowl like this, we can make soba for Nomari-chan.

We'll probably need it in another year or two... You don't mind, do you?"

"No, that's a wonderful idea. I hadn't even thought about it. Thank you."

"This is the least I can do for one of our regulars." She gave a sigh of relief and smiled. "I'll go buy this, then."

He was about to offer to pay, but she disappeared into the back before he could get a word in. He found himself smiling without meaning to. This was clearly beyond what one did for a mere regular customer. He felt truly grateful she would do this for his daughter. Perhaps it was a sign he was doing all right as a father.

"Thanks for tagging along with me."

"Not at all. If anything, I should be thanking you for doing this for Nomari."

Ofuu ended up paying for the bowl herself. The two walked the path back together, side by side and baby in his arms. Perhaps the people who saw them thought they had a different kind of relationship.

"Say, would you be up for looking around a bit?" Ofuu stepped ahead of him, then turned around. A subdued smile graced her face.

Jinya nodded, and she happily led the way.

The streets of Edo were so familiar to him now. They window-shopped as they strolled along, and evening came before they knew it. The sun slowly melted into the horizon, and laughter resounded in the distance, probably young shop boys on their way home from work. The din of the town was there, but it lacked the vigor of the early afternoon. The evening and all of its noise felt terribly fleeting somehow. Feeling his spirits dampen ever so slightly, Jinya frowned. The two continued to walk, gazing at Edo as it drifted by.

They crossed the Aramebashi Bridge, then walked alongside the Kanda River—which was neatly maintained like a moat—before reaching a line of willows surrounded by thickly grown grass. At a closer look, these clearly were no normal willows. On their drooping branches were small, white, five-petaled flowers.

"It's been a while since I've come here." Ofuu stopped beside one of the snow

willows and gracefully touched one of its blossoms.

Snow willows looked like normal willows at first glance, but they were actually a kind of cherry blossom tree. The way their white flowers bloomed so closely together on a single branch resembled snowflakes piling atop one another.

"Time flies. It's hard to believe it's already their season to bloom," Jinya said.

"I know. And they've bloomed so beautifully this year too."

The white flowers bathed in the evening glow. The two had talked under these flowers before.

Some things could never change, but Jinya could now allow himself to live slowly from time to time, and that was surely thanks to Ofuu. He was grateful to her, but he also lamented the parts of him that couldn't change.

"I'm glad we made this little detour," she said.

"Me too, but...is it okay for you to not be by your father's side?"

"It's fine. It's not like he's sick or anything."

He could tell she was only hiding her worry. They'd known each other long enough for him to grasp that much. In truth, she wanted to go to her father's side at that very moment, but she made no effort to part from the snow willow.

"Besides, I'm more worried about you, Jinya-kun." She smiled wryly. One had to wonder why women tended to treat men like children at times. The face she made was one an older sister would make toward her younger brother. Ofuu would always care for his clumsy, awkward self. How kind she was.

"You're...worried about me?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help but eavesdrop," she said hesitantly. She'd overheard Jinya's discussion with Yasuhide, and his lack of a clear decision on whether he'd take the job seemed to have made her worried about him. "Is there a reason why you weren't sure?"

He didn't mind her asking one bit. He trusted her enough to open up about how he felt. "No, I was just...perplexed." He hadn't wavered on Yasuhide's request out of hesitation, but he didn't really know how to explain why he had wavered either. "I can't ignore a murderer who kills indiscriminately, even if

Hatakeyama Yasuhide only wants me stop them as part of a plot. But..."

He'd killed demons, devoured them, and made their strength his own. That was how he'd lived so far, and that was how he would live from here on out. But at some point in time, he had gained more things to live for than just that. "This request doesn't have much value as far as my goal is concerned, and yet I instinctively wanted to accept it simply so I could stop a murderer. That bewildered me, so I couldn't say yes. Even now, I'm still confused about why I would think such a thing."

What if the murderer were to kill Ofuu? What if he were to kill the restaurant owner or Naotsugu or Nomari? What if those two he no longer saw were killed without him knowing? Jinya had done so many vicious things already for the sake of his goal, but the mere thought of an unpleasant possibility made him forget the hundred-something-year journey that lay ahead of him.

He thought he had abandoned such attachments, but the worry welling up inside wouldn't let him choose the option he so clearly could see was best.

"Maybe I've grown weak."

His wish to become stronger was all he had, yet he could no longer single-mindedly pursue that obsession like he once did. He gritted his teeth hard. Frustration and mortification made his shoulders tremble.

"Ha ha." Ofuu laughed, but there was no ill will in her voice. The look on her face was that of a mother finding something too charming to not smile.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Sorry, but you're just too cute not to, you know?" From her tone alone, one would think she was mocking him. But she looked so gentle, so he voiced no complaint. "I feel like there's nothing I can say to you now that you'll accept. But please, don't forget what you call weakness now. I just know that one day a time will come when you'll treasure it dearly."

She looked radiant, like a flower in bloom. Her meaning was lost on him, so he could only stare at her in a daze.

Ofuu was beautiful next to the snow willows and in the evening light. Perhaps he wasn't dazed so much as entranced by her.

He thought back to that unforgettable night sky in his memories, the one from the moment it all began. Its beauty was rivaled by the evening sky he saw now, and that made him tear up slightly. But surely it was just the blinding orange glow stinging his eyes.

The evening eventually came to an end, and the day Yasuhide had arranged arrived.

3

O_{F ALL THE BRIDGES} spanning the Kanda River, Edobashi Bridge was among the biggest.

The sun had already set, so the only light came from the brightness of the moon and stars. The clamor of daytime was gone, leaving only the soft murmurings of the moonlight-reflecting river to fill the soundless void. Not a soul was in sight. Jinya couldn't have asked for a better stage.

He had already waited at the center of the bridge for a full koku. Finally, the figure of a man with crazed eyes emerged from the darkness. At his hip was a sword encased in an iron scabbard. The way he walked looked careless, but he left no opening in his stride. The fundamentals of all martial arts began with one's gait, so his strength was clear just from his perfectly centered walk. He came to a stop before Jinya and smirked.

There was something unsettling about his expression. It contained malice, sharp and bare like an unsheathed blade. Jinya knew beyond a doubt that this was the murderer of whom he'd been told.

"I take it you're Okada Kiichi?" Jinya asked. He placed his hand on Yarai and popped the blade from the mouth of its scabbard, slightly easing his weight onto his left leg as he did so.

"Indeed I am. And you are ...?"

"Jinya, a ronin of Fukagawa. I hereby request a duel."

"My, how polite of you."

Their exchange of words was nothing more than a charade. They were both already oozing with intent to kill. Their deathmatch had begun before they even exchanged names.

"Well, I see no reason to decline your request for a duel..."

The two carefully judged the distance between them, the atmosphere on the bridge as tense as could be. Time seemed to stop for an eternity, but in fact their stare-down only lasted a moment.

Kiichi's body seemed to blur as he suddenly began to close the distance. He dashed forward, not letting his momentum drop and reaching his top speed with a single step. Closing in fast, he swung his blade toward Jinya's neck. For a lesser demon, his skill was incredible. He was fast enough that a normal person would be killed without even understanding what had happened, but Jinya had defended himself from swift attacks more times than he could count. He blocked the incoming horizontal slash with Yarai, then swept his sword downward. With Kiichi now defenseless, Jinya unleashed a diagonal slash at him.

"Oho. Not bad." Kiichi had thought he would finish the battle with his first strike. Seeing Jinya actually manage to block and counterattack made him smile gleefully. He leaned back and put his weight on his left foot, thereby dodging Jinya's sword with the slightest possible movement. But he didn't stop there, counterattacking as well with an upward motion of his sword.

Jinya took a step back and locked his blade with Kiichi's. He was certain he would win in a contest of strength, and sure enough, he easily forced Kiichi's sword away.

But Kiichi didn't let that stop him. Without hesitation, he deftly parried Jinya's follow-up attack and closed the distance between them. As he stepped in, he thrust his sword forward at Jinya's heart.

Kiichi's movements were fast... No, perhaps *perfect*. He made no wasted movements while dodging or correcting his stance, and he left a minimal opening when he moved into his thrust. Kiichi himself may have been even sharper and better tempered than the sword he wielded. His skills and body were honed to perfection, giving his incoming thrust the illusion of being

preposterously fast.

Jinya stepped back with his left foot and tried to intercept the attack.

"And yet you are impure."

But the tip of Kiichi's sword *leapt*, the strike suddenly changing from a thrust at Jinya's heart to a gouge at his neck.

Jinya couldn't dodge fast enough. He tried to force his upper body to the side, not caring about the awkward position it left him in, but the sword still nicked the flesh of his neck and the iron smell of blood filled his nose.

He had reacted too late due to the sheer smoothness of the change in the sword's trajectory. The shift in attack had been natural, as though Kiichi had planned it from the start. There was so little wasted movement in the man's actions that it made a shiver run down Jinya's spine.

And Kiichi's attacks didn't end there, as his extended sword persistently followed up by slashing at Jinya's neck. But if something like that were enough to kill Jinya, his journey would have ended in death long ago. With his stance still unstable, he used one arm to sweep his sword downward. Although he was easily seen through and his sword only struck air, that was fine in itself. The momentum of Jinya's swing was enough to force himself back on balance. Kiichi had to pull his sword back, creating a slight space between the two. Jinya took advantage of this to lower himself and ram his left shoulder into Kiichi's solar plexus.

But yet again, he only struck air.

Jinya had been sure he had the man. His shoulder blow was enough to stun superior demons, so it stood to reason that a man with a smaller build like Kiichi couldn't possibly endure it. That was why he had unleashed it, and his timing was perfect too. But the strike ended up half a step short.

Jinya saw the cocky expression on Kiichi's gloating face and immediately understood what had happened. His opponent had read him like a book.

Leisurely, Kiichi stepped back, putting distance between them before laughing. "Keh, keh keh. I see now. You're strong. Your body can far outperform my own...but you are too impure."

Kiichi was strong. Yasuhide had claimed his skill with the sword allowed him to rival a superior demon, and that seemed to be no exaggeration. Jinya had gained plenty of experience in his previous battles and was fairly confident in his own skills, but Kiichi was far and away superior when it came to swordplay. In a normal duel of swords, Jinya would lose ten times out of ten.

But this was no normal duel of swords.

With *Dart*, Jinya sprang forth, closing the distance faster than humanly possible, then struck without killing his momentum. His blade descended on Kiichi's cranium with more strength than any man could hope to unleash.

"You use up too much strength."

It wouldn't be fair to call Jinya's swing a slash; it was more of a crude bash. But it would still kill if it made contact, and even if Kiichi somehow managed to intercept the strike, the force of the blow would crush him underneath.

But Kiichi didn't try to intercept the strike. Instead, he kept his movements subtle and deliberate, as if he were handling fine glasswork, and gently parried the attack. He brushed up against the flat of Jinya's sword and changed its trajectory slightly, then slid into the safe space that he'd created. With his feet still shuffling forward, he repositioned his elbows and moved into an upward diagonal slash.

"You waste too much movement."

From a parry to a dodge to an attack while advancing forward, Kiichi's movements flowed like water, wasting nothing along the way.

"And your spirit is disturbed."

He had grasped Jinya's brief disturbance.

Jinya hurriedly twisted his body, but he couldn't completely dodge. The blade gouged into his side as he moved past Kiichi. His wound felt like fire. The strike didn't reach his organs, but flesh had been cut away. His clothes were soaked in red.

Another follow-up attack swiftly approached, and Jinya hurriedly blocked it. He then used *Dart* again, this time to make distance from Kiichi.

"You're impure, so terribly impure. You have too much waste, both in body and in mind." Kiichi stood unguarded, seemingly uncaring about any attack Jinya could make at all.

From their exchange just now, Jinya could tell Kiichi's physical abilities were not that high. For a demon, his strength was just above the middle of the pack at best. He was still very much within human limits. And yet, he was strong. Jinya had him beat in physical strength and speed, and he even possessed demon powers while Kiichi did not. But Kiichi was simply that much better than him with the sword. The man had clearly cultivated his swordsmanship to an absurd degree, training without pause for years on end. Diligence was Okada Kiichi's strength.

"...Why do you kill?" Jinya asked. He wasn't reprimanding the man; he genuinely wanted to hear his answer. "When I first heard you were a murderer, I envisioned you as some barbaric monster, but instead I find a man who is faithful to the blade. You must have trained for years to reach the level you're at, I'm sure. Tell me then, how can a man who pursues swordsmanship so wholeheartedly enjoy senseless killing?"

The corners of Kiichi's mouth rose to form a twisted, scornful smile. "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." He spoke softly, like he was trying to explain something to a child. "To forge hardy steel, one needs to remove all impurities. To create delicious alcohol, one needs clear water. Are we no different?" He spoke decisively, as though certain in his belief. "Waste clouds our purity, so we need to do away with it." He sneered, his ghastly smile bringing to mind the smell of blood. "I was born a samurai, and so I was given a sword and trained to use it. But I was told not to kill. Isn't that strange? If you take up a sword, it should be to kill—that is the logical conclusion. That is what a sword is for. That is what our training is for... Yes, I believe the first man I killed was my swordmaster. I've continued to kill since then, and I eventually realized something: Only samurai are granted swords, but the samurai way of life prevents us from killing."

There were some parts Jinya could understand, but he didn't agree with Kiichi's worldview. That said, Kiichi wasn't crazy. He had his own logic worked

out, and he killed in accordance with it. He truly believed swords were meant for killing and was putting that belief into practice, nothing more.

"Loyalty, honor, faith, dignity, morality...all are worthless. People grow impure precisely because they let those things cloud their blade. A sword is meant to cut. The beliefs of the samurai only spoil the purpose of one's sword. That's why I've cut down my family, as well as my former samurai self."

Jinya felt like he had a grasp of Kiichi now. He was a man with no goals whatsoever. Forget things like protecting the shogunate or taking a side on the border issue; he wasn't even interested in the future or the past, his life or his death. If he had one aim to speak of at all, it was to remain who he was until his very last moments. He was a man who lived by the sword, and he killed people to prove that such a way of life had meaning. For him, living without dishonoring the person he had been up until now was his greatest, and only, pride.

"I've cut down my swordmaster, strangers, my family, my relatives, even my friends. I've killed so many that I don't even remember them all. Keh, keh keh. And as it turns out, going so far renders one inhuman. Before I knew it, I had become a demon."

A demon born not from negative emotions but from a pursuit taken to its extreme.

Kiichi sneered. "You asked me why I killed. Allow me to answer you: I've abandoned my humanity, become a demon, and killed so many...all to live truer to the sword. I live by the sword, and so a life devoted to killing gives my life meaning."

He only had one wish: to be able to live by the sword. Swords were made to kill, so he would kill. Swordsmanship was developed in order to kill more efficiently, so he would use it to kill more efficiently. It didn't matter whether his victims were man or demon, samurai or commoner, or even woman or child; so long as he lived by the sword, he would kill. This way of life, devoid of ethics or morals, was everything to Kiichi.

"To live by the sword is to become the sword."

His words shocked Jinya deeply. Jinya narrowed his eyes, blinded by the

radiance of the man he faced.

Okada Kiichi was the embodiment of all Jinya's ideals.

Ever since the day Suzune declared she would bring ruin to all of mankind, an ambiguous hatred had dwelled inside Jinya. He began a journey in search of nothing but power, hoping that his newfound strength would one day remove all doubt about why he wielded his blade.

"I...see."

But at some point along the way, he had become burdened by excess things. He claimed he was hellbent on stopping the Demon God, but his heart had wavered to the point where he was partaking in a side digression like this duel, one where he could gain no strength from winning. Jinya wanted to be like Kiichi. He so desperately wished he could abandon everything in pursuit of his one goal.

"Is that all?" Kiichi asked.

"Yeah... Let me just say one last thing, though. I find you...incredible. Enviable, even." Jinya meant it, and yet part of him still disagreed with the man. "Which is why we must continue."

"Oh?"

Still bleeding from his side, Jinya took up a stance with his sword held to his side and pointed behind him.

The scorn in Kiichi's face had disappeared at some point, replaced by a ghastly smile. "Aren't you going to run?"

"Of course not. After hearing you out, I want to cut you down all the more."

Jinya wondered why that was, but he knew the reason deep down. Jinya saw value in the impurities Kiichi scorned.

He'd been taught the names of flowers, shared drinks with friends, tried making soba—he'd even learned how to change diapers. These were all worthless things, waste that diminished the purity of his true goal. But he held them all dear.

And so he would not run.

If Jinya was weaker with the sword, then he could just turn into a demon and use his powers to win, but he willingly chose not to. He wanted to know just how he compared to his once-ideal form now that he was, as Kiichi put it, impure.

"Those are some rather pure words. You have my attention." For the first time, Kiichi took up a stance. His position was nearly orthodox with his sword held in front, the only break from the standard being the slight left slant of the tip.

Finally, the man was treating Jinya like a proper opponent.

The air seemed to stagnate. Jinya held his breath. His throat felt like it was filled with sand.

The two stared one another down, not moving in the slightest. They were not searching for openings, however, but trying to amass strength in their own swords. Only one thought ran through their minds: *kill*.

They shuffled their feet ever so slightly, nearing one another almost imperceptibly.

The silence seemed to stretch on forever.

A cold night wind blew between them, and it became the signal to start.

Jinya sprung forth from his state of rest. He launched his battle-hardened body forward, moving without any excess strength. Meanwhile, Kiichi did the same, reaching his top speed with a single step. They relied not on the strength of their flesh, but on the bodily control their technique gave them. Though they seemed to make the same movements, the nuance behind their actions was subtly different. The distance between them approached zero in a flash, and they both swung with all they had.

"Haaaah!"

"Haaap!"

The two demons let out shouts as they converged to one point. They flashed past one another and stood still as silence returned.

Then, one fell to his knees.

"Agh...gh..."

Blood sprayed a second later. His chest was sliced open, revealing the flesh under his skin.

The two had both poured their souls into their strike. One man chose to live by the sword. The other desired strength but could not commit as the other had. Neither could be said to have chosen a path superior to the other's; they simply valued different things. No one could judge them, not even themselves. But there had to be a victor, nonetheless.

The one left standing swung his sword to remove the blood, then slid it into its iron scabbard. "Keh, keh keh. Wonderful. I haven't seen such a magnificent sword in a long time."

The one on his knees, unmoving, was Jinya. He'd given it his all, but his all wasn't enough.

He coughed up blood. The wound wasn't deep enough to kill him, but he was defenseless, unable to move. The outcome of their duel was clear, and yet he couldn't just roll over and let himself be killed. He still had his goal to achieve. He had to struggle until his last breath, no matter how unsightly it made him seem.

He tried to put strength into his limbs, but he couldn't stand. And yet, no matter how much time passed, Kiichi didn't follow up with a new attack. Jinya lifted his head in confusion, only to see that Kiichi had his back turned and was walking away.

"Where...are you going...?" Jinya called out. With his breath ragged, he forced himself onto his feet by propping himself up with his scabbard. There was no anger in his voice, only genuine confusion as to why he'd been spared. "You've...won. Why not...finish me off?"

"I have not won. A battle of swords is a clash where one's life is at stake. The fact that we are both alive means no victor has emerged. Such a result is rather impure, but...the fact remains that you *did* cut me."

Kiichi turned to face Jinya and raised his arm. The sleeve of his robe was sliced above the elbow. He rolled it up to reveal a cut, not even two sun in length.

"Your sword is mired in impurity, yet it remains serene. Fighting against such a contradiction was enjoyable." Kiichi had a smile on his face, not a sneer. The crazy-eyed, smallish man seemed happy to have been cut. "Your life is yours to keep for now."

Kiichi was pure. The only things on his mind were swords, to the extent that he became a demon because of them. Demons were creatures that couldn't escape the path they chose for themselves, and so Kiichi could not tear himself away from the path of the sword, not that he would ever want to.

"Let us meet again someday, so you can try and show me the meaning behind your impure blade once more."

With a creepy smile, the man laughed from the bottom of his heart and left.

Jinya had failed to carry out Yasuhide's request, and a murderer was back on the streets. This was a defeat in every sense of the word, and yet his heart was as light as a feather.

He lay down on his back in the middle of the bridge and looked up at the night sky. He gazed at the twinkling stars and the pale moon, thinking of the duel he'd just fought as well as the night he'd shared under the snow willows.

"Heh, heh heh... Ha ha ha..."

He couldn't help but laugh. He'd lost, and yet he was happy that his impure self had managed to injure his idealized persona. That tiny wound he'd inflicted proved that the way he'd lived so far hadn't been meaningless.

"What do you know? I had it in me after all."

Overjoyed that he'd proven himself with his own hands, he smiled despite his wounds.

September 2009

It was a little past five, so students on their way home from clubs would start pouring in en masse any minute.

"Good afternoon, Manager." One of my part-timers who'd started working here around the start of summer vacation, a first-year at Modori River High

School, greeted me.

"Oh, Miyaka-kun. I see you're early today."

"That was the plan."

Her long hair had a slight brown tint, and her looks drew in some male students with hopes of talking to her. She was good help for the store—though I couldn't help but wonder if all the girls these days were getting more uncouth than they were before... *No, surely it's just her.*

She was here to take over the register for me, so I counted the cash. It wasn't even a single yen off from the balance. *Another job well done, if I do say so myself.*

I asked, "Could you restock the shelves?"

"On it."

She seemed like she'd be a cheeky brat, but she was actually a very nononsense, hard-working person. Her brusqueness aside, she was polite and carried herself quite unlike a youngster. *Now if only the other part-timers would learn from her example...*

"Oh, welco...ugh." A group of customers came in while she was stocking the shelves, so she started to greet them with a smile but froze up midway.

"Miyaka-chaaan! I'm here to mess around!"

"We'll be in your hair a bit."

It was a short, young-looking girl and a stern-faced man—a strange combination indeed. They both wore Modori River High School uniforms, so they were presumably friends...though I had a hard time believing that man was really their friend.

"Aw, jeez, you guys are embarrassing me... You two really do get along well, though, don't you?" Miyaka greeted her class friends with bewilderment, then gave them a somewhat suspicious look over how close they seemed. The pair didn't look disconcerted by her suspicion.

"Eheh heh, well, I guess so! We are old friends, after all!" the short girl said.

"Really now?" Miyaka replied.

"Oh yeah! Like, from more than a hundred years ago!"

"Kaoru, was there supposed to be some kind of punchline somewhere in there?"

"What? No! I'm being serious!" The girl called Kaoru puffed up her cheeks.

They say three's a crowd, but these two were quite the lively duo all by themselves. The man left them to their own devices and began looking around the store, eventually bringing a massive bottle of Japanese liquor up to me at the register.

"Did you find everything all right today?" I said, giving the textbook-standard greeting.

The man made a tired sigh and said, "...I'll never get used to hearing you speak formally..." This kind of exchange was a regular thing for us.

"Very well, then. How about I speak freely?"

"Please do, for my sake."

I scanned the liquor. He might have been wearing a student uniform, but I knew he was above the legal drinking age.

"You should really think twice about buying alcohol in a student uniform, you know."

"You're not wrong. None of the other places will sell to me when I look like this."

Regulations on drinking had become stricter lately. Being a high schooler had its drawbacks.

I glanced at the girls chatting over by the magazine section near the window, then looked back at the man in front of me. "I assume high school life is going well for you?"

"It might be. What about you? You seem right at home working as the manager."

"I only took this job to make ends meet, but it does have its joys. I don't

dislike working here."

The work of a convenience store manager was surprisingly interesting. I could observe different kinds of customers by working the register, and I'd gained the perspective to imagine many different ways of life by doing so. I'd grown fond of the position.

I continued, "But in the end, it is all superfluous. I remain true to myself now, just as I did then."

Time has passed and power has changed hands, but I haven't abandoned the sword. I may have grown accustomed to my life as a convenience store manager, but I can part from it whenever I want. I can enjoy my current life precisely because it is not my true calling but a way to kill time.

"And you? Have you discovered the meaning behind your impure sword?"

A sword should be without impurity, but I once dueled against a Yasha guardian in Edo who was trying to live by the sword while harboring impurity. I was interested in the man's different way of life and wanted to see what end he'd meet, but I failed to kill him. Much time had passed for us both, but now I could have the answer I'd been waiting for.

After a brief silence, the man quietly began to speak. "You remain my ideal form now, as you were then."

He looked to the side and saw the two girls giggling blithely. Even now, he clouded himself with impurity, and yet his relaxed shoulders seemed to express a confidence he'd lacked before.

"I once longed to be able to abandon everything for one ultimate pursuit. I thought such a way of being was unbelievably pure."

A distant look formed in his eyes. The words this stern-faced man strung together were soft.

"But I've lived a long life since then. I've lost much, but small things have remained with me. My experiences have changed who I am. Yes, every time my burdens make me waver, I remember that I am impure... But I do not consider those burdens to be superfluous or wasteful. My outlook has changed."

His response was too vague to be a true answer, but I was more than happy with it. More than a hundred years had passed, but he remained the same impure man he once was. He would certainly be crushed to death under the weight of his own burdens.

He said, "Until next time, I suppose. You should try stopping to smell the roses yourself sometime. You might just be surprised by what happens."

The fool had grown weaker, but he stood taller than he did before. He was a walking contradiction. I found that quite amusing, enough to want to exchange blows with him once more.

"...You know the manager?" Miyaka finished restocking the shelves and returned to the register. It must've seemed like we were talking familiarly, as she gave us quite a quizzical look.

"He's an old acquaintance," the man said.

"Ah yes, we do go a long way back," I followed up. It was technically true.

Miyaka didn't seem convinced.

"Ready to go, Asagao?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Later, Miyaka-chan!"

"Right, see you tomorrow..." Miyaka replied, still a bit confused.

The man began to leave with the young-looking girl. Come to think of it, the girl hadn't bought anything. She really had just come to mess around, it seemed.

"Oh, I forgot just one thing." In contrast to our duel long ago, this time Jinya was the one to stop and look back as he walked away. He smiled in a bold yet relaxed way that seemed to boast victory. "An impure sword makes for a dull blade, that much I'll admit. But my dulled blade has helped me past some obstacles without needing to kill. *That* is the meaning behind my impure sword."

After revealing the answer he'd reached at the end of his dizzyingly long journey, the man turned to leave, in earnest this time.

The sword exists to kill, and yet he was proud to have avoided killing. What an

impure man he was.

But perhaps that too was a path true to the sword. At least, the certainty and conviction in his steps made it seem that way.

"... What was that all about?" Miyaka said, furrowing her brows.

In stark contrast to her, my face—which once went by the name of Okada Kiichi—was the picture of delight. When we'd last dueled, the man could only manage a scratch on me, but he had since grown stronger in his own way. The passage of time was truly a wonder.

The corners of my lips rose as I compared the man from my memories with what I was seeing now. I watched the man once known as the Yasha guardian walk away and...

"Keh, keh keh..."

...Couldn't help but laugh.

Intermission: A Chat Over Tea

 $Y_{\text{EAR THREE}}$ of the Keio era (1867 AD), early autumn.

"Howdy. It's been a while since we last met, eh? Have you been well?"

Jinya received an unexpected visitor at his cheap row house room: Akitsu Somegorou the Third, a craftsman as well as an artifact spirit user who hunted demons. This demon hunter visited Jinya, a demon, with a grin on his face.

"What do you want?"

"Oh, c'mon, don't be a stranger. You don't got something against me, d'ya?"

"No, I just want to hear what you came for."

Somegorou lived in Kyoto, which was located far away from Edo. His visit likely meant that something was going on.

"Well, I was thinking we could have tea," Somegorou said.

"Tea? You came all the way from Kyoto just for tea?"

"That's right."

Jinya was flummoxed by how nonchalantly the man affirmed it. He was still a bit wary, but at least it sounded like nothing big enough for him to worry about was happening.

"C'mon, let me in already, why don't you?" Without even waiting for a response, Somegorou practically forced his way into the room. He sat himself down, took a look around, and then froze with a heavy frown. "So, you've finally taken to kidnapping, eh, demon?"

His gaze fell on Nomari. Come to think of it, she hadn't been around yet when Jinya had last met the man. It seemed there had been a misunderstanding of sorts.

"That's my daughter," Jinya clarified.

"Huh? Your daughter..." Seeing Jinya unashamedly make such a claim seemed to bewilder Somegorou somewhat, but he didn't reject the idea outright. He mulled it over a bit before nodding to himself, seeming to accept that their strange bond was possible. With a plastered-on smile, he said, "Pardon me, dearie. I'll be talking to your papa a bit if that's all right."

Nomari bowed and gave a brief greeting, then moved out of their way and sat in a corner.

"Hey, isn't she way too polite to be your kid?"

"She is, and I'm proud of that."

Seeing Jinya say something so uncharacteristic made Somegorou's stiff smile ease a bit, as though he saw a true father in him. After a pause, Somegorou took some sort of lacquerware out of his luggage.

"What's this?"

"It's a tea container. Pretty nicely made, isn't it?"

Tea containers contained powdered tea and were used in tea ceremonies, which meant a commoner would likely never use one. There were many types of tea containers, but the one Somegorou brought was flat at the top and twice as long as it was tall. It had a beautiful hydrangea drawn in gold dust on it and was clearly a high-end item.

"But this piece isn't too popular with folks, and it just gathers dust."

"Because of the hydrangea, I take it." Jinya didn't have an eye for appraisal, but he did know about flowers thanks to Ofuu. Hydrangeas changed color depending on the soil they were planted in, so they were often linked with treachery and fickleness as well as infidelity. This meant they were not among the most popular flowers.

"It's really a good tea container, though. It'd be a real shame for it not to get at least one chance to shine. That's why I was thinking I'd have you make us some tea with it." Without even a bit of hesitation, Somegorou revealed the reason why he'd come all the way from Kyoto: to have Jinya make him tea. The lack of shame in his request was almost refreshing. Still, there was an underlying problem that needed to be addressed.

"But I don't know how to make tea." Jinya had been born in Edo, but he grew up in a village out in the mountains. He wasn't anywhere near sophisticated enough to know how to do a tea ceremony, let alone make tea itself. The only tea he drank was from restaurants, and that was just a cheap type made from boiled, non-powdered leaves.

"Oh, my mistake. Hm, but I'm not refined enough to be familiar with tea ceremonies either." Somegorou laughed, not seeming let down in the slightest. He hadn't given up, however. "Do you know anyone who might?" he asked.

"Well... I suppose I do."

"Great! We can chat over tea after all, it seems. There's some demon talk and ghost stuff I've been wanting to discuss."

The man let out an exaggerated roar of laughter. Dumbfounded, Jinya felt his shoulders deflate.

After entrusting Nomari to Ofuu, Jinya and Somegorou headed to the Miura family home over in the southern samurai residential area.

"Tea? I know the basics, I suppose."

Knowing how to perform a tea ceremony was a must for a samurai. Jinya had guessed Naotsugu might be familiar with it, and he was right. They gave him a general idea of what was going on, and he was surprisingly on board.

"We can't thank you enough, Samurai-sama," Somegorou said.

"You're Akitsu-dono, correct? It's no problem at all. I don't mind having tea myself every now and then."

Perhaps because Naotsugu was a samurai whom he was meeting for the first time, Somegorou was more humble than usual. Naotsugu was ultimately shouldered with all the tea-making responsibilities, but that couldn't really be helped. They moved to a room in the Miura family home and began a tea ceremony for just the three of them. As it was a sudden event, there were no flowers for decoration or tea snacks arranged. Other than the hydrangea tea container Somegorou asked to be used, the ceremony was bare-bones.

"Sorry, but the two of us have never partaken in a tea ceremony before. Please forgive any breach in etiquette from us," Jinya said.

"Oh, don't worry. Fussing over etiquette detracts from the true spirit of the tea ceremony. Please, just relax and enjoy yourselves."

Tea ceremonies generally began with everyone bowing, but Naotsugu insisted they didn't have to, as they were doing a wabi-cha-style tea ceremony, which was known for favoring fulfillment through pleasant simplicity over luxury. This would likely allow Jinya and Somegorou to enjoy themselves and not have to act stiff.

"I shall begin, then. One moment, please." Naotsugu took some fine powder out of the hydrangea tea container and put it in a teacup, poured hot water into the cup with a ladle, then whisked the tea and made it foam. His movements were those of an expert. The finished tea was placed in front of Jinya first. "Here you are," said Naotsugu.

Jinya took a sip of the tea, which was made less bitter than usual to make up for the lack of tea snacks. He didn't know if there was a correct, formal response to provide, so he just gave his honest impression. "It's good."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Naotsugu got to work on making a new cup for Somegorou. Jinya asked if they weren't going to pass one cup around, which he'd heard was the norm; Naotsugu answered that they were going to each get their own cup, as the focus this time was on chatting.

"Here you are, Akitsu-dono."

"Thank you very much. You truly are a kind man to let us into your own home and serve us tea like this, Samurai-sama."

Naotsugu didn't mind their sudden visit and welcomed them even though he'd never met Somegorou before. His refusal to lord his samurai status over them must've made him seem magnanimous to Somegorou. Jinya was a little surprised as well. He knew Naotsugu had changed, but seeing him this flexible with himself was unexpected.

"Not at all. Any friend of Jin-dono is a friend of mine. Feel free to make

yourself at home. You can even sit cross-legged if you'd like."

"Aha ha ha! Oh, I couldn't bring myself to go *that* far." Somegorou happily accepted his teacup and loudly took a sip, savoring the taste. "Mmm, it's good. It feels like the container makes it taste even better."

"It certainly is a nicely crafted piece," Naotsugu said.

"You have a good eye, I see. This here is a masterpiece made by a long-gone craftsman."

Jinya watched the two talk, his mind elsewhere. Naotsugu noticed his distraction and asked, "Is something wrong, Jin-dono?"

"No, it's just...I wouldn't really say Somegorou is a friend of mine." Jinya had to wonder whether he truly deserved to be trusted so much by Naotsugu when he hid his true self from him. His passing doubt bled into his words a little.

"Hey, now that's just plain rude!" Somegorou complained. He looked between Jinya and Naotsugu, perhaps guessing at Jinya's thoughts. "You two sure look like close friends, though."

"I'm glad it seems that way. Jin-dono is definitely my oldest friend."

"Is that right? But this guy's a commoner, y'know? Is it all right for you to be saying something like that?"

"It would be unfair of me to claim status is irrelevant when I'm enjoying the benefits of being a samurai, but I still do treasure the bond I have with him."

Naotsugu likely didn't read much into Somegorou's probing words, but his answer made Jinya feel a mix of emotions.

Jinya said, "As do I. I hope this bond can remain like this."

"Indeed."

Jinya washed down his doubts with the tea. The light, bitter taste made a pleasant pairing with the scent. This idea of Somegorou's had certainly come out of the blue, but it had been a good one.

[&]quot;Ah, that was nice. Thank you for making us tea."

"It was my pleasure. I greatly enjoyed it."

The tea ceremony came to an end, and the two left the estate behind. Even though he'd been imposed on, Naotsugu wore a sunny expression as they parted.

"You've got yourself a nice friend," Somegorou said. There was hidden meaning in his words, but Jinya could tell he was being genuine, not teasing. He knew Somegorou wasn't a mean-spirited person.

"I suppose I do," Jinya replied. "Now then, what are you really here for?"

"I already told you, didn't I? To drink tea and talk. We had our tea, and our chitchat is finished. Now it's time to talk about demons." The look in his eyes finally turned sharp. This was the face of Akitsu Somegorou the demon hunter, not the craftsman. "There's been a lot of unrest as of late. The folks at the top have their hands full dealing with our little foreign guests, and that means Kyoto's been swarming with all kinds of spirits."

The country was faced with turbulent times, and the future seemed uncertain. News of the unrest over in Kyoto had even reached Edo. It wasn't a surprise to hear spirits were rampant, but Somegorou seemed to be alluding to something greater.

"Though I suppose Edo's not faring any better, huh? But get this, there's a disturbing rumor that's been spreading among the demon hunters. They're saying the rise in spirits seems so odd that it's like they've found a leader or something."

Jinya felt like his gut had been wrenched. "Akitsu Somegorou... What do you know about this spirit leader? Do we know anything about their appearance? What about their hair color?"

"Nope, nobody knows a thing. It's not like anyone's actually laid eyes on this supposed leader. I've heard they might be a powerful spirit or a female demon, but it's all just rumor so far."

Details were vague, but there seemed to be a good chance that Kyoto had a strange spirit pulling strings. Somegorou had been there for the events surrounding the Snow's Memory incident, so he probably felt a little bad about

what happened and came all this way from Kyoto to tell Jinya this rumor, only pretending he had come to chat over tea.

"So, what do you think?" Somegorou asked.

There wasn't enough information to work from, so it might be worth looking further into things. At least, that was what Jinya thought, but he couldn't bring himself to say so.

Somegorou seemed surprised by Jinya's silence and tried to read his expression. He continued, "Well, it's just a rumor, after all. Just keep it in the back of your mind for now."

"Sorry. You came such a long way for nothing."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I really did want to have tea, and I was able to tell you about this demon rumor and settle my ghost case. It was worth coming all this way."

After ending the conversation there, Somegorou started to walk away. Confused, Jinya called out to stop him.

"Wait. We had tea and talked about that demon rumor, but what's this about a ghost?"

"Don't worry, that case is all settled now." Somegorou nonchalantly waved his arm as though to say it was no big deal. "The tea container I brought may be a masterpiece, but nobody's ever given it the proper love it deserves. Not just because it has a hydrangea either, but because owning it apparently made weird things happen. It's been passed around a bunch of times, but after its last owner died, it was thrown away without ever once being used."

"What's this about a ghost, though?"

"The emotions of the tea container have taken the form of a ghost. The point of the tea ceremony was to put it to rest."

Perhaps only an artifact spirit user like Somegorou could understand the feelings of an item that never got its chance to shine. Instead of eradicating them like he might do with another spirit, he'd cleared away the tea container's final lingering regrets.

"There's more to our work than just fighting and killing," Somegorou said. "Compassion is also a way to cleanse spirits."

"That's rich coming from the man who attacked me without hearing me out first."

"Aha ha, you got me there."

This was certainly a compassionate method for the man who'd once claimed that demons were creatures to be hunted. Somegorou had changed in the time since Jinya had last seen him. Nothing remained the same, for better or worse.

"So long. Let's get something stronger to drink next time."

Somegorou left in earnest this time. He was as unreadable a man as ever, but he really had tried to help Jinya out by telling him about the demon rumors. He accepted Jinya now, even though he was a demon. That much was clear.

"Kyoto, huh?" Jinya murmured thoughtfully. The tea ceremony was over, but the slightly bitter taste still lingered in the back of his throat. Nothing was certain, yet he felt a worry stir within himself. 1

It was a day like any other. Jinya showed up at Kihee to eat lunch with Nomari seated at his side. Children grew fast; it seemed like just yesterday she had been a baby, but she was already able to walk on her own now. Jinya dug into his soba, and Nomari did the same. Times like these keenly reminded him that he was, in fact, a parent. Children copied what their parents did, so he slowed down and ate without making a mess, using his chopsticks properly. Ofuu and Naotsugu noticed his change in behavior, of course, and they smiled at him.

"How is it, kiddo? Yummy?"

"Mmm, it's okay."

"Heh. She's your kid, all right."

The restaurant owner grinned wryly at Nomari's frank reply. Come to think of it, Jinya had once given a similar response when he was asked what he thought of the soba. It seemed the apple didn't fall far from the tree, even if they weren't related by blood.

Nomari was using the bowl that Ofuu had bought for her years before. It was small but deep, just the perfect shape for her. It was still a little hard for her to use chopsticks, so she had to bend over to eat—an adorable sight in its own right.

Jinya thought about the challenges that came with being a father with a wry smile. He wiped the edges of his daughter's mouth, saying, "Nomari, you got something there."

The others watched them affectionately.

"You've really become a father, huh?" Ofuu said.

"Never thought I'd see the day Jinya-kun would dote over a kid like this," the restaurant owner said with some exasperation.

Jinya didn't smile very often, or really make much of an expression at all. Perhaps that was why the sight of him smiling at his daughter seemed so peculiar to everyone.

"Is it really that strange?" Jinya asked.

"Maybe not. I'm not exactly one to talk when I dote over Ofuu all the time, now am I?" the restaurant owner said. "So how is it? Having a daughter is nice, right?"

"It is. Now I get why fathers always fret over their daughters."

The restaurant owner nodded deeply without another word. Jinya looked back at his daughter and smiled.

"Father, did I do something wrong?" Nomari asked with a tilt of her head.

"No, not at all. It's just in a father's nature to worry." He caressed her head softly, and she looked so happy that the others couldn't help but smile as well.

"Ha ha, it sure is. You've got a lot of challenges waiting for you as a father, let me tell you!" the restaurant owner said.

"I'm sure I do. But I can't say I'm not looking forward to it."

"By the way, don't you think your girl might need a mother? Why, I think I might have one for you right here. Why not take Ofuu as your bride?"

"Here we go again..." Ofuu sighed. She used to get all flustered when her father brought up marriage like this, but now she just let it slide.

"But think about it, Ofuu."

"Yes, yes, I will."

"...Is it just me, or have you been cold to me lately?"

"Only because you keep saying silly things."

This all-too-familiar exchange had never left much of an impression on Jinya before, but he was starting to see things differently now that he was a father. "...I wonder if Nomari will ever be cold to me like that."

"It's a little bit early for those kinds of worries, don't you think, Jin-dono?" Naotsugu said. Still, Jinya couldn't stop himself from being nervous about what

was in store.

Ofuu burst out laughing, probably finding Jinya's worries hilarious. "J-Jinya-kun, you've changed."

Many years had passed since he left his hometown, and he'd grown able to relax slightly more than before. Lately, everyone was saying that he'd changed, but had he really? To tell the truth, he didn't know. If he closed his eyes now, he would still feel his hatred for his sister stirring inside him. He couldn't forgive her, but he didn't want to kill her. That conflicting set of emotions still existed within him.

"...Does it really seem like I've changed?" he asked.

"Yes, at least to me. You smile more gently now than you ever did before."

"...I see."

Jinya believed his time in Edo was nothing more than an extension of his time in Kadono. He felt like he would always remain a prisoner of that fateful night no matter how much time passed. But Ofuu saw him for who he was now, and perhaps she was right. Perhaps her kindness had changed him.

"Thank you, Ofuu." Jinya smiled, trying to convey some of the indescribable warmth he felt in his chest. The others smiled back.

Splendid sunbeams shone down on them, and a comforting summer breeze was in the air. It was a wonderful afternoon, and the mood of the restaurant was peaceful. Things were just as they always were. It was simply another regular day with nothing special to speak of.

But this day would eventually reach its end, as days always do. Whether one's days were full of grief or joy, they ended and began anew all the same. That was a universal truth none could question, for time cruelly marched forward without pausing for anyone.

All things existed in a perpetual cycle of change.

It was September in year three of the Keio era (1867 AD). Autumn was approaching, and the end of summer could be felt in the newly thickened

clouds of the sky.

In the courtyard of the Miura estate, located in the southern samurai residential area, two men crossed swords. Although they were only using wooden swords for training, their vigor still rivaled that of a real battle. The atmosphere in the courtyard was tense.

The dry sound of wood clacking echoed.

"Ngh!" Jinya unleashed an unbelievably fast overhead swing that Naotsugu blocked. Jinya was holding back, but Naotsugu's movements weren't bad.

Jinya increased his pressure, trying to force open Naotsugu's defenses. He'd generally never make such a crude offensive maneuver, but he wanted to see how Naotsugu would respond. "Can you handle this?"

Hearing Jinya egg him on, Naotsugu took a step forward and repelled his friend's wooden sword. Without losing his momentum, he kicked off with his left foot and swung down on Jinya's shoulder for a textbook diagonal slash. From such a distance, it seemed sure to land, but things wouldn't be so simple.

"Sorry."

Before Naotsugu's strike could reach its target, Jinya's wooden sword came to a stop with the tip right at the base of Naotsugu's neck.

Naotsugu looked confused. His attack had begun first, yet Jinya's thrust was somehow faster. There was no grand secret, though. The moment Naotsugu tensed to repel Jinya's sword, Jinya 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 Naotsugu's throat. In other words, he had simply taken a stance faster than Naotsugu after reading his move. In fact, Jinya didn't thrust his sword at all, for Naotsugu moved into it himself. It was a sequence with no wasted movement throughout. He was only imitating the techniques of that murderer he'd dueled some time ago, but he'd grown rather skilled at them.

"Y-you got me," Naotsugu conceded, cold sweat dripping down his forehead.

Jinya exhaled and retracted his wooden sword. "Your honesty is one of your virtues, but it's also your weakness. You're easy to read."

"Ha ha, how embarrassing. I'm impressed by how strong you are, though. Thank you for showing me the skill of a demon hunter."

"Thank you, but I'm not trained in any particular style. If anything, I have more to learn from you."

Jinya's sword skills had been taught to him by Motoharu and further refined through self-guided practice. Meanwhile, Naotsugu was faithful to the basics and had a beautiful form that was true to the textbooks. Naotsugu was a good example for Jinya to use for refreshing himself on fundamentals. Naotsugu may have been the one who asked to be trained, but there was much to be gained for Jinya as well.

"Oh, that's not true at all. I'm the one with more to learn here. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I've hardly ever had a chance to draw my blade. Your skill, polished through real combat, is much more impressive."

"If you say so. What made you want to spar all of a sudden, though?"

"I just felt like exercising a bit, that's all." Naotsugu averted his gaze. There was clearly more going on, but Jinya didn't press him. Naotsugu was earnest and kind, but he was an old-fashioned samurai at heart. He wouldn't talk if he didn't want to.

"If it's something I can help with, let me know," Jinya said.

"Thank you... Hopefully, I'll be able to tell everyone soon." Naotsugu was obviously concealing some secret.

"I take it you two are finished?" Kinu, Naotsugu's wife, called out to them. She acted just as politely as Naotsugu did, proof of her origins in an ex-samurai family. She had prepared tea for them by the veranda and approached Naotsugu with a towel.

"Thank you, dear." Naotsugu smiled and wiped his sweat with the towel. He had been training for one and a half koku already and was quite tired, so he happily moved to sit down on the veranda. Kinu promptly brought them the tea, the husband-wife pair perfectly in sync.

"Father." Nomari, now five years old, walked toward Jinya. He kneeled, causing her to break into a trot. Right as she reached him, she leapt into his

chest.

"Whoa, careful now," Jinya said. His daughter had grown nice and healthy, but she was full of energy.

Despite practically tumbling into her father, she seemed happy. "Eheh!"

He had hardly worked up a sweat from his training with Naotsugu, but he took the towel she offered anyway. He thanked Nomari and patted her head, making the child burst into a shining smile. "Were you bored?"

She shook her head.

"I see," he replied. He walked over to the veranda as well, and Kinu brought him tea. "Thank you, Kinu-dono."

"Not at all. Thank you for going along with my husband's request, Jinyasama."

"The pleasure was all mine. I learned a lot as well."

"I'm happy to hear that."

Jinya had met with Kinu multiple times already. As he was an inexperienced parent, her advice had been invaluable to him. In fact, she was the one who taught him how to change diapers. He found her a bit difficult to interact with, though. Not too long ago, their relationship had been an entirely different one.

"By the way..." she began.

"...Yes?"

"Don't you think it's about time for us to drop the formalities, Ronin?"

"...I would greatly prefer that."

"Why don't you call me Streetwalker like you used to while we're at it?"

For the longest time, she hadn't told Jinya her real name—Kinu—and insisted on being called "Streetwalker," a word that referred to low-class prostitutes. He still hadn't gotten used to her real name.

"I can't very well call a married woman a prostitute," he said.

"You're so stiff," she giggled. The old coquettishness in her voice was gone,

leaving only her childlike playfulness.

She'd married Naotsugu a few years ago. Jinya hadn't even really known they'd been meeting, so the sudden announcement of their marriage took him by surprise.

Samurai rarely married for love, so it was no shock that they faced challenges. Naotsugu's mother was an old-fashioned samurai woman who was greatly opposed to her son marrying a streetwalker. The couple's path to marriage had been a bumpy one, but that isn't a story that needs to be told now.

"How's your son?" Jinya asked.

"Oh, Tadanobu? He's at school. He should be back soon," Kinu answered.

As the eldest son, Tadanobu was slated to be the head of the Miura family one day and therefore was receiving the appropriate education. The private school he attended was a rare one, however, as it admitted commoners alongside children of samurai.

"Oh, speak of the devil, here he comes now."

"Jinya-sama, Nomari-san!" Tadanobu had his mother's charming looks but hadn't inherited her peculiar personality. He was quite fond of Jinya, his father's friend, and always welcomed him with a wide smile. "Were you sparring with Father?"

"Yeah. We just finished up, though."

"Aww, I wanted to watch."

He was a studious and polite kid, but he was still childish in many ways. Half the reason why he liked Jinya so much was because Jinya was good with the sword. He deeply admired the way Jinya could make a living from sword skills alone, and he always had stars in his eyes when he talked to him.

"Nomari-san, h-how do you do?"

"Huh? Uh, how do you do?"

The other reason why Tadanobu liked Jinya so much was because of Nomari, Jinya's daughter. Nomari was adorable, so Jinya thought it was only natural that the young boy would develop a crush on her. Tadanobu acted flustered

whenever he talked to Nomari, which was heart-warming in its own right.

"It looks like Tadanobu likes Miss Nomari. Any interest in marrying her into a samurai family, Jin-dono?" Naotsugu said as he watched the two kids. It was hard to tell if he was joking or not. Knowing his personality, though, he was likely serious.

Jinya replied, "Nobody's taking my daughter from me...is what I would like to say, but I do think I can trust your son more than some stranger from who-knows-where."

Naotsugu raised his son strictly, more so than you'd think from his usual gentle demeanor. Time and time again, he reminded Tadanobu—who was still only a child—that samurai existed to protect the common people. As a result, Tadanobu was an earnest eight-year-old boy who already had good manners.

Perhaps this was an antiquated way of parenting, but Jinya himself was an old-fashioned man and considered such an upbringing to be proper. If Tadanobu continued to develop as he had done so far, Jinya wouldn't mind marrying Nomari off to him.

"But it'll all ultimately depend on how Nomari feels herself," Jinya said. "When she grows up, she'll be the one to decide."

Tadanobu and Nomari ran around the courtyard playing. The thought of Nomari leaving the nest one day saddened Jinya, but if her marriage would continue what he saw now, then perhaps it wouldn't be all that bad. Jinya had no intention of forcing his daughter to marry someone she didn't love...not that the issue would come up for many, many more years.

"I'm surprised," Naotsugu said. "I thought you'd be more against it."

"I can't choose the way I live. I at least want my daughter to be able to live freely."

Come to think of it, if Nomari married Tadanobu, then Naotsugu and Kinu would become part of Jinya's family. That alone would be fairly amusing.

Jinya was lost in that thought for a moment when he noticed Naotsugu laughing. The man looked like he was trying to hold it in, but he couldn't prevent his shoulders from shaking with mirth.

"What's so funny?" Jinya asked.

"Nothing. I was just thinking how strange it is that we've both reached a point where we worry about our kids and think of their futures."

Jinya understood where he was coming from. The two had met fourteen years earlier, back when Naotsugu was looking for his missing brother, Miura Sadanaga Hyouma. That was the beginning of a long friendship that continued to this day.

"I never would've imagined the two of us would become fathers," Jinya said.

"Right? We've sure grown old." Naotsugu laughed again, then abruptly stopped. He gave Jinya a sad look and quietly murmured, "Jin-dono...you haven't changed at all, huh?"

It was the exact opposite of what Ofuu had said earlier. Ofuu was talking about Jinya's internal change, but Naotsugu was referring to his lack of external change.

Naotsugu was thirty-two this year. While still but a few, wrinkles were starting to appear on his face. It was normal for humans to age as time passed, but the same could not be said for demons, who could live for more than a thousand years. Jinya's appearance hadn't changed in the slightest since he was eighteen.

"Sorry. Forget I said anything," Naotsugu said.

Jinya and Ofuu were hiding the fact that they were demons from others, but if enough time passed, people would eventually notice something was off. In fact, people may have already started to suspect what they were.

"It's fine. Well, I think it's about time for us to get going now," Jinya said. He called out to Nomari, who made a beeline for him. Tadanobu seemed a bit sad to see them go, but he politely bowed. Jinya waved back at the kid and picked up his daughter. She snuggled into his chest; she was still at an age where she wanted to be spoiled.

"Wait. I didn't really mean what I said," Naotsugu apologized.

"It's okay, I know." Jinya was thankful to Naotsugu, who remained his friend even when he wondered why Jinya didn't age. But Jinya couldn't openly admit to being a demon. He trusted Naotsugu, but revealing his secret might put Ofuu's own at risk. And *that* would come dangerously close to revealing that the restaurant owner was Naotsugu's older brother, Miura Sadanaga. Of course, a part of Jinya also worried Naotsugu simply wouldn't accept him as a demon. "I just felt like heading over to Kihee now."

"Oh, I see..." Naotsugu hung his head. Jinya didn't know whether he'd believed his excuse.

And so, Jinya and Nomari left the Miura family courtyard.

A worry crossed Jinya's mind. Perhaps it was time...

"Oh, heading home already?" Kinu called out and stopped him right before he crossed under the gate. He was about to just nod and walk out, but her next words stopped him in his tracks. "That's quite the long face you have there. Did my husband say something wrong?"

Jinya intended to hide how he felt, but she read him easily. Come to think of it, she had always been good at reading him. Streetwalkers had to be good at understanding people as part of their work; perhaps that was why she was one of the very few people who could see through his expressionless self.

"Not particularly."

"Is that so? Well, I don't know what he said, but do feel free to come visit again." She flashed a rare, honest smile. Jinya was bewildered, not expecting to see such a thing. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, um... To be honest, I didn't think you wanted me coming around."

"Why would you ever think that? If anything, you're the one who doesn't want to be around me, Ronin."

He was startled at having been seen through again, and she laughed at his speechlessness.

"You really are so easy to read."

"So you say, but you're just about the only one who can see through me."

"Well, what an honor that is. Why don't I see through you once more while I'm at it, then? Ronin, you torture yourself too much," she said with

exasperation. Her expression twisted, as though she didn't know where to begin, before continuing, "You're alive, for better or worse; and that means some things will change while others will remain the same, no matter how much you wish otherwise." She reached out and touched her slender fingers to his cheek, then traced his cheek to his jaw as if to make sure he was there. "I don't know what burden you bear, but it's a part of you, is it not? No matter what you may think of yourself, I admire you, Ronin, and I'm sure my husband does too. Is that so hard to believe?"

She couldn't have heard his exchange with Naotsugu, so there was no way she knew what Jinya was worrying about. Still, he felt better than he did before.

"To think the day would come when you of all people would try to cheer me up." Jinya felt too embarrassed to thank her outright, so he said that instead.

"Hmm... I'll take it," she said with a smile. There was no way she would fail to see through his bashfulness. This level of indirectness was just right for them. Her gentle words soothed him just as much as the hand that caressed his cheek.

Jinya left the Miura estate behind and headed for Kihee in Fukagawa. He passed through the entrance curtains, but, strangely, the restaurant owner didn't greet him for once. The man was missing from his usual spot in the kitchen.

"Oh, Jinya-kun...Nomari-chan..." In place of her father, Ofuu weakly called out to them. She had been resting her head on a table, looking exhausted.

Jinya put Nomari down, and she tottered over to Ofuu. With a bow, Nomari said, "Good afternoon."

Ofuu managed a stiff smile and said, "Yes, good afternoon. What a good girl you are, acting so politely." But she seemed to sink back into gloom immediately afterward, and Jinya thought he knew why. It was the very same reason why he'd been spending more of his spare moments at Kihee lately.

"Where's your father?" he asked.

Ofuu answered, "He's lying down in the back."

"I...see."

Since around the end of last year, the restaurant owner had spent many days in bed. He wasn't sick, though; it was simply age getting to him. But perhaps it would've been better if he *had* been sick, as that would at least reduce Ofuu's misery. Ofuu loved her father, but the life spans of demons and humans were vastly different. She probably thought she had braced herself for their eventual parting, but nobody was actually as ready as they believed.

"It's all...my fault," she murmured. The main cause of her torment was obvious: Her ability had caused his old age. If he had never met Ofuu, the restaurant owner would be twenty years younger right now. The time he had spent in her garden of happiness was a part of his life span that she had taken away from him, and that fact ate away at her.

Without a word, Jinya sat down next to her. He had nothing clever to say, so he just sat there and allowed time to pass on by.

"...Aren't you going to say anything?" Ofuu was the first to break the heavy atmosphere.

"Do you want me to?"

"...No. I don't think there's anything you could say that'd make me feel better."

Silence fell once more. Still without a thing to say, Jinya kept his mouth shut.

Man and demon. As painful as it was to admit, perhaps the two were simply not meant to be together. That thought crossed Jinya's mind as he sat silently in what had once been a place of respite for him.

2

T WAS AN AUTUMN AFTERNOON where the chill seeped deep into one's bones. Jinya visited Kihee together with Nomari and they were greeted by the restaurant owner as always, but he had changed slightly as of late.

"Oh, Jinya-kun. Come on in."

The owner was in the kitchen and looked even thinner than before. His arms were like withered branches, and his face was bony and covered in wrinkles. Still, his greeting remained as energetic as ever.

"Are you all right?" Jinya asked, coming to a sudden stop in his tracks. The restaurant owner had been bedridden for quite some time, so it was a real surprise to see him up and making soba.

"Oh, I'm fine. Feeling mighty good today, in fact. It's nice to be making soba again." True to his words, the man seemed rather sprightly despite his gauntness. His hands didn't stop as he talked, even while he cut the flattened dough into strips.

"Dad... Don't push yourself," Ofuu said worriedly. Her father flashed her a smile and continued to work.

Jinya said nothing of the situation and took a seat. Nomari sat down next to him without making a peep, just dangling her legs playfully. Ofuu cast her gaze down, unable to do anything but wait as her father made the soba.

"There we are, two orders of soba," the restaurant owner said. He'd made kake soba, of course. After a long period of Jinya ordering nothing but that, the owner began to start preparing it the moment he walked through the entrance. Jinya felt keenly reminded of just how long he'd been coming there.

"Here you go," Ofuu said, bringing the soba over.

"...Thank you." Jinya grabbed some chopsticks and began eating. Nomari did the same, eating from her smaller personal bowl.

Jinya had formed a long history with Kihee. At first, he only picked the place because it didn't get many customers, but since then he'd come more often than he ever thought he would. He'd never directly told anyone before, but he thought of Kihee as a place where he could let his guard down—a home away from home. He would look back on his time there and remember it fondly.

...Remember it fondly? Jinya paused in his thoughts and wondered why he felt like it was already over. A strange feeling came over him. He couldn't explain where it was coming from, but he felt as though something was about to happen that would never occur again.

"Here, Ofuu, you eat up too."

"Huh? Oh, um..."

The restaurant owner brought out two more bowls and set them on the same table where Jinya and Nomari sat. They were clearly meant for him and Ofuu. Ofuu seemed flustered, unsure if it was all right for her to eat with customers there.

"It's fine. Let's all eat together for once," the restaurant owner said.

"It's just us anyway," Jinya added.

A bit hesitantly, Ofuu joined them so that the four of them were surrounding the table. Jinya was a little amused by the oddness of this unprecedented situation.

"Jinya-kun, you've really been a long-time patron of ours, haven't ya?"

"I guess so. More than ten years now, I think."

"Right. I remember the first thing you ordered was kake soba. You haven't changed one bit in taste or appearance, though I guess you didn't have the little missy back then." He looked Nomari's way, and she tilted her head in some confusion over his words. Her cute gesture made Jinya smile slightly. "Heh heh. I never would've thought you could make that kind of face back then. Getting old has its merits."

"...Smiling doesn't really suit me, though," Jinya said, quickly stiffening his expression when he saw the restaurant owner try to stifle his laughter. He was too late, of course. His attempt to hide his smile only made Ofuu giggle as well.

"No, no, a smile really does suit you... Probably a lot more than demon hunting does," the owner said. His words made the restaurant fall silent. "You have a daughter now. Don't you think it's high time you gave the dangerous work a rest? You can work here at my restaurant if you need a job. Or...even better, you can marry Ofuu and take over for me. How about it?"

He phrased it as if it were another joke, but Jinya could tell the man was serious about his offer. Demon hunting was dangerous work, and Jinya could lose his life any day. Wouldn't it be better for him to choose the peaceful life

instead?

Perhaps it would. He had Nomari now. He might be better off giving up fighting and spending his days in peace. He had a feeling he'd genuinely be happier that way.

"I'm sorry. I can't do that." He firmly shot down the restaurant owner's kind offer nevertheless.

"...I see." There was disappointment in the man's eyes, but it was mild. He had expected Jinya's answer to some extent.

Jinya could have let that be the end of it, but he didn't. The man had been kind to Jinya. He worried about him, beyond what one would feel about an ordinary customer. Jinya couldn't ignore his kindness, so he spoke slowly and deliberately now. "A demon cannot escape their nature." He looked down at his left arm and its empty palm. So much had slipped through the fingers of his weak, weak hand. "That's what a demon told me once, long ago. Demons live as slaves to their emotions and will do all they can to fulfill their purpose, even if that means dying. That's why I don't think I can ever change. I will live and die with these emotions I bear."

After losing everything and becoming neither human nor demon, stopping his sister became the only task he had to serve as a guidepost. It was his everything.

"But you have changed, Jinya-kun," the restaurant owner said.

"Perhaps. A little. But that's different."

He had come to think of Kihee as a second home. He had somebody who awaited his return from dangerous jobs. He'd made many friends. He had a daughter entrusted to him by another. He had proved the strength of his present self by fighting against his ideal self. Each and every one of these precious things had changed him.

But hatred still smoldered in his heart even now. All his changes only made what couldn't change hurt even more.

"The only thing different about me is that I've learned how to take breathers. My burdens and my goal haven't changed in the slightest. When the time comes, I'm sure I'll leave all of this behind."

Jinya truly treasured all he had gained, but he knew he would abandon it eventually. This was not a belief of his, but more of a premonition. Just like the demon with the power of *Farsight* he'd once met, Jinya could see an unavoidable future lying ahead of him.

"Is that why you can't live a normal life?" the restaurant owner asked.

"It is."

"And you have no problem with that?" The man's gaze seemed to contain more pity than worry. Jinya's heart ached.

"Correct. I have my goal, and I'm prepared to do away with anything and everything to see it through."

He was even prepared to devour his own kind. He'd lost some bonds already because of this life, but he believed he could endure moving forward if he pushed himself to do so. He'd done all right up until now.

"But I wonder why... Right now, this way of life I've led feels like an awful burden."

If that murderer Jinya once dueled against were here, he would surely call him impure. Even after all that boasting about his dedication to his goal, Jinya was wavering. Truly, how pathetic he was.

"Then why not change it all together?" the restaurant owner asked once more.

"If I could do that, I wouldn't have become a demon in the first place," Jinya said with a wry, self-deprecating smile.

The restaurant owner broke into a roar of laughter. The expression on his face was likely the same one that Naotsugu had once admired. "Weird as it may be, I can't help but be happy after hearing all that."

Jinya gave him a look, mystified by what the man meant.

The restaurant owner puffed his chest out victoriously. "You've realized that the life you've led is full of burdens, and that's direct proof that you enjoy the life you live now. You're afraid of leaving all this behind. Me, Ofuu, Nomari,

Naotsugu—all of us are now on par with that goal you're chasing, and that makes me happy, Jinya-kun."

Jinya's mind went blank. The restaurant owner had nailed it. After all of Jinya's justifications, the real truth boiled down to something so simple. "I see. I just...didn't want this to end."

Jinya's words amounted to nothing more than the pouting of a child. Demons were long-lived. The restaurant owner and Naotsugu would inevitably pass away before Jinya. As a fellow demon, Ofuu would remain, but Kihee would never be the same with those two gone. That saddened Jinya and made him want to lash out.

"I'm still as weak as ever, huh?" Jinya's expression softened as he recognized his own weakness. The restaurant owner smiled proudly, as though he were witnessing the maturity of his own son.

"Ofuu...and you too, Jinya-kun. Listen up real quick."

The air tensed. Jinya understood intuitively that he must not miss the words that would follow.

"The two of you will live far longer than me and eventually experience many losses. Sometimes, the things you've lost will grow even more beloved in memory, even though they can never return. That might make you sad to the point you want to cry." The restaurant owner's eyes narrowed as if he were gazing at something bright. Jinya wondered just what the man saw with that distant look, but he had no way of knowing. "But that's okay. There's nothing wrong with it. If, at some point on your long journeys, you think of the past and want to cry, be proud of that. That sadness you feel is proof that there was once something or someone so dear to you. Be as sad as you want."

Jinya and Ofuu didn't say a word. They could tell this man had thought deeply about their futures, and they didn't want to interrupt him.

"But whatever you do, please don't belittle the present moment just because you're afraid of the eventual parting. That will only hurt your pasts, the people who've loved you, and yourselves." Just what sight, one had to wonder, did he see behind his now-closed eyes? Jinya and Ofuu had no way of knowing.

The man continued in a passionate tone. "You two will live long lives, so I'm sure there will be days when you've lost so much you don't think you can go on. You'll think of the past, feel hurt, and find yourselves thinking you hate everything." He opened his eyes again and smiled softly. Tenderly, he said, "But you know what? Even if you're sad for a while, there will always be somebody you can smile with again in the future. I want you two to treasure the present moment as much as you can, precisely because your lives are so long."

Don't be trapped by the past. Live holding the present moment dear.

"That's what I wish from you both."

He, too, would one day be a part of their past. That made his words even more meaningful and worth committing to heart.

Having finished, the restaurant owner heaved a sigh. "...How about it? Did I manage to sound a little like a father?" He grinned, raising an eyebrow. His usual joking self was back, and the tense atmosphere was instantly dispelled.

"What do you mean 'like a father'? You are a father, remember? It's just that your start with Ofuu was a bit different than most people's," Jinya said.

"That's right. I'm very proud to call you my father," Ofuu said.

Even if they weren't related by blood, and even if they weren't both human, the restaurant owner had proven beyond a doubt that he was her father by giving her his time. That was an action the sword could never hope to mirror.

"Oh, by the way, Jinya-kun, and you too, Nomari-chan... Would you mind standing up for me for a moment?"

"What for?"

"Oh, you'll see." The restaurant owner had an impish grin on his face.

Jinya wasn't sure what he wanted, but he obeyed and stood up.

"Thanks. Ofuu, could you stand next to Jinya-kun there? Yes, yes, just like that." The man gestured where he wanted them, then nodded with a satisfied smile. Jinya and Ofuu stood facing him with their backs to the kitchen, and Nomari stood between the two. "Hmm, one more thing. Nomari-chan, could you hold your daddy and Ofuu's hands?"

"Like this?" Nomari said, grabbing one of each adult's hands and going limp, entrusting her weight to the two.

The sudden pull brought Ofuu down a bit, bringing her closer to Jinya. Even though they were familiar with one another, she felt embarrassed by their closeness and blushed slightly.

The restaurant owner's gaze softened. With the child between them holding their hands, the three looked just like a...

"Ah...how nice. I'm glad I got to see this," the restaurant owner mumbled softly. The smile on his face was a happier one than they'd ever seen on him before. "Welp, working after such a long break has made me a bit tired. Sorry, but can I leave the cleanup to you, Ofuu?" He stretched his back, then waved goodbye to them and headed for the bedroom. "I'll see you tomorrow." He stopped once to look back, leaving them with the same cheerful smile they had seen many times before.

And that smile was his last.

After returning to bed, the restaurant owner—Miura Sadanaga Hyouma—did not awaken again.

He had completely flipped his life around for the benefit of a demon, but he did not complain once, not even in his final moments.

His time spent as Ofuu's father had come to an end.

It was an autumn afternoon where the chill seeped deep into one's bones.

3

T HE RESTAURANT OWNER'S funeral was a modest, quiet affair. He had no relatives to speak of, and he hadn't kept in touch with his old acquaintances.

The funeral had seemed like it would last a long time, so Jinya entrusted Nomari to Kinu. Only he and Ofuu were in the restaurant now. Ofuu simply stood in a daze, a somber look on her face from fatigue and heartbreak. Jinya

leaned against the wall, having nothing better to do.

"It's so...empty," Jinya mumbled. He wasn't really starting a conversation so much as voicing an idle thought. The death of the restaurant owner had hurt him more than he expected, and he didn't have it in him to try and cheer Ofuu up.

"It really is. I had no idea this place could feel so empty," Ofuu replied.

The restaurant had never had many customers, but the absence of the owner made the place feel even more vacant than usual. The brisk autumn air felt terribly cold to Jinya, and likely to Ofuu as well.

Just once, for a brief moment, Ofuu wrapped her arms around herself and trembled. Jinya chose to believe it was simply because of the chill.

"I knew it was only a matter of time," Ofuu began, tracing her finger across a table. "Our life spans are different. We can't stay together forever. That's why I tried so many times to drive Dad...Hyouma out of my garden of happiness." Perhaps she was trying to make a confession that would clear the guilt she felt. She smiled with tears streaming down her face, her grief visible. "But in the end, I gave in to his kindness. I let myself be hurt by a parting I knew was coming. Aren't I silly? I'm no different from the way I used to be."

Ofuu became a demon over the despair of losing her parents. Her sorrow had been deep enough to turn her into something inhuman. Now, she had lost another father. Grief raked at her, just as it had done with the death of her parents.

She didn't even blink as her tears fell. Jinya felt his heart squeeze and began walking over without even realizing what he was doing. Gently, he put a hand on her shoulder. He had no words to comfort her with, but he at least wanted to be by her side.

"Jinya-kun..." Ofuu leaned into him. If somebody were to see them, they might think they were embracing. But Jinya didn't see a woman in Ofuu right now. Instead, he saw the lost look of a stranded child. "Please, just...let me do this for a little while." Her eyes were swollen with tears, and yet she continued to cry. She seemed so helpless and feeble, as though she would shatter if he put a little strength into his arms.

"Remember how your father always used to ask me if I wanted to take you as a bride?" Jinya began.

"Yes...yes, I do."

"I think I understand why now. He wasn't just joking around. He was genuinely thinking about what might be best for you."

With their similarly long lives, Jinya and Ofuu could spend their eternity together. The restaurant owner had probably kept making his offer so Ofuu would have somebody by her side even after he passed.

"Your father always made fun of me for doting on Nomari so much, but he really was one to talk, wasn't he?"

"Yes, yes, he was. He...he only ever thought about how he could make my life better."

Jinya held Ofuu a tad tighter. Even though his arms were wrapped around her, there was nothing romantic about it. If she could behave like a stranded child, then he might as well be one too. They were both confused and aimless, only able to lick each other's wounds now.

"I'm sure...we'll eventually suffer many more losses," Jinya said. The restaurant owner's last words flitted through his mind. If you can grieve the past, then be proud, he had said... But that was absolutely impossible for the two of them right now. Their grief was too overwhelming in the moment.

Ofuu said, "The thought alone makes me feel so..."

"...Yeah, I know."

The sentiment hung between them, but neither would put it in words. They felt like voicing it fully would dishonor the restaurant owner's wish.

The two would likely go on to lose many more things from their lives. Perhaps the weight of it all would crush them one day.

Thoughts of the future flitted through Jinya's mind. These, too, he left unsaid.

Finally, the two parted. Their embrace hadn't been a romantic one to begin with, so separating came all too easily. Even so, Ofuu was a bit embarrassed, and she blushed slightly. "I-I'm sorry."

"No. If anything, I am."

The two grinned wryly, finding their nonsensical exchange amusing.

The experience of loss brought grief, but there was still no greater joy than being able to love someone enough to miss them. That must be why people have sought connections with others even though they knew one day they would have to end.

"Thank you, Jinya-kun."

"I didn't do a thing."

"But you did. You stayed by my side, and that was enough." She wiped away her tears, and her usual grace returned. Jinya thought he hadn't helped her at all, but perhaps he had.

After some more time passed, Naotsugu and Nomari arrived. Naotsugu bowed when he came in, and Nomari followed suit. The two had apparently walked there holding hands. Nomari liked Naotsugu a lot, so perhaps her marrying his son might not be a mere joke in the end.

"Miura-sama, thank you for—"

"No, no. I've greatly enjoyed the time I've spent here in Kihee. My visit is nothing you need to thank me for."

Ofuu had been about to thank Naotsugu for coming, but he quickly stopped her. He seemed to be saying he wasn't there out of politeness' sake; he truly mourned the loss of the restaurant owner.

Jinya smiled slightly. He wasn't the only one who treasured his time spent here, and that made him happy.

"Father, I'm back," Nomari said in her youthful, slightly inarticulate voice.

"Welcome back," Jinya replied, petting her head. She smiled, ticklish but happy. Her innocence warmed his heart. "Thanks for looking after her, Naotsugu."

"It was no trouble at all. Tadanobu was happy to have her around. Oh, by the way... There's something I need to tell you, Jin-dono." Naotsugu appeared relaxed on the surface, but the tone of his voice was a bit stiff. His eyes looked

more serious than Jinya had ever seen them before. He had clearly come here with some sort of goal in mind.

"All right. Let's go somewhere more private, then."

"No, here's fine. I want Ofuu-san to hear this as well."

"Huh? Me too?"

"Yes. You're an important friend of mine as well. I want you both to hear what I have to say." He took a step forward, seemingly steeling himself for his declaration. "I'm not very eloquent, so I'll keep things short and simple." He cast his gaze down. His expression was tense, and the atmosphere turned heavy. No one knew just how long the ensuing silence lasted, but eventually he spoke with clear, resolute will. "I'm planning on going to Kyoto."

Around the start of the Keio era, the conflicts between the shogunate and the pro-imperial forces sharply escalated, and Kyoto was considered to be the center of the storm. It was easy to imagine why Naotsugu wanted to go there now of all times.

"I'll be leaving Edo for Kyoto to join up with the forces there and devote myself to overthrowing the shogunate. A friend was able to introduce me."

The Miura family had served the Tokugawa for generations, but Naotsugu himself had misgivings toward the shogunate in its current form. His decision wasn't strange for him at all.

Jinya thought back to the incident involving the demonic sword Yatonomori Kaneomi. He remembered how that occasion had instilled some determination in Naotsugu, who likely began thinking about opposing the shogunate from that moment on. His sudden request to spar may have been in preparation for the battles that awaited him.

In other words, Naotsugu wasn't asking for an opinion about his decision. His choice had been made. He had selected the path he would take in life.

"You're sure?" Jinya's question was brief, but his old friend understood exactly what he meant: *Are you sure you're ready to betray the Tokugawa you've served up until now?*

Jinya's gaze was as sharp as a blade, but Naotsugu didn't waver. Proudly, he stood before him.

"I am. The current unrest of the world proves that the government has failed its people. The citizens of Edo are destitute, and foreign powers are being allowed to do as they please. I may have sworn loyalty to the Tokugawa, but we samurai exist to protect the weak. Trying to cling to the past in these trying times will only bring about more suffering, so I choose to do the very opposite." It had likely taken him a lot of thought to reach this answer. There wasn't a thing anyone could say to sway his mind. As if to prove his resolution, he forcefully declared, "I shall fight in the hope of seeing a new era...a new future brought about some day."

"You might die."

"It would be an honor for my life to serve as part of the foundations of the future."

He was a true samurai.

Hatakeyama Yasuhide once claimed that samurai would be made irrelevant by the march of time. That was likely the truth. Samurai were people who laid down their life for ideals, and so death was an inevitable part of their fates.

And yet, how dazzling they were! They possessed a strength Jinya himself could never hope to have as a demon.

"Um, does Kinu-san know?" Ofuu asked.

"She does, and she's accepted my decision. She's even coming to Kyoto with me...though, truth be told, I wanted her to stay in Edo. But being a lady of a samurai family, she's much too headstrong for that."

"I...see." Ofuu's face clouded. If even his wife approved, then there was nothing anyone could say to Naotsugu. Jinya and Ofuu were deeply worried, but as Naotsugu's friend, it was their duty to respect his decision.

Jinya tried his hardest to remove all emotion from his expression. "Then go. Take the path you've chosen for yourself."

"Thank you, I shall. I'm not so sure I'll be very useful in battle, though."

Even so, he would fight. To Jinya, who couldn't change his own way of life, Naotsugu's resolution to die for his ideals appeared somewhat foolish...

"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."

...And yet, Naotsugu's foolish resolution was something nobody could deny him. His words were genuine. He spoke them not for the sake of being heard, but because they were the truth. He had chosen to live his life as a samurai, and he would stand by the samurai code. Fighting for the sake of others was merely one of its facets.

The man known as Miura Naotsugu Arimori stuck to his tenets as a samurai to remain true to himself.

"What a stubborn man you are," Jinya complained.

"I may be stubborn, but *you're* the last person I want to hear that from," Naotsugu replied without missing a beat.

The mood lightened. With a giggle, Ofuu joked, "Jinya-kun's stubborn enough to be the king of stubborn people all over the world."

Naotsugu saw how quiet that made Jinya and laughed. The smile on his face was cheerful as could be.

Around noon, the four of them left Kihee and headed for Tomizen, a restaurant in Fukagawa.

"Let's make it my treat today, to celebrate this new chapter in your life," Surprisingly, the one to say this was Jinya. Naotsugu was setting off for Edo to fight, and what the future held was unknown, but there was a fair chance he would die, as difficult as it was to admit. As Naotsugu's friend, Jinya had no right to stop him, but he at least wanted to do something for him.

"Thank you, Jin-dono."

"It's nothing worth thanking me for. I wanted to let my daughter eat to her heart's content today, anyway." Jinya looked at Nomari, whom he was holding in his arms as he walked. "Eat whatever you like today, okay?" "Okay."

They continued to make small talk as they walked the streets of Edo. The city lacked the hustle and bustle it had seen before the country's unrest took its toll, but many people could still be seen out and about, perhaps because it was noon.

"When are you leaving?" Ofuu asked.

"Tomorrow. I figured the sooner the better," Naotsugu answered.

"I see. Then you'd better watch how much you drink," Jinya said.

"Huh? Oh, um, I wasn't exactly planning to drink while the sun's still up anyway."

"Oh. I see..."

Jinya had grown rather fond of liquor, partially thanks to a demon friend he once knew. He'd hoped to drink the night away with Naotsugu, but the latter apparently had no such plans.

"I'm sure you'll be fine staying sober for just one day, Jinya-kun," Ofuu joked.

"I guess," Jinya replied a bit glumly.

Naotsugu watched the two with a wistful grin. "I'm not sorry I decided to go to Kyoto, but I do think I'll miss moments like these."

Ofuu's expression eased into a smile, even though she was still mourning the loss of her father. "Oh, don't say that."

"She's right. You make it sound like we'll never meet again," Jinya said. This very well could be their last meeting, though. Naotsugu was throwing himself into a violent conflict at a critical moment in history. Death was very much a possibility. But even so, Jinya wanted to believe they would meet again.

A harsh voice from the crowd interrupted them. "So you're going to Kyoto, then."

Jinya wasted no time in handing Nomari to Ofuu, then reaching down for Yarai with his left. He stooped his weight low so he could move at a moment's notice and spun around to face a giant, almost seven-shaku tall man.

The man's muscular physique made his robes cling tightly to his skin. His hair was wilder than Jinya's, untied and reaching his shoulders. His face was a familiar one. Jinya had met him when he visited the home of the Hatakeyama family, retainers of the Aizu domain.

"How very interesting."

His name was Tsuchiura, and he was the demon servant of Hatakeyama Yasuhide, a Shogunate Faithful and the former head of the Hatakeyama family.

4

"Still snooping around, I see," Jinya said. He took a step forward, standing in front of Ofuu and Nomari.

He had already popped his sword slightly out of its scabbard. He stood ready to fully draw it at any moment, directing his complete attention to Tsuchiura's movements. "Have you finally come to get rid of me?"

"I have no business with you, so long as you don't get in my lord's way."

They had already realized that they couldn't see eye to eye the last time they met, so Jinya fully expected their second encounter to be a bloody one. To his surprise, however, Tsuchiura was calm. He remained guarded against Jinya, but he apparently was not here to fight him.

"The one I have business with is that man." Tsuchiura's cold gaze focused on Naotsugu.

Jinya felt Naotsugu shiver slightly behind him. Tsuchiura was a demon; he could easily make quick work of a human if he

wished. Having the malice of a demon directed at him must have filled Naotsugu with fear on an instinctual level. "M-me?"

Tsuchiura scoffed. His eyes were full of disdain toward Naotsugu. "My lord has many contacts within the shogunate. They tell him that a samurai working as a secretary has been stealing documents, and my lord has deemed this an act of rebellion."

Jinya felt something was off. Naotsugu was a secretary in Edo Castle, but he only worked with public documents and mainly handled cataloging. Even if he stole something to hand to the anti-shogunates, it wouldn't be very valuable. There shouldn't be anything for Hatakeyama Yasuhide to be worried about.

"So your lord wants Naotsugu's life," Jinya said.

Tsuchiura nodded.

Jinya didn't understand what Yasuhide was scheming, and it likely wouldn't make sense to him no matter how much he thought about it now. All he knew was that Naotsugu's life was in danger, and that killing the demon before him would have to come before any thinking.

"My duty is to eliminate all who pose a threat to my lord." Tsuchiura's body began to change into a grotesque form. Creaks and groans sounded as his muscles swelled. His robes ripped apart, and his skin color changed as his arms and legs began to lengthen. His transformation complete, the demon stood a full head taller, almost eight shaku in height, and a horn sprouted from his forehead. His skin was a dull bronze, and eerie jet-black circular and elliptical patterns lined with red formed all over his body. "And so, I will kill you here."

Naturally, his eyes were a rust-like red.

"H-hey, what is that?"

"I-It's a monster!"

Terrified voices could be heard from the townspeople. They ran away. Some stopped at a safe distance to watch the demon that had appeared in broad daylight.

Tsuchiura paid no mind to the surrounding clamor. His form seemed to blur as his massive body lunged forward. His target was Naotsugu, who was standing behind Jinya.

All samurai at least dabbled in swordplay, but that wasn't enough for one to be able to fight a demon. Naotsugu froze, unable to move a finger—much less draw his sword—as Tsuchiura fast approached.

But Jinya wasn't about to let the demon have his way. He swung right along

Tsuchiura's path and unleashed a descending vertical strike. It was the same move he had used against Naotsugu when they were sparring, only this time it was much faster.

Tsuchiura predicted the attack, however, and dove to the side without coming to a halt. He easily dodged the strike, creating plenty of distance between him and Jinya in the process.

"That was quite the swing. You live up to your reputation," Tsuchiura said, but he showed no sign of being flustered. He had dodged with ease, after all.

Jinya cursed under his breath as he glared at the demon. "Ofuu, take care of Nomari."

"Jinya-kun... All right, I understand." Ofuu took Nomari's hand and disappeared with her into the crowd.

The two looked worried about him. He had to end this quickly to put them at ease. Slowly, he took up a stance with Yarai and faced Tsuchiura directly.

"Naotsugu, you should leave too."

"But Jin-dono, I'm the one he's after."

"That doesn't matter. He's a demon and taking care of demons is what I do." Jinya kept his eyes on Tsuchiura as he told Naotsugu to get lost. Jinya felt bad, but he knew Naotsugu was the type who might put himself at risk unnecessarily. Naotsugu seemed to understand what he meant and didn't put up a fight. Reluctantly, he left. Once he was sure his friend was gone, Jinya's gaze sharpened. "Tsuchiura...are you insane?"

Tsuchiura had revealed his demon form in broad daylight—in the middle of a public street, no less.

He scoffed, taking Jinya's deadly glare in stride. "That's what I should be asking you."

Tsuchiura had apparently decided it was better to deal with Jinya before Naotsugu, and that worked just fine for Jinya. He moved his left foot forward and relaxed his shoulders. Then he brought his sword to his side and pointed it behind him, taking up his favorite stance.

Tsuchiura took up a stance as well, lightly clenching his fists. He brought his left leg back and lowered his weight. His center of gravity was a bit toward his rear, not for a defensive position but so he could spring forth off his left foot at any moment. If Jinya were to show an opening, Tsuchiura's massive frame was sure to come barreling toward him.

"So, it comes to this after all." Tsuchiura murmured without breaking his stance. Perhaps this was to be expected. As demons, they both couldn't help but insist on having their way. Now that their paths had crossed, they had no choice but to clash head-on. "...I take it you wouldn't retreat here if I asked?"

"Of course not."

That settled it. Their deathmatch couldn't be avoided. All logic and morals were tossed to the wind as the two focused solely on killing their opponent.

The first to move was Tsuchiura. He slid his feet to close the distance, pulling his right hand back to his flank while extending his left arm out. He then twisted his hips and swung with his right hand, firing his fist directly at Jinya.

Meanwhile, Jinya stepped forward and swung with his left. He aimed to slip past the fist and cut off the upper part of Tsuchiura's right arm.

Both their attacks missed, and they merely exchanged places. Jinya managed to evade the punch, but in doing so he had to give up on making a proper strike.

Tsuchiura's strike relied on the wind-up action of a punch, utilizing the torque created when he rotated the trunk of his body along its horizontal axis. What's more, all his movements were made in essentially a single moment, showing he was well trained in the basics of kenpo. His speed came from technique, not pure physical ability. He used the refined fist of a man, not the physique granted from being a demon.

A demon who used the techniques of a man... In that sense, he was similar to Okada Kiichi—and even more so to Jinya himself. Jinya and Tsuchiura both used their demon physiques and human techniques to their advantage. In other words, they had the same strengths.

That made Tsuchiura a troublesome opponent, but it was no use complaining about it. He focused his mind, immersing himself deeper into the duel.

He turned, then stepped in and made a diagonal slash without hesitation. Tsuchiura swept the strike away with his right arm, then thrust his left fist toward Jinya's abdomen.

Jinya knew he would be incapacitated by a direct hit from such a powerful arm, so he let go of his sword with his right hand, then thrust his palm out—not to attack, but to dodge and lay the groundwork for his next move. The moment his palm hit the outer side of Tsuchiura's left forearm, Jinya sidestepped the punch, then continued further around Tsuchiura's left side. With his left arm blocking his own attack, Tsuchiura would be a moment late to react.

That was just what Jinya wanted. While he was dodging, he had repositioned his sword in his left hand so he was holding it in a reverse grip. With his right hand still on Tsuchiura's arm, Jinya took a half step with his right foot, sunk his weight low, and dug both his feet into the earth. Using all the strength he possessed, he slashed with his reverse grip, aiming at Tsuchiura's neck.

At such a distance, there was no way Tsuchiura could manage to block or dodge in time. Jinya was certain that the blow would be lethal. Tsuchiura's head was as good as his.

His sword became a dull blur, moving faster than the eye could follow. But the result wasn't what Jinya expected.

There was a high-pitched ring, like metal colliding with metal.

"What...?" Jinya's eyes went wide. His strike hadn't cut Tsuchiura's neck. In fact, it hadn't even left a scratch. His sword had just stopped at his opponent's neck.

The skin of a demon was harder than that of a human. A mediocre sword could never hope to pierce a demon's skin, but the creatures were by no means impervious. A renowned, masterpiece sword would be capable of killing them, and even a normal one could cut with the right skill. Jinya had already killed numerous demons with Kadono tachi blades.

But that only made him all the more astonished now. Yarai was the culmination of Kadono's sword-making techniques, as well as his demonhunting partner for many years, and yet it hadn't so much as scratched Tsuchiura's skin.

Seeing an opening, Tsuchiura made his move. He stepped forward into Jinya's space, pulled a fist back to his flank, then pushed off his left leg and rotated his body.

Jinya sensed danger. Because he'd aimed for Tsuchiura's neck, he was closer than he should have been. At this distance, the fist was faster than the sword.

Using his rotation to its limit, Tsuchiura thrust his right arm forward toward Jinya's abdomen. His fist seemed adamant on barreling straight through Jinya.

Jinya let his center of gravity fall back and kicked off the ground, blocking the attack with his free right arm.

"Ngh!" The blow was fierce, to the extent that he couldn't stifle his groan.

There had almost been no point in blocking it. His right arm creaked, and the impact still reached his internal organs.

Still, it was his turn to strike. Now using two hands, he swung down on Tsuchiura's skull with all his might, but that same metallic ring sounded. No matter how fiercely he struck, his sword wouldn't cut the skin. Jinya stepped back, putting distance between himself and his foe.

"Your efforts are futile." Tsuchiura closed the same distance and prepared to strike again. His left foot dug into the earth while his right slid forward. He pulled his fist back to his side, twisting it against his torso so it faced up. There was nothing peculiar about the action, which was the standard stance one took before throwing a punch...and yet a shiver ran down Jinya's spine all the same.

Jinya protected his front with both arms, leaping backward to try and reduce some of the incoming force. Tsuchiura swung, not caring about Jinya's defense. His punch was both orthodox and unusual, in a way.

Tsuchiura's level of polish, not his technique, was the real threat. The power provided by the rotation of his hips was perfectly transferred to his knuckles, creating an explosive punch. His movements were textbook standard throughout, but the perfection with which he moved his whole body was terrifying. One could only imagine the amount of training required to reach such a level.

It lasted no more than a moment, but Jinya was still awed by what he saw.

Then the air roared. The demon's fist barreled into Jinya's defenses and an impact like no other assailed his arms. He was sent flying back, seeing the ground twice as he spun over.

He only survived the blow because he was a demon himself. If he had taken such a punch back when he was human, he would surely have been torn apart like paper.

Lying on the ground, he checked his condition. His arms had somehow remained unbroken, but the force of the blow had damaged his internal organs. His whole body felt numb, to the point that he couldn't move. The taste of rust spread inside his mouth. He spat out the gathered blood, then lifted his head to glare at Tsuchiura.

"A shame. Your blade cannot hope to cut me, no matter how renowned it might be. My body is unyielding." The demon's voice was emotionless, as if it were merely stating a fact.

Jinya was lucky to have survived, and it would take some time for him to stand again. Naturally, his opponent wouldn't give him an opportunity to recover. Tsuchiura slowly approached to deliver the finishing blow.

Jinya gathered strength in his core, causing his body to painfully ache. Ignoring the pain, he tried to sit up. "Ngggaaaaaahh!"

He couldn't die here, he thought. But his body just wouldn't listen. The demon came closer as Jinya remained unable to rise.

Then the demon suddenly stopped.

"Oh?" There was something in Tsuchiura's voice, perhaps admiration.

Naotsugu was standing before the defenseless Jinya, blocking his opponent's way. "Miura Naotsugu, what is the meaning of this?"

"This man is my friend. You'll have to go through me if you want to kill him." Naotsugu drew his sword and held it in front of him, pointing the tip at Tsuchiura's eyes. His voice was strong-willed; all fear had left his body.

"Laughable. What can you manage against me?" The demon's words were not mocking. Naotsugu could not defeat Tsuchiura, and that was a simple fact. But Naotsugu knew the foolishness of his actions better than anyone else there.

"I know I can't beat you...but I am a samurai, and there are times a samurai must fight even if they know it's hopeless!" To abandon a friend in need went against the values of a samurai. Though he knew he was facing death, Naotsugu held his sword with vigor unthinkable of his usual self.

Faced with such a man, Tsuchiura seemed to turn a bit somber and closed his eyes. But when he reopened them, his ghastly countenance had returned. He now recognized Naotsugu as his enemy. "Very well then, Miura Naotsugu. You shall die here for the sake of my lord."

Jinya bit his lip in frustration. The situation was different, but he was reminded of the other beloved people whom he had lost. Images of the woman he loved with her heart pierced in front of him and his father in the form of a demon flitted through his mind.

"Naotsugu, don't. You can't beat him," Jinya said.

"Didn't you hear me? As a samurai, I cannot run from here." Naotsugu didn't even look back. Jinya hadn't known he could show such obstinance, but now his stubbornness could only end in his death.

"Die." Tsuchiura raised a fist over his head.

Jinya was more than three ken away. There was no way he could make it over there. Yet again, he had failed to protect a companion.

No. Not this time. Jinya grimaced. By sheer luck, some of the feeling in his body had returned while Tsuchiura and Naotsugu were talking. He forced his aching body to move against its will.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

The moment he shrugged off the pain and stood up, he swung his sword horizontally with *Flying Blade*. The slash moved through the air and closed the distance in an instant. It wouldn't leave a mark on Tsuchiura with his ability, but that was fine. *Flying Blade* only needed to distract him, to turn his attention back to Jinya.

Naotsugu looked at Jinya in bewilderment, but answers would have to come later. Jinya moved past him, ignoring his pain as he approached Tsuchiura.

Tsuchiura must have thought his earlier punch would keep Jinya down, as his gaze was a mixture of surprise and faint praise.

Belatedly, Jinya thought about the mistakes he had made up until now. He had called Tsuchiura insane for revealing his demon form in the open like this, but perhaps he himself had been the truly insane one. Tsuchiura was among the most powerful demons he'd ever battled. Thinking he could stay in his human form to fight him was nothing but *arrogant* of Jinya. He had been the one acting insane. Tsuchiura was not an opponent he could fight with anything less than his full power.

And so Jinya would no longer hold anything back.

The sickening sound of creaking flesh could be heard. Jinya's body became inhuman as his skin and hair changed color and his muscles began to protrude abnormally. In no time at all, he had become a demon of asymmetrical proportions, but his transformation didn't stop there.

He murmured "Superhuman Strength," and his left arm began to pulse. It began to distort down to his very bones, swelling into a massive, grotesque appendage. He clenched the hand into a fist, and the tightening was audible.

His eyes, now red, focused on the target he would kill. He swung his arm, aiming for Tsuchiura's heart. The fist carried an extraordinary amount of force, enough to leave a gaping hole in a normal opponent. The punch landed perfectly on Tsuchiura's left breast.

"Indomitable."

But Tsuchiura remained uninjured; he was only pushed back three steps or so. This was Jinya's most powerful attack, and it had amounted to almost nothing.

"...I see. This is your power."

The skin of demons could be tough, but it shouldn't be tough enough to resist *Superhuman Strength* gouging a hole through it. The "*Indomitable*" Tsuchiura spoke of must've been an ability to harden himself.

"Indeed. My power grants me an unyielding body."

A simple but powerful ability. If what he claimed was true, then there was no

tool in Jinya's arsenal to beat Tsuchiura—not if even *Superhuman Strength* was too weak. Jinya had no means of defeating Tsuchiura, but he couldn't run or Naotsugu would be killed. He had to at least buy enough time for Naotsugu to get away.

"Naotsugu, run," Jinya said. No reply came, so he was about to repeat himself at full volume when he looked over and immediately lost all words.

"Jin-...dono?" Naotsugu's face was full of fear and confusion, as if he were looking at a monster.

...No, not "as if." Naotsugu was looking at a monster.

Natsu's harsh words remained deep within Jinya to this day. He didn't realize it, but he had been avoiding showing his demon form to others. With each demon he devoured, he had only become more of an abomination, a patchwork of hideous features. He was a shadow of his former self at this point.

Jinya was weak, and he hated himself for it. He was terrified of showing others his ugliness. He called himself Naotsugu's friend, but he would have kept him in the dark forever if he could.

"I said run, damn it!" Through a grimace, Jinya forced himself to shout.

Naotsugu trembled, then finally ran. As he left, Jinya could hear him quietly murmuring, "I'm sorry..."

This was fine. It hurt a bit, but Jinya was relieved, to tell the truth. His friend would be safe.

All that remained was to do something about Tsuchiura. With no way to win, Jinya had to cobble together a backup plan. But what could he do against an opponent who couldn't be injured?

While Jinya pondered, Tsuchiura lowered his guard and let his arms hang at his side.

"...What's the meaning of this?" Jinya asked when he saw that Tsuchiura had lost interest in fighting.

Sounding as if he couldn't care one bit, Tsuchiura replied, "My target is Miura Naotsugu. I have no reason to fight now that he is gone."

He turned, leaving himself defenseless—likely out of confidence in his *Indomitable*. He seemed to almost be daring Jinya to try and attack him.

Jinya was left dazed, unable to comprehend Tsuchiura's sudden change of heart.

After walking a few steps, Tsuchiura looked back as though he'd just remembered something. "I told you once before that humans and demons are incompatible." His eyes carried pity, even though the two had been fighting only moments ago. "Do you see what I mean now?"

Jinya glanced at the townspeople watching him from afar. Their gazes were full of fear...fear of Tsuchiura and of him as well.

Humans reject what is inhuman. Their fear was only natural.

"Father..."

Jinya's own beloved daughter was watching in the crowd. He knew such fear was appropriate for a human, yet he couldn't help but feel his heart break.

"I've said this before, but my master has accepted me. He harbors no prejudice and will accept anyone, man or demon, so long as they have potential. Of course, he is also willing to cut off anyone who lacks potential. Think about what that means."

Leaving those words behind, Tsuchiura departed.

The gazes of the townspeople gathered on the one demon who remained. Fear. Disgust. Loathing. These negative emotions seemed to cling to his very being.

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"It's a monster."

"I think I know that guy..."

"Yeah, I've seen him around too."

"So he's a demon."
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Perhaps the pain Jinya felt was left over from Tsuchiura's strike, or perhaps it was something else entirely. Either way, he didn't want to hear another word.

Invisibility... With a whisper, his form melted away.

And so the two demons were gone.

It was early afternoon. Clouds like soft blots of ink were spread thin across the autumn sky.

All things existed in a perpetual cycle of change.

The days of peace Jinya held dear had proved brittle, and they were lost somewhere in the vicissitudes of time.

1

H_{E DIDN'T} WANT to become stronger.

He just wanted a body that would never fail him.

I remember it even now. We were looking out on such a beautiful landscape.

We would spend our nights by the river, listening to it flow softly as we talked. I loved her and she loved me. Things weren't perfect, but it was a good enough life for me.

She called for me that day like she always did, and I went up that small hill to meet her. She greeted me with a smile and said "I love you" in a sad voice.

My heart began to race, right before I felt pain course through me. I turned around and saw several men holding bloodstained swords. I had been stabbed, and yet she didn't so much as flinch.

I realized then that this had all been a plot from the start. I'd been tricked.

Sharp and dull pains ran through me. Was it my body that was in agony, or something else? Something broke inside me as my consciousness began to dim.

"Damned demon." The men uttered profanities as they carved me up.

As soon as I realized I would die if they left me this way, my body began to move on its own. I let my swell of hatred take over and mowed the men down, rendering them a bloody mess of corpses.

But I couldn't stop.

I felt an unpleasant sensation in my fingers, then realized my hand had pierced her. Perhaps this was what she deserved, a just end for the woman who'd tried to kill me. But she still smiled, just as I knew she would.

In a voice full of remorse, she said, "I'm sorry. I couldn't be strong like you..."

Unconsciously, I grabbed her hand and felt her life ebb away. The only warmth I could feel came from her blood on my skin as her own body grew colder and colder.

Only then did I come to my senses and realize what I had done.

Then, a fade to black.

The dream ended.

But every time I closed my eyes, I still went back to the beautiful landscape we saw that day.

That was why I made a wish...

Visions of a now ancient and meaningless past flitted through Tsuchiura's mind. His expression remained flat as he cleared away the thoughts of the woman he once knew.

He reminded himself how pointless such thoughts were and refocused himself on the task at hand. He raised his face and looked at the lord he swore loyalty to.

"Welcome back, Tsuchiura. How did things go?"

The two were in a tatami-matted room in the Hatakeyama estate. The person sitting only one ken in front of Tsuchiura was a narrow-eyed man with a more wrinkled visage as of late, Hatakeyama Yasuhide. Yasuhide kept a fake smile on his face while he looked at Tsuchiura as though evaluating him.

"Forgive me, but Miura Naotsugu got away." Tsuchiura bowed deep enough for his forehead to touch the tatami mats. He had been sent to kill Miura Naotsugu on Yasuhide's orders, but Jinya got in the way and forced him to retreat in disgrace. "I take all responsibility for my failure. Please give me whatever punishment you see fit."

Tsuchiura was serious, but Yasuhide brushed the idea of punishment off lightly. "Tsuchiura, I do not doubt your loyalty. I know you are worthy of my trust, and that will not change just because of one failure. We can always simply try again."

Yasuhide sounded as though he didn't mind at all, but Tsuchiura wasn't so foolish as to think for a moment that his lord was lenient. Yasuhide was a man who could easily cut off useless pawns. In a sense, that made him more impartial than anyone else.

Whether they were men or demons, Yasuhide would keep others around so long as they proved useful to his ends. He didn't punish Tsuchiura because he knew the demon was still worth something to him. Tsuchiura saw he had the man's trust and would do anything to keep it.

"Thank you, Yasuhide-sama. Next time, without fail, I shall kill Miura Naotsugu."

"Oh, don't worry about that anymore. I want you to head over to Kyoto next."

"Kyoto?"

"Yes. The city is a mess right now. Lord Matsudaira is holding down the antishogunates for the time being, but not without difficulty. Your strength is needed there."

Matsudaira Katamori, feudal lord of the Aizu domain, was the Military Commissioner of Kyoto. He used the Shinsengumi, which was under his command, to keep the peace there. Katamori was a supporter of the "Union of the Imperial Court and the Shogunate" policy, which placed him against the anti-shogunates. However, as time went on, things were trending closer to the shogunate's fall. With the formation of the Satsuma-Choshu alliance and a spate of farmer revolts all over the country, the shogunate and the ever-loyal Aizu domain were slowly being backed into a corner.

The situation was dire, but there wasn't a trace of worry in Yasuhide's expression. "I've sent about a hundred lesser demons to Kyoto. I want you to follow after them and discreetly eliminate our opponents there. Use the demons I've sent as your pawns."

"As you wish... Where did you find so many demons, if I may ask?"

"Oh, there was this curious liquor going around. Sadly, it's not available anymore, but I made good use of what I could get."

Tsuchiura didn't understand the answer, but he didn't press any further. He

had his orders, and that was that. Yasuhide had given him his trust, so he had to follow his commands to make sure that trust wasn't misplaced. That was the code Tsuchiura lived by.

Truth be told, Tsuchiura hadn't the slightest interest in the country's political issues. He served Yasuhide for one purpose and one purpose only: to repay the man for taking him in when he was a drifter who had been left betrayed by humans.

It had been more than ten years ago now since Yasuhide offered Tsuchiura his hand. "Place your trust in me. We demons and samurai are both relics of the old world being tossed aside by the march of time. That makes us something like brethren. Why don't we join forces?"

Although he was a human, Yasuhide had a strength Tsuchiura lacked. He was arrogant, yet worthy of Tsuchiura's respect all the same. Tsuchiura aspired to be like him, unyielding and steadfast.

"I shall take my leave here, then. I will depart for Kyoto and eliminate all those who oppose you," Tsuchiura said.

"Please do."

Tsuchiura began to leave the room but stopped. With some hesitation, he asked, "Yasuhide-sama, if I may ask...was it truly necessary to attack Miura Naotsugu with the ronin present, and to reveal my true form?"

It was by no coincidence that Tsuchiura had attacked Naotsugu while he was walking in the street with Jinya. Yasuhide's exact order had been for Tsuchiura to kill Naotsugu while the two were together. That made little sense, as Jinya would try to interfere if he were present; it would be much easier to kill Naotsugu while he was alone. Tsuchiura couldn't make sense of the specification.

"It was," Yasuhide said simply. "Is that a satisfactory answer?"

"...It is." Tsuchiura didn't pursue the matter further. Many years ago, he had decided to put his trust in Yasuhide, so he would continue to follow whatever orders he gave. That was what it meant to trust someone, after all. Besides, even if his orders seemed bizarre, Yasuhide was wise. He had to have a reason

for what he asked.

After convincing himself with that logic, Tsuchiura left his doubts behind.

"I'm counting on you, Tsuchiura."

The sliding paper door made a soft sound as it slid closed.

The distance between the two had only been a single ken, yet they had felt so far apart.

People tended to avoid the abandoned Mizuho Temple because rumors of demons had been connected to it on two separate occasions. That made it the perfect place to hide.

It was dark out, past dusk. The pale moon waited conspicuously behind thin clouds. In the main building of Mizuho Temple was a single grotesque creature.

Jinya leaned weakly against the wall and fell to the ground. His gaze wandered idly as he sat there, not even reverting to human form.

He had fled straight here after his battle with Tsuchiura. He didn't even know why he chose this place. Perhaps it was because this was where Mosuke and Hatsu met their end. Perhaps it was because he'd met Yuunagi and Nomari here. Or maybe he just thought a temple rumored to shelter man-eating demons was appropriate for someone like him. He thought about why he'd come here for a few moments, then realized it was meaningless speculation and put it out of mind. He didn't have the luxury to focus on such things at a time like this.

He wondered where Naotsugu had gone. He wondered if Ofuu and Nomari got away. He was in no state to check on them himself, as the wounds he'd sustained were far from superficial. His bones were intact, but his internal organs were a mess. Demons were durable, but not immortal. He couldn't push himself when he was in this state.

But even more than that, his emotions rendered him immobile. If he really wanted to, he could force himself to find the others, crawling if he had to. But his legs felt like lead as they were.

"I've lost people yet again..."

The townsfolk had gawked at Jinya with fear and disgust. The reactions of Naotsugu and Nomari were seared into his mind. The pain that pierced his heart was leagues above what Tsuchiura's fists had caused.

Jinya had revealed his true form knowing full well that demons were detested, and yet he was still devastated. Perhaps it was foolish for a monster like him to even think he could live with humans. The reality of his existence made his body feel sluggish. Everything felt too tiring all of a sudden. The weariness of his body and mind slowly pulled his eyelids shut.

I'm tired. Just let me sleep.

He needed to rest to heal his wounds. At least, that was the excuse he gave himself as he tried to let his consciousness drift. But then he opened his eyes at the smell of something sweet.

"Is that...winter daphne?"

Winter daphne was the flower that signaled the start of spring. Its aroma was out of place for the present season, but he didn't question it at all.

He raised his head and saw a petite young woman, but he knew who it was even before he looked. The winter daphne was her flower, after all.

"So this is where you were."

Ofuu was wearing her usual gentle smile.

2

 $J_{\text{INYA HEARD THE RAIN}}$ pouring down. He hadn't even realized it had been raining outside the temple. Ofuu's shoulders were slightly wet, evidence she had searched for him in the downpour.

"I've been looking for you," she said.

He was about to ask why, but then he realized there was no reason why she wouldn't be. She knew he was a demon. She herself was a demon. His

transformation likely hadn't been much of a shock at all. She acted like her usual graceful self, despite his grotesque and asymmetrical appearance.

"I'm surprised you knew where I went," he said.

"I didn't. I just went around to all the places I figured you might go." She giggled and came over to sit down next to him.

A demon and a young woman sitting shoulder to shoulder. The two made for a strange, poorly matched pair.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"This isn't enough to kill me."

"You know that's not what I mean." There was no ill will in her words, and Jinya didn't know how to respond.

The two sat without saying a word for a while, but the silence wasn't oppressive. If anything, it was comforting. Precisely because the two were both demons, they could understand and ease one another's pain without saying a thing.

"What are you going to do next?" Ofuu abruptly asked, as if she'd suddenly remembered the question.

Jinya couldn't stay in Edo now that his identity had been revealed. It was best for him to leave as soon as possible, but he had unfinished business.

"I need to slay Tsuchiura...that demon from earlier." His voice was soft and powerless.

Ofuu showed no emotion, merely casting her gaze down slightly. Did his reply come as a surprise, or had she expected it? He couldn't tell from her reaction. But her voice betrayed worry. "...You can't. You couldn't even injure him."

She was right. At present, Jinya had no way of breaking through Tsuchiura's *Indomitable*. Nevertheless, he still had to kill his fellow demon—he was aiming for Naotsugu's life under Yasuhide's orders.

Yasuhide was finally using his demon pawn to take direct action. If left to his own devices, Tsuchiura could very well crush all the imperial loyalists of the anti-shogunate faction. Jinya could just barely accept Naotsugu losing his life in

a conflict, but not at the hands of a demon.

"Even so, I can't run. It's against all I stand for," Jinya said firmly, without further explanation.

The silence that followed was tense and lacked the comfort of the earlier one.

The rain seemed to grow heavier. Its echo sounded even louder in the stillness of the temple.

"Jinya-kun..." Ofuu was the one to break the long silence. She spoke with hesitation, but there was determination in her voice too. "I've always wondered...why exactly *do* you fight demons?"

Her question was direct and to the point. There was seriousness in her eyes, and she clearly didn't intend to just make small talk.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn't told her of his past yet. Why shouldn't he? Surely he could trust her with the information.

Without meeting her eyes, he began to speak, bit by bit. "It all happened more than twenty years ago now. Back then, I lived in a village called Kadono..."

He started to divulge his disgraceful story, the one in which he failed to protect a single person. The story of a pathetic fool of a man.

"Kadono produced iron, but I didn't have the talent to be a craftsman. I was lucky enough to show some promise with the sword, though, so I became the guardian of Itsukihime...our village's shrine maiden."

"A shrine maiden..."

"Yes. Her name was Byakuya." He was surprised by how softly he said the name, almost allowing it to be drowned out by the rain. Ofuu must have noticed the tenderness in his voice. A slight awkwardness followed, paired with a brief silence.

"Did you...love her?" Ofuu asked.

"...I did. She was someone who put aside any prospect of her own happiness to pray for the well-being of the village. I respected that and swore to protect her."

But he'd failed.

"One day, demons attacked the village. I tried to fulfill my duty as a shrine maiden guardian, but I failed and lost everything. The demon that killed her left with a vow to bring ruin to the world."

The night when it all happened was so long ago now. He'd failed to protect the woman he loved, lost the family he treasured, and even seen his noble duty dragged through the mud. Only one thing remained in him.

"I felt hatred. Hatred for the demon who took everything from me. I was told that demon would become the Demon God, a lord of darkness, and return to Kadono in more than a hundred years' time, so I've made it my mission to stop her. That's all I've lived for since then."

That was why he sought power, to one day stand before the calamity that would threaten all of mankind. He wanted the strength to feel less conflicted in his hatred.

"I fight demons to devour them and take their power. My only goal is to grow stronger."

He would be lying if he said that all his killing meant nothing to him. He'd cared about many of the ones he devoured, such as Mosuke and Yuunagi. But he devoured them all the same, because that was the path he'd chosen.

"The demon who killed Byakuya is named Suzune...and she was my younger sister." He felt anger flare up inside him just by uttering her name. His hatred wasn't even an emotion at this point—it was a part of his very being. Just as one could not stop themselves from breathing air, he could not part from his hatred of her no matter how hard he tried to forgive her.

"Then...you want to become stronger so you can kill your sister?" Ofuu asked, getting straight to the point. There was no judgment in her calm, measured tone.

"...Who can say?" he replied.

She clearly didn't like his answer, and she cast her gaze down slightly. There was no anger in her eyes, but Jinya saw something resembling sadness. She seemed to take his reply as a sign she wasn't good enough to hear his true

feelings. But that wasn't it. He simply didn't know what his true feelings were supposed to be, much less how to express them. "Am I not someone you can tell?" she asked.

"No, I trust you. I just don't know how to answer that question."

The hatred burning inside him wouldn't allow forgiveness for Suzune, but the happiness they once shared wouldn't let him kill her either. He'd come all this way without even figuring out what the point of it all was.

"I...see. Then let me ask you just one more thing." Ofuu didn't follow up on his vague excuse, nodding with a kind of understanding. Thinking her reaction was a bit odd, he looked at her to see she was already gazing straight at him. "I understand you fight demons to grow stronger, for the purpose of stopping your sister. But why is it that you want to stop her?"

His mind went blank at the question. Why *did* he want to stop her? What made him go down this road?

"I just don't understand," she said. "Why would you choose the path you did if it meant you might have to kill your sister?"

"[..."

"Was it to protect people?"

That had been one of his reasons at one point. When Jinya left Kadono, he told the village chief he would stop the Demon God from bringing ruin to the world. But that goal had since grown hollow to him.

"Or was it because you hated this Suzune-san? Is it revenge you're after?"

He couldn't deny that revenge played a part. That was what had set everything in motion, after all. But if revenge were the only reason he wielded his blade, he wouldn't be wavering anywhere near as much as he was.

He didn't have a clue why he wanted to stop Suzune, but he *just knew* he had to be the one to do it. He needed to end things by his own hand, be it through forgiveness or death. He racked his brain for the reason why, but he couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer. He delved deeper, certain there had to be an explanation somewhere within himself, and managed to dredge up some old

words he'd once said:

"I'm the one who forced her to such an end, so I'll make things right."

And then he understood. The truth he had secretly known deep down but didn't want to acknowledge was finally brought to light.

"Is that it? Do you really hate her that much?" Ofuu asked. Perhaps a man wanting to kill his sister for such a reason seemed insane to her.

"No, that's not it." Jinya shook his head.

Ofuu had given Jinya many important lessons under the pretense of teaching him about flowers. She'd made great efforts to give him a place to belong. He was too shy to say it directly, but he felt indebted to her. Surely he could reveal his weakness to her.

"I still hold Suzune dear," he continued. "But my hatred for her just won't fade. I can feel it even now...the loathing, the malice. I love her so much, yet I can't help but detest her."

Suzune's words had saved him on that distant rainy night. He remembered the warmth of the days they spent together, but the endless hatred welling up inside him blotted it all out.

"I hesitate at the thought of killing her. Decades have passed, and I still haven't figured out exactly what I want to do."

He'd spent all these years lost, but now he understood. He knew just whom he truly wanted to turn his blade against.

"And yet, I swore to stop her. I'm sure that wasn't out of my hatred for her, or a desire to protect people."

He was ready to come to terms with the truth now.

He hadn't selected this path out of a righteous desire to protect others.

Nor had he selected it for revenge against the one who killed the woman he loved.

"...I just wanted to take responsibility for the way of life I chose."

The one who drove his sweet, cherubic little sister to the point of cursing all

of humanity was Jinya himself. That was why he had to stop her. That was the only way he felt he could redeem himself for his mistake. Revenge and saving others amounted to nothing more than pretense. He only wanted to do something about the weakness he saw in himself reflected through Suzune.

He'd been unable to fulfill his role as a protector, then he'd destroyed what remained with his own hand. He'd given into his hatred and become a loathsome demon, one who lived without meaning or purpose.

He truly wanted to turn his blade against his own weak self.

"...I'm so pathetic. I want to kill her and at the same time I want to forgive her. Both things are true. But then, that contradiction is just an excuse for me to cover up my weakness." He showed a feeble smile unbefitting his grotesque appearance. "I'm sure I'll meet a terrible end. I'll never be able to part from my hatred... The way of life I've chosen was wrong."

The truth he'd discovered about himself was hideous and shameful. He had committed murders without even realizing it. What was it all for? He hung his head, grimacing with self-directed disgust.

"Thank goodness." Ofuu nestled closer to Jinya and sighed with relief. "You're the Jinya-kun I know after all. You can admit your mistakes." She smiled softly, as if to show her words weren't empty. "Is it really so important to do what is right?"

A cold breeze slipped past the rain and into the temple. It was harsh, but its touch felt soft. She had probably been the one who turned the harsh wind gentle. Her very presence made the world feel kinder.

She continued, "My dad left his whole life behind for my sake. Knowing what I know now, I can understand that was the wrong thing for him to do as a human."

"Ofuu, that's not—"

"Don't. It's the truth... Because of the choice he made, someone suffered dearly."

Naotsugu respected his older brother from the bottom of his heart. It was cruel of Sadanaga to cut him off without so much as a word. Ofuu, who adored

her father, was willing to admit that—but she still had a happy smile on her face.

"But even so, he managed to save me by doing what he did."

Her smile was as brilliant as a flower in bloom. It was a smile Jinya was familiar with, and one that deeply captivated him.

"Doing what is 'right' isn't always what's best. At the very least, I wouldn't be here if my father had done what was right."

She accepted Jinya's flaws, saying it was okay to be wrong. Her warm words struck a chord with him.

"You fight so you can kill your sister, devour demons to take their power, both for such selfish reasons... Yes, you've chosen the wrong path."

Jinya didn't need her to remind him. In the end, everything he'd done was meaningless. He bit his lip and drooped his head down, but Ofuu's tone turned more forceful when she saw that.

"But even so, there are people whom you've saved."

He was about to argue with her, but then the floor creaked. He looked up and saw that two people had entered the temple building. "What are you two doing here?"

It was Naotsugu, looking awkward like he didn't know what face to make, and Nomari, who seemed to be near tears. Their gazes pained Jinya.

"I'm sorry, we've actually been listening for a while now," Naotsugu replied.

Ofuu said, "These two have been looking for you too, Jinya-kun. They want to apologize."

Naotsugu was clearly still afraid of Jinya. Even so, he looked at him head-on instead of backing away. "I'll be blunt. Your form scares me. Being near something so much more powerful than a human makes me want to flee right this moment."

"I know..." Jinya didn't blame him. Everyone was afraid of death, and spirits like demons were known to take the lives of the unsuspecting. "As you can see, I am a monster. Your fear is warranted."

"No!" Naotsugu yelled, to Jinya's surprise. "You waver and worry over what is right, but you still continue to devote yourself to your way of life. That makes you no different than me. You may be a demon, but you're no monster!"

Jinya was at a loss for words, shocked by the intensity of Naotsugu's emotions. Tears welled up in the man's eyes as he gritted his teeth, but Naotsugu did not avert his gaze.

"Jin-dono, you are my friend. I've run from you one too many times already, but I won't do it again. I want to remain your friend until the very end." Tears and mucus dribbled down his face, rendering him an unsightly mess, but he was still gallant. His half-incoherent plea plucked Jinya's heartstrings.

"Father!" Nomari dove into Jinya's chest for a hug as he sat frozen in shock. She practically clung to him. The action was so natural for a child that it bewildered him all the more.

"Nomari... Aren't you afraid of me?"

She furiously shook her head. She was crying. Her small eyes were wet, and tears dripped down her cheeks. Jinya wanted to wipe those tears away, but he held back because he felt he shouldn't touch her with his hands.

"Father... Father..."

He had never seen her like this before. She was a very well-mannered child, likely due to her circumstances. He'd never thought she could be so upset.

"I'm not afraid, so don't go anywhere..."

Finally, he understood the reason for her behavior. She didn't care about Jinya being a demon; she was scared her father would disappear from her.

How silly.

He himself had been the truly scared one. The mere idea of Nomari leaving him had terrified him to the point of deciding to leave her first instead.

"...You really are such a doting parent, Jin-dono."

"He is. Just hearing Nomari call him 'Father' was enough for him to make such a face."

With a sniff, Naotsugu managed to smile. Ofuu watched the father and daughter warmly.

Jinya reached up to touch his face. On it, he felt not the self-deprecating sneer he expected but a boundlessly happy smile. Feeling embarrassed, he kept silent. When they noticed, Ofuu giggled and Naotsugu began to laugh. Nomari finally stopped crying in his arms, and the mood began to resemble their time together in Kihee, even though they were actually in a temple that had seen better days.

"All of this was made possible by that wrong path you've taken, Jinya-kun. Not so bad, is it?" Ofuu gave Jinya an impish wink which reminded him of her father. Even if they weren't related by blood, some of his personality had still been passed down to her.

"No... No, it isn't." The smile on his face was simple and genuine. He hadn't smiled like this since his youth.

A nostalgic dream surfaced in his mind.

"But you won't stay here with me, will you, Jinta?"

In it, Shirayuki told Jinya that he was certain to continue living the way he had, just as he'd chosen a path that had no room for his feelings for her. She also told him that a day would come when he would realize the meaning of it all, even after he'd lost so much. She always knew just what to say.

He had lost his home, his family, and the woman he loved. He had lost so much, enough to leave him still in despair even after all these years. So long as he continued down his path, he would likely go on to lose more things. Even so, he was not wrong to take the path he did. Though his journey may have been twisted, it allowed him to meet people who would accept his weak and hideous demonic self. He had been too preoccupied with his guilt to see that some good had come from it all.

"Don't worry. My feelings will always be by your side. Now go, achieve your purpose."

He didn't think everything he had done was right. He'd trampled over too many things for him to make that claim. But what he retained and what he'd

found along the way proved he was not empty inside. As he was now, he could accept that he hadn't been wrong.

His body, which felt like lead only moments ago, slowly regained its strength. Some pain remained, but it wouldn't be a problem.

He asked Nomari to step away for a moment, then slowly brought himself up. Still asymmetrical and grotesque, he stood proudly.

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"Jinya-kun..."
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"I'll admit it. I tried to use my hatred as an excuse to justify myself. That was wrong of me." He'd thought he was earnestly pursuing his goal, but in truth he had been standing in place. It hadn't all been for nothing, though. "But admitting that won't change the fact that the Demon God will appear someday. I will likely never be free of my hatred, and I'll fight to kill Suzune in the future. But even so..." His hands were covered in blood, but perhaps they could be used for something beyond killing. "...maybe it's okay for me to want to protect others." He looked at the three before him and smiled.

"You *have* protected many people, Jinya-kun. You just didn't want to believe it."

"I see... So even if I was on the wrong path, I was still able to do some good."

Though it began for the wrong reasons, his path hadn't led him completely astray. At the very least, Ofuu's smile made him want to believe that.

"...I think it's time for me to go," Jinya said. Now that he could move, he had a demon to take care of. Tsuchiura couldn't be left to his own devices, for Naotsugu's sake.

Naotsugu looked remorseful. "I'm sorry... In the end, I'm making you clean up the whole mess."

"Don't worry about it. You're heading to Kyoto. You don't have time for this nonsense."

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"But—"
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[&]quot;Just as it takes a thief to catch a thief, it takes a demon to stop a demon."

[&]quot;I... Thank you, Jin-dono."

"No problem. This is just what I'm meant to do. You should do what you're meant to do as well, both as a human and as a samurai."

Their purposes weren't different because one was a demon and one was a human, but because they'd chosen different paths for themselves. Naotsugu understood that and could allow himself to see Jinya off without shame.

"Take care of Nomari for me, Ofuu. And you be a good little girl, okay, Nomari?"

"Okay, Father."

Jinya patted Nomari's head. She smiled happily, even though she'd been crying only moments ago; a child's emotions were a fickle thing. He walked past the two and began to leave the temple building.

"Take care, Jinya-kun, and come back safely. We'll be waiting for you," Ofuu said. She was always a little worried when she saw him off.

He also responded the same way he always did, not with any words but with a light wave of the hand.

He walked on without looking back. He left the building, continued into the rain, and made his way through the neglected temple grounds.

"Human, why do you wield your blade?"

He heard a voice mixed in with the rain, a question posed long ago by the owner of his grotesque left arm. In the past, he had answered: "For others. I fight to protect others, and nothing else."

Oh, how young he had been. He truly believed in that answer back then. But somewhere along his long journey, he'd lost the presumptuousness to claim he was acting for the sake of others. He could no longer return to the time when his feelings were so straightforward. Even so, the number of things he wanted to protect had slowly increased. There were those even his bloodied hands could save.

That realization made him a little stronger. Up until now, his strength had been devoted to slaying demons and stopping his sister. He obsessed over gaining power and pretended not to notice how weak he really was. Things

would be different now, though. He would use the slight strength the three had given him to proudly declare he would protect others, something he couldn't truly say before.

The rain poured incessantly, having only grown in intensity. Between that and the night's darkness, he could not see the path ahead.

Even so, he did not waver.

He treaded onward, his steps true.

Cold rain battered him, but he was filled with a kind of warmth he hadn't felt since his younger days.

3

 $D_{\text{EMON CHILD.}}$ That's what Tsuchiura had been called by others ever since he was young, due to his abnormal physique. The only one who didn't call him that was a young girl he was close to.

He never thought of himself as unfortunate. Other children his age teased him, but they all knew they couldn't lay a finger on him because of his strength. All they could manage was to call him names from a distance, and such gutless people could never get to him. Occasionally someone would try to get physical, but a single punch would send them off crying.

He lived a lonely childhood as an outcast, but instead of feeling hurt, he developed an understanding of his situation. Through firsthand experience, he had learned that people discriminated over the slightest of differences, so he came to expect nothing good from others. Occasionally adults would bother him, even kicking him away. But he was neither hurt nor disappointed, having come to expect such treatment. By the young age of seven, he had already learned a truth of the world: People were not to be trusted.

After twenty years of living, he had grown to a massive size. He was nearly seven shaku in height and was now simply called a demon instead of a demon child. He was not a real demon, of course, as he possessed dark-brown eyes, but his physique made others call him a demon regardless. The village didn't go

so far as to exile him, but they did try their hardest to ignore his presence.

Both of his parents had already passed away, and there were few people he was on friendly terms with. The village chief indirectly protected him and allowed him to continue living there, but he did not feel like he belonged by any stretch of the imagination. Even so, he still did not consider himself unfortunate —now for different reasons than in his youth.

"Oh, there you are, Tsuchiura." Having found a moment to pause between swings, the ironworker greeted him.

Now a young man, Tsuchiura became the apprentice of a blacksmith and made his living crafting iron products like kitchen knives. He had no particular aspiration to become a blacksmith. Rather, it was the only trade that had been available to an outcast like him.

"Come take a look at this. I'm working on the second one right now. I thought I'd try a little something extra with the temper pattern, so I added some flake spots to go along with the soft waves. Nice and graceful, like a dainty lady, eh?"

Tsuchiura's master nodded with satisfaction as he showed off the sword. The man was a peerless master of his craft, but he was also an oddball. He was considered the greatest blacksmith in the village, but he only worked when the fancy struck him. Except for the material preparation, he stubbornly insisted on handling every step of the manufacturing process alone. People gossiped that his workshop was a place for demons to gather because Tsuchiura was his apprentice, but the workshop's master couldn't care less.

"Leave it at that, Kaneomi. You're weirding your poor disciple out."

But the strangest thing of all about the man was his wife. The rumors of the place being a demon workshop were caused by Tsuchiura's presence, but there really was a demon who frequented the place—and she was none other than the workshop master's wife.

"But just look at 'er, Yato! She's a beauty if I ever saw one."

"...You know that people call you a weirdo because you keep saying strange things like that, right?"

"Hey, don't give me that look... Oh no, not you too, Tsuchiura!"

"Sorry." Tsuchiura couldn't help but smile wryly at the exchange between the man past his thirties and the woman who appeared to be in her mid-teens. Still amused, he started his smithing work.

Tsuchiura was just as distrustful of people as before, but he had now opened his heart to a few: his blacksmithing master who taught him a trade, his master's wife who married a human despite being a demon, and one other.

"Oh, looks like your lady's arrived. Sheesh, get a room, you two," said Tsuchiura's keen-eyed blacksmithing master with a teasing grin on his face.

A person could be seen peering into the workshop from outside. It was none other than the only one who hadn't called Tsuchiura a demon child in his youth.

"Hmm, how about we call it a day here?" the blacksmithing master said.

"Huh? But—"

"It's fine, it's fine. Just get going. Shoo, shoo."

The man often excused Tsuchiura like this.

"You should go. It's good to take breaks every now and then," said the smiling demon with long black hair.

"...Very well. I shall accept your kind offer."

"Yeah, you do that! ... Wait, why do you listen to her but not me? Aren't / your master?!"

Tsuchiura pretended not to hear the man, quickly put away his tools, and left the workshop. The expression on his face was flat, but his heart was aflutter.

As he left, the young woman greeted him with a soft, familiar smi...

Tsuchiura walked through heavy rain along a dark road. He was traveling on Nakasendo, a highway spanning from Nihonbashi in Edo to Sanjyou in Kyoto. It was about 130 ri⁵ long and had sixty-nine rest area stations along it. Like Tokaido, it was one of the Five Highways radiating from Edo as well as a significant trade route for the country.

The rain made it difficult to see. The clamor of rainfall was deafening, and the

darkness seemed to continue indefinitely. Tsuchiura walked alone. The road stretched far ahead, but the poor visibility hid it all from sight. Perhaps that was why memories of the past flitted through his mind...memories he didn't want to remember yet couldn't forget.

He shook his head to dispel the melancholy and drive away the memories. There would be many imperial loyalists in Kyoto. Under his lord's orders, he was going to slaughter them all. He had no need for these distracting thoughts.

A line of pagoda trees appeared by the side of the road, as well as a single tall mound of dirt. Every highway in the country had one of these mounds situated every ri. They functioned identically to milestones and generally had hackberry or pagoda trees planted nearby. Travelers used these mounds to know they were on the right path, and the trees provided shade to rest in. By counting the number of mounds they passed, one could know just how much further their destination would be. Humans came up with such amusing things.

Tsuchiura technically used to be a human himself, having become a demon only after being corrupted by dark emotions. But because he'd been treated like a demon since his youth, he never really considered himself to be human.

He walked on past countless pagoda trees and caught sight of someone leaning against a tree near the mound of dirt. Perhaps it was a traveler, taking shelter from the rain. Wary of them, Tsuchiura strained his eyes, then recoiled in shock. The figure under the tree was something *inhuman*.

They leaned against the tree with their arms folded and their left eye shut. Their skin resembled dull metal, and their left arm was abnormally swollen and dark red. Their wet, silver hair extended to the top of their shoulders and gleamed like a blunt blade.

"You sure took a while," they said as they slowly came out from under the tree and moved onto the road. They acted brazenly, without a hint of nervousness. Their eyes were red.

"You..."

It was Jinya, the demon Tsuchiura had fought not long ago. Once again, he stood in Tsuchiura's way.

"I've been waiting for you." Jinya unsheathed his sword, then let his arm hang without taking up a stance. "I was able to question some demons earlier. I hear you're heading to Kyoto?"

Tsuchiura furrowed his brow slightly. Apparently, the demons disguised as townspeople Jinya had met earlier were indeed Yasuhide's people. It was lucky that he'd stopped them by chance.

"Did you kill them?"

"I did. They didn't even amount to a warm-up."

Their conversation lacked emotion. Jinya saw no problem killing those who got in his way, and Tsuchiura couldn't care less about mere disposable pawns.

"Why?" A chilling question came through the torrential rain. "Why are you so intent on getting in Yasuhide-sama's way, to the point of slaughtering your own kind?" It was a fair question. No matter what business Tsuchiura had in Kyoto, it had nothing to do with Jinya. "Now that your true form has been exposed to the world, you have no reason to fight for humans. I can't understand your intentions."

Tsuchiura regarded Jinya with a perplexed look. Perhaps humans discriminated over the slightest of differences, but even demons were wary of things they could not understand. That realization brought Tsuchiura some calm, despite the tenseness of the situation.

"I've said it before, but I do not support either side of the ongoing conflict," Jinya began. "Whether it be opening the borders or repelling the foreigners, I haven't the slightest interest either way... That said, I just cannot bring myself to agree with Hatakeyama Yasuhide's methods."

In Kyoto, the anti-shogunate imperial loyalist faction and the pro-shogunate faction were currently at war with one another. Their beliefs differed, but both sides were fighting for what they thought was the best future for the country, staking their already short time in this world to accomplish something they believed in. Their lives, ephemeral like the flowers that bloom to scatter, held a beauty that the long-lived demons lacked.

"This is mankind's battle, one that will determine history... Monsters like us have no place in it."

"That's why you stand in my way?"

"No, I am not so eccentric. My reason for being here is much simpler."

Jinya was a demon. Though he genuinely believed mankind's battle should be theirs alone, that belief wasn't enough to completely prevent him from acting. He stood here now for a very simple reason indeed.

"My friend's battlefield lies beyond this point. I'm sorry, but I cannot let you pass."

Jinya didn't want some interloper butting in on the path his friend had chosen. He could accept Naotsugu losing his life fighting other humans. He could accept Naotsugu dying honorably for the sake of his samurai code. But Jinya could not accept Naotsugu being a victim of Yasuhide's schemes.

"I thought I had no right to intervene. I'm ruled by hatred, and I wish to kill my very own sister. But now I've learned that even someone awful like me can save others." He finally had an answer to that question that had been posed long ago. He may not have known what decision he'd make at the end of his journey, but even he had people to protect. "For the sake of this way of life I can't part from, the small beliefs I stubbornly cling to..." Not justice, but his own selfish desires. Therein lay his purpose. "...and for those I wish to protect, I wield my blade."

Even if the way of life he chose was wrong, there were people for him to save. His blade would no longer waver.

"I see..." Tsuchiura nodded in understanding. Then, abruptly, his body swelled. His clothing ripped from his expanding muscles, and a pattern formed on his skin. He became a demon once more. "So, you have something you believe in as well." His red eyes reflected neither hatred nor malice, but something bordering sincerity.

Jinya wondered what had provoked such a look, but he had no way of knowing. Still, he understood. Tsuchiura also fought for something he believed in.

"That's right. And I have no intention of giving it up."

"Naturally, neither do I."

That meant there was only one thing for them to do.

"I'll kill you."

"You're dead."

In the rain, the two demons repeated the same declarations they'd made once before.

4

PEOPLE ARE NOT to be trusted.

He knew this, but he did not truly understand.

She can't be trusted, a voice whispered.

And so, he made a wish, a wish for a body that would never fail him.

Surely, if he had such a body...

It was a moonless night. Cold rain poured down, rustling the leaves of the pagoda tree. The pliant branches drooped from the weight, their outline looking feeble in the darkness.

There wasn't a human in sight—only two hideous demons.

Jinya slipped under Tsuchiura's burly, outstretched arm and slashed with his sword. As he expected, the blade was repelled with ease.

Tsuchiura's next move was a swift punch that Jinya blocked with his grotesque left arm, but he couldn't fully stop the impact. His body painfully creaked, but he did not retreat. Instead, he slashed once more, this time aiming for the neck. His blade made contact, then his hands went numb. Tsuchiura's head remained firmly attached, without so much as a scratch on his skin.

Jinya clicked his tongue. His next move came quick; he kicked off the ground

and fell back. After putting enough distance between them, he took up a stance again and stared down Tsuchiura. Jinya had put all his might into his swings, but they were no different from a light breeze to Tsuchiura.

The fight continued, but Tsuchiura remained unscathed after each exchange.

"It doesn't matter how many times you try; it's futile."

By now, Jinya had struck him more than ten times, yet Tsuchiura still remained as composed as ever.

In terms of technique, the two were about even. There was no big difference between them in strength or speed either. *Superhuman Strength* and *Dart* could give Jinya a momentary edge in both those departments, but he was still the underdog in this battle. His opponent just couldn't be hurt, no matter how many attacks he absorbed. In this battle between foes of equal strength, Tsuchiura's unyielding body proved dominant.

"It's not futile." Despite his disadvantage, Jinya hadn't lost the will to fight. He fearlessly pointed at Tsuchiura's chest, where a tiny wound had been made. It was nothing more than a minuscule scratch, but a scratch was still a wound. Jinya had succeeded, albeit only slightly. The tides were against him, but Tsuchiura was by no means unbeatable. "That ability to harden your body, *Indomitable*...you can't move while you use it, can you?"

A slight twitch told Jinya all he needed to know. His deduction had been right. *Indomitable* was the ultimate defensive ability, but the hardening of the body made the muscles and joints unable to move.

"What of it? That doesn't change the fact that you cannot defeat me."

Tsuchiura remained calm even with his ability's weakness exposed. But of course he would. Jinya's hypothesis may have been correct, but Tsuchiura was still moving freely. Jinya had another theory as to why that was.

Tsuchiura was likely using his *Indomitable* only at the very moment Jinya's attacks connected. That was how he managed to keep his defenses up while still firing off menacing punches. He had combined his demon power with his human technique to reach a higher plane of fighting. In a sense, he was what Jinya aspired to become: a perfect combination of man and demon.

Tsuchiura was truly strong. His unyielding body was a problem, but the most frightening part was his ability to read his opponent, which was honed so finely that he could sense the instant Jinya's attack was about to connect. Tsuchiura wasn't strong because he had the physical strength of a demon. He wasn't strong because he had the techniques of a human. He wasn't even strong because of his *Indomitable* ability. He was strong because he knew how to use his skill to its full potential. In other words, Tsuchiura was strong because of who he was.

Without slackening his stance, Jinya kept his attention on his opponent and wondered how he could get past *Indomitable*.

He tried aiming for a moment when Tsuchiura was moving, but Tsuchiura just used his ability right before impact. He tried *Dart* to quickly close the distance and *Invisibility* to hide his form, but Tsuchiura easily defended himself. *Flying Blade* only had the same strength as a normal attack, and his *Dog Spirits* lacked power. He had already seen that *Superhuman Strength* wasn't enough. There was *Falsehood*, but that wasn't even an attack at all. That left one thing...

Jinya's thoughts stopped there. The nearly eight-shaku tall man approached at a speed unthinkable for his size. A normal person wouldn't even have been able to react. Tsuchiura's upper body didn't sway in the slightest as he came straight forward, moving in a perfectly honed fashion. A wall of rain formed, and Tsuchiura's fist bore through it.

Faced with an attack, Jinya stepped forward instead of retreating. He swung Yarai with his right hand, sending it along the underside of Tsuchiura's arm. Jinya's goal wasn't to block the attack but to divert the fist's trajectory. This was one of the techniques with no wasted movements Okada Kiichi had used. Jinya could imitate the man, although only imperfectly.

He couldn't completely divert that attack, though, and Tsuchiura's fist gouged out the flesh of his left shoulder. Jinya felt pain, but he ignored it and retaliated by striking Tsuchiura's own left shoulder with his left palm.

"Didn't I tell you it was futile?"

Jinya's hand felt like he had struck metal. *Indomitable* proved unyielding yet again. In fact, Tsuchiura was so sure he'd be unharmed that he allowed the

palm strike to connect. His gaze was scornful, but Jinya didn't care. He hadn't planned to defeat the man with his palm strike anyway. He just needed to touch him.

Jinya's grotesque left arm began to pulse. Tsuchiura sensed something was wrong and tried to pull back, but it was too late.

Jinya had no means of getting through *Indomitable*, but he did have a power that could affect others while ignoring their defenses. If Tsuchiura wouldn't physically yield, Jinya could just absorb him into his own body with *Assimilation*.

In an instant, Tsuchiura's consciousness rushed into Jinya through his left arm.

The world was dyed in white. In a distant memory that was not his own, Jinya somehow saw the place where it all began for him.

In Kadono, there was a small hill that overlooked the river. Tsuchiura and his female friend, his junior by three years, had been fond of this place in their youth. Today, they held hands as she brought him here, just as she had when they were children.

Their village lacked opportunities for recreation, but even if it hadn't, an outcast like Tsuchiura wouldn't have been able to play with others anyway. Perhaps she brought him out here so often because she knew he needed someone to spend time with.

The clear waters visible from the hill gleamed with the light of the sun. The two loved the sight and would spend days in their youth just gazing out at it.

"Apparently the emperor's advisor passed away. War's on the horizon again."

Occasionally, Tsuchiura's blacksmithing master would pass along things he'd heard from visiting merchants. The temporary peace brought by Totoyomi Hideyoshi would be undone with his death, pushing the country closer to war again. In all likelihood, a big conflict was coming that would decide the fate of the nation. The iron-making village of Kadono would be very busy soon.

"What's wrong?"

"...It's nothing." The young woman hung her head, perhaps bored of the

topic. She tried to smile, but it was too stiff to convince Tsuchiura.

"If something's bothering you, you can tell me." She was the only one who'd stayed by his side in his youth, so he wanted to repay the favor by being there for her as much as he could.

For an instant, she looked close to tears. "I see... Then there is something I'd like to tell you." But the gloom faded from her face, and it was replaced by a warm, teary gaze directed his way. Her voice trembled nervously. "I love you."

His heart raced. He was in disbelief, but a happy smile still rose to his face. He tried to say something in reply, but then he felt a sharp pain in his back, followed by another and another. He looked down and saw several blades protruding from his chest. With difficulty, he turned around and saw several men with sickening grins standing behind him—youths from the village.

"Damned demon."

They proceeded to cut him some more. Just being called a demon didn't mean he could actually be as strong as one. He was pierced over and over with laughable ease.

Once more, he turned to look at her. She was near tears, but there was no surprise on her face. She had known they were coming...no, she had called Tsuchiura here for this very purpose.

"Heh heh. Thanks for helping us kill this demon," one of the men said to her.

Oh, Tsuchiura thought. *I was betrayed*. The moment he understood that, his knees buckled. How foolish he had been. Despite all the disdain he'd endured, he hadn't truly learned a thing. How could he have trusted her?

"All that's left is that demon woman. We should've gotten rid of her from the start."

Demon woman. Tsuchiura figured that referred to the blacksmith's wife.

Were the people of the village trying to kill all the demons? Was that it? Was he being killed as one too?

His mind went hazy from loss of blood, silencing his thoughts. His wandering gaze found her again, but she averted her face from him.

She wouldn't even meet his eyes. She, too, saw him as nothing more than a demon child. She'd called him here so that he could be killed. The time they had shared meant nothing to her.

It hurt. The truth stirred a mixture of emotions inside of him. Sorrow. Despair. Hatred. Something unknowable and dark whirled like an eddy.

His blood wouldn't stop flowing. His consciousness grew dimmer and dimmer by the second.

He should have listened to his doubts. Why would she have stayed with someone like him? If he had just thought about it, then maybe he wouldn't have died in a place like this. He scolded himself as the end approached. But eclipsing all the regret...was fear. He was afraid beyond words of having his life come to an end, of the whole thing being for naught.

No...

His body was bigger than the norm, and he was being killed for that reason alone. How absurd.

No...not like this...

Why did he have to die while all those who mocked him lived on?

I don't want to die like this.

He desperately pleaded, pathetically clinging to his life. And then he made a wish that changed everything for him.

"H-hey..."

"What the hell?!"

The men let out murmurs of surprise. The sound of their panic calmed Tsuchiura again, allowing him to grasp the change in himself.

"What's the matter? Wasn't this what you all wanted?"

They called him a demon, didn't they? So why was it such a surprise for him to be one?

His flesh began to be remade anew. The swords thrust into him were pushed out by swelling muscles. His size increased dramatically, and a horn sprouted

out of his forehead. His skin was bronze, and jet-black circular and elliptical patterns lined with red formed all over his body.

"A-ah..."

He heard the fear of his childhood friend, but he felt nothing. He would feel nothing ever again now that he had abandoned his heart.

Hatred welled up inside him—he had become a true demon.

He began to mow down the men. Humans were brittle things. They were easily rendered a bloody mess of corpses, not even granted the time to scream. But he didn't stop after killing them—he set his sights on the young woman who had once been dear to him.

"Aren't you going to run?"

Perhaps he had loved her before. But now that he was a demon, his hatred for her was endless.

In spite of the malice directed at her, the woman did not flinch. "No... I'm scared, but I will not run. Even if you are a demon, you are still you." With her shoulders trembling, she smiled at him just like she used to when they were young.

She can't be trusted, a voice whispered. Her words, her smile...it's all just an attempt to cling to her life.

That had to be it. She was just trying to survive by appealing to his emotions. She, who had just betrayed him, simply wanted to trick him into sparing her.

As soon as he reached that conclusion, his feet moved.

Perhaps he was not himself. He did not truly understand what he was doing, not until it was done.

He felt an unpleasant sensation in his fingers. His grotesque arm had pierced through her.

"Ah..."

Somebody let out a noise. He was too dazed to even realize who it came from.

She'd tried to kill him, so he killed her. This was what she deserved. And yet, his heart felt like it was being wrenched.

He pulled out his arm, and she fell to the ground, facing the sky.

Their eyes met briefly. There was no fear in her gaze. She still smiled softly, and a single tear ran down her face. With remorse, she said, "I'm sorry. I couldn't be strong like you..."

Unconsciously, he grabbed her hand and felt her life ebb away. The only warmth he felt came from her blood on his skin as her own body grew colder and colder.

Only then did he come to his senses and realize what he had done.

"No..."

He had been tricked and betrayed. All his beliefs had been trampled in an instant.

But he hadn't asked for this.

A demon could not escape its nature. His excessive attachment to life made him distrustful of others and subconsciously guided his behavior. That was the kind of demon he became.

Then, a fade to black.

The dream ended.

But every time he closed his eyes, the beautiful landscape they saw that day appeared once again.

That was why he made a wish...

5

 $T_{\text{HERE IS A GAME}}$ children play called "Take the Child." In it, the players choose a "demon" and a "parent." All the others become children who hide behind the parent in a line, holding the shoulders of the person in front of them. The

demon then tries to tag the last child in the line, and the parent tries to protect them. If the child is tagged, they become the new demon and the demon becomes the new parent. This simple pastime is the prototype of the modern game known as "Tag," which is played by so many children.

Children's games sometimes conceal harsh truths we don't like to admit. In this game, everyone runs from the demon, and the ones the demon touches become demons as well. Children run about innocently, shouting, "Don't let the demon touch you or you'll become a demon too!"

Tsuchiura was shunned as a demon child. Just what kind of treatment did the girl who stayed by his side receive without his knowledge? Did he ever really wonder about it?

The pain and nausea were intense, like his mind and body were being twisted apart. It felt as though someone had stuck their hand inside his head and begun to churn its contents. But he was still within his opponent's range, so he forced himself to move away.

Jinya yanked his hand away and forced his aching body to leap backward. His movements were sluggish, but Tsuchiura didn't take the opportunity to attack for some reason.

"What...was...that...?"

Jinya looked to see a similar expression of agony on Tsuchiura's face. Jinya's *Assimilation* must have been the cause. This was the most shaken he'd seen the giant demon so far.

Jinya lacked the focus to attack. His breathing was ragged. Disorienting pain assailed him, and his consciousness was murky. But even with his mind so dim, he pieced together what had happened.

Up until now, he had only ever used *Assimilation* on those who were close to death, so he'd never realized one important facet of it. *Assimilation* allowed him to absorb other living beings and make them part of him, but it needed one condition in order to work: The target he was devouring had to have a weak sense of self. When he used *Assimilation*, he absorbed the memories and

consciousness of his target as well as its flesh. However, two minds could not inhabit the same body. Attempting to absorb someone by force would only end in the body self-destructing.

That was the cause of the pain Jinya felt now. His mind and Tsuchiura's had clashed, nearly tearing their bodies apart. Jinya was lucky enough to have immediately canceled his *Assimilation* before they were both killed.

The pain lingered, and it was mixed with intense remorse. The feelings of regret carried by Tsuchiura felt like Jinya's own right now. Tsuchiura's doubts and misunderstandings had led him to kill the woman he loved, and the resulting pain led him to make a wish bordering on insanity. Now that he knew this, Jinya drew one conclusion: He could not lose to Tsuchiura.

Forcing down his pain, Jinya narrowed his eyes into a glare. Tsuchiura seemed to make a somewhat similar recovery, answering with a sharp gaze of his own.

"Suzune..."

Jinya was not surprised. He'd suspected that Tsuchiura had glimpsed his memories as well.

"Is she the reason you fight?"

"She is."

"...You and I are the same, then."

"Perhaps."

For a moment, the atmosphere turned peaceful, even though they were in the middle of a battle.

They were both demons who were once human. They'd both rejected something dear to them by their own hand. They were both unable to change their way of living and clung excessively to life. They both harbored the same pain, and that allowed them to understand one another while knowing they could not give way to the other.

"I take it I can't convince you to stand down?"

"If you could, I wouldn't have become a demon in the first place."

"But of course."

The calmer atmosphere turned tense again. Once drawn, a blade could not be returned to its scabbard until the job was done. Jinya didn't fight because of his demon nature; he did so out of stubbornness, and Tsuchiura was the same. His stance left no openings, and his gaze was unwavering.

"Nothing's changed. You still can't get through me."

Tsuchiura seemed certain of his victory, but Jinya didn't look worried.

"Is that right...?"

With a whisper, Jinya disappeared.

Tsuchiura wasn't surprised. He had already seen this ability, and no one would be shocked by a parlor trick whose gimmick had been revealed beforehand.

Jinya tried a reverse diagonal slash aimed at his opponent's chest, but Tsuchiura dodged it with ease. Even if he couldn't see the strike, he could hear Jinya and see his footprints. The ground, made muddy with rain, clearly exposed his location.

Jinya reappeared by the side of the road, three ken away.

"It's futile," Tsuchiura scorned.

Jinya paid him no mind and said with indifference, "Mosuke wanted to live a life hidden away from demons and humans alike." That was why his power had been *Invisibility*. He wanted to be able to hide from anything, but the peace he wanted eventually came crashing down.

Jinya took a step forward and closed the distance with abnormal speed. Tsuchiura had no time to dodge. Jinya's sword was aimed at the base of Tsuchiura's throat, but a metallic sound echoed as the strike connected. Tsuchiura had blocked Jinya with his *Indomitable* yet again.

"Hatsu wanted to be fast so she could return to her husband's side." That was why her power had been *Dart*. She did indeed become faster than anyone else, but she never managed to return to her husband.

Jinya tried to distance himself, but Tsuchiura didn't let the opportunity slip.

He charged forward, swinging a fist with the intent to finish his foe off. But Jinya remained calm, not even trying to dodge.

"Ofuu wished to return to her garden of happiness." Having lost her home, she remade it with *Dreamer*. The past played out before her eyes, but she could never truly return.

"What...?" Tsuchiura's fist seemed about to barrel straight through Jinya's skull, but instead it slipped effortlessly through, as if it were touching a mirage.

"Yuunagi wanted to hide one simple emotion." Demons could not lie, but she used *Falsehood* to overturn the logic that bound them. Even so, she could not fully hide her love.

By the time the illusion disappeared, Jinya was already behind Tsuchiura. But he did not attack, instead waiting with his sword loosely held by his side.

Tsuchiura spun around and made a perplexed face, confused by Jinya's strategy.

"There was once a demon who could see the future. She probably gained her power because she was worried about the future of all demons. Even so, she could only see what would happen, without changing it. Her power was called *Farsight*."

Then what did the demon from whom Jinya received his grotesque left arm desire? Jinya had no way of knowing, but that demon likely also had an unfulfilled wish for something he couldn't give up.

"I understand now. A demon's power isn't innate—it comes from our desires. Our powers are a culmination of our unfulfilled wishes. Humans become prey to negative emotions and are corrupted into demons, but demons gain power through unmet desires. Or perhaps our fixation on our unmet desires is what brings about our powers. If that's true, it's certainly sad."

Humans were crushed by their unfulfilled wishes, but demons bore the weight in exchange for eternal suffering. It was hard to say which was preferable, but the fact remained that neither set of wishes was fulfilled.

In the end, both humans and demons clung to what they'd lost and coveted what they didn't have.

"That's why I can tell that your wish wasn't to become stronger. Tsuchiura...

Why did you wish for an unyielding body?"

"...Silence." Tsuchiura's anger at having his mind probed was beginning to show.

While still talking, Jinya slowly lowered his weight. His left arm made a sickening sound as it began to swell. *Superhuman Strength*. The strongest ability in his arsenal.

"Let me change my question, then. Why do you fight?"

"To repay Yasuhide-sama, who took me in. I put my faith in the man who claimed samurai and demons can live side by side."

Jinya had expected such an answer, but a fragment of a memory still surfaced in his mind. After killing the woman he loved, Tsuchiura had left his village. He lived a long life tormented by his broken heart, until he was found by Hatakeyama Yasuhide ten years ago.

"Yasuhide-sama accepted me, a demon. My loyalty to him has become everything for me. It's all I have left," Tsuchiura declared, biting his lip bitterly. Jinya recalled a certain idiot saying something like that before.

"That can't be true."

Jinya had a rough idea of the truth behind Tsuchiura's wish for *Indomitable*. If Jinya were able to tell from a mere glimpse at his memories, then Tsuchiura had to know himself as well, and yet he said nothing about it. He was likely trying not to admit his truth.

"I thought you and I were similar, but we're not."

They weren't alike at all. Jinya had only thought he'd lost everything he had, but Tsuchiura had nothing in the truest sense of the word. He lost it all, clung to the way of life he had, and abandoned all else.

"Tsuchiura... You are probably stronger than me."

Tsuchiura became a demon through betrayal, and yet he was willing to trust and devote himself wholeheartedly to Yasuhide. The ability to abandon everything else in favor of one single thing was a strength Jinya himself had possessed in the past.

But Jinya was weaker now. Despite seeking strength, he'd weighed himself down with too many attachments and could not fight like he used to do when he loathed his sister. He could no longer abandon everything and focus solely on stopping Suzune. But he was a little proud of that weakness.

The restaurant owner gave his very life to show that man and demon could live together.

Ofuu taught Jinya that even a wrong path could lead to something right.

Naotsugu remained Jinya's friend even after learning he was a demon.

Nomari stayed there for him as family.

He had lost so much, but it wasn't all that bad.

"You can't defeat me, though. Your strength has come from abandoning everything and deceiving yourself."

Jinya could not lose. That would be like saying everything he'd gained was worthless. He would be declaring that nothing could ever replace what he'd lost, and that his life up until now meant nothing.

"My weak, wavering self won't lose to you!"

He would fight for the sake of the life path he'd mistakenly traveled, and the things dear to him that he'd found along the way. He would fight to remain the person he was.

"How pretentious. Acting big won't cause this body of mine to falter."

Tsuchiura wasn't being arrogant. It was a simple fact that Jinya had found no way to get through *Indomitable* yet. The wounds he'd inflicted so far were nothing more than coincidences, and the odds were still in Tsuchiura's favor. But that was exactly why Jinya would challenge him head-on.

Jinya dug his feet into the ground, lowered his weight, and gathered strength. He would increase his power with *Superhuman Strength*, but that alone wouldn't be enough. He needed something more to get through *Indomitable*, and Tsuchiura was well aware of that.

"Very well. Try it."

Tsuchiura knew Jinya was planning something, but he still took up a stance. He seemed certain that he could crush Jinya along with whatever he was plotting.

The rain began to weaken. It would likely stop soon, but the battle would be over first.

The two began to move simultaneously. Tsuchiura leaned forward, nearly falling over as he took a step. His speed was unthinkable for his brawny frame.

Jinya pulled his left arm back, then swung his fist. But he was still far away. The distance hadn't been closed yet, so he would only be hitting air. Furthermore, it was a mere bare-handed punch. No matter how much his strength had been increased, it wouldn't get through *Indomitable*. Jinya knew this well enough himself.

"...Dart."

That was why he combined his *Superhuman Strength* with the speed of *Dart*. He closed the empty space with abnormal speed, making his seemingly wayward fist land true. There was no high-pitched echo of metal this time, but a deep ring like he had hit a bell. Pain coursed through him like his body was being torn apart.

Using both abilities at once took a toll on him. Normal demons only had one ability, so it made sense that his body wasn't meant to withstand two. Just one swing left Jinya feeling like he was about to crumble apart.

"Guh, aah..."

But his attack worked. For the first time so far, Tsuchiura showed pain on his face. A line of blood dribbled from his lips, and he was unsteady on his legs.

Indomitable hardened the body, rendering Tsuchiura unable to move. In other words, the fact that he could move now meant his *Indomitable* was undone.

If Jinya let this opportunity slip, a second one would never come. He ignored the pain and swung Yarai with all his might, intent on ending things here.

Feeling pain for the first time in a long while brought back an unpleasant

memory for Tsuchiura. A memory from shortly after he killed the woman he loved with his own hands.

He could no longer stay in his village. He was returning home to get ready to set off when he coincidentally ran into the parents of the woman he killed. The two of them were surprised for a moment, but they soon apologized with tears in their eyes.

Tsuchiura was mystified. They couldn't have already known about their daughter's death, and even if they did, they had no reason to apologize to him. He asked them what they meant, and they told him they knew of the plan to kill him, as well as their daughter's involvement in it.

He was not surprised. He hadn't trusted any of them from the start, so he didn't feel particularly betrayed.

But their next words stirred his heart. They told him their daughter was shunned by the village because she stayed with him, the demon child. Even so, she chose to remain by his side. But things changed with this incident.

The village chief hadn't been involved. It was just a renegade faction of the townsfolk at work. But they had taken the woman's parents hostage, threatening to exile them from the village if she didn't help lead Tsuchiura to a place where they could kill him. A demon's presence in the village was apparently just that impossible for them to tolerate.

What she did was still unforgivable, no matter what her reasons were. Even so...

"She really did love you."

"She did. She wanted to be with you, demon or not."

Her mother's soft smile and her father's teary face flitted through Tsuchiura's mind.

He had still been betrayed, but she hadn't lied to him. But did that matter? Even if he realized his mistake now, what was lost could not return.

This new knowledge simply proved the weakness of his distrustful self.

The pain pulled him back to the present. A grotesque being was in front of him, fiercely slashing at him with a sword.

His opponent's attack had apparently undone his ability. He activated *Indomitable* again, regaining the unyielding body he desired so long ago and rendering the incoming attack meaningless. Still, the man did not stop his onslaught; in fact, he increased the intensity of his strikes.

The fierce blows left no opening for Tsuchiura to undo *Indomitable* and strike back. A thorn had been stuck in him that he couldn't remove. Every time the man's foolishly honest sword struck Tsuchiura's skin, an unbearable pain coursed through him. His body remained intact, but a precious part of his heart felt like it was being gouged apart by the man's way of being.

"Silence," Tsuchiura ordered, even though the other party hadn't said a word. His sudden utterance seemed to come from nowhere, but he just couldn't stop himself from saying something.

The man's eyes questioned him as he continued his onslaught: Why do you fight? What did you wish for?

"I said be silent!"

Once more, another powerful blow was coming. The fist approached at an abnormal speed. With one glance, Tsuchiura knew *Indomitable* wouldn't be enough to withstand it. His body might not yield, but the pain would still come through.

The other was a demon like Tsuchiura, but he seemed to struggle for reasons much too simple. He was infuriating, yet Tsuchiura couldn't take his eyes off him. Perhaps he was jealous. The sight of a demon wielding his sword on behalf of others was pitiful and unsightly, but it was also unbearably enviable.

"No..."

He had called Tsuchiura strong, but Tsuchiura's heart wavered every time his sword connected.

Tsuchiura wasn't strong. He couldn't be.

He knew better than anyone that the idea of "untrustworthy" people was a

lie. He was just afraid. Afraid of his trust being betrayed. That was why he chose never to trust anyone at all; that way he could never be hurt. He was so weak that he needed to justify his weakness by blaming it on people who weren't worthy of his trust.

It needn't be said where that got him.

His doubts built up an imaginary fear that led him to kill the one he loved. Her words had not been a lie, but he hadn't allowed himself to believe her. He was too afraid of being hurt, of dying. His pointless weakness gave birth to mistrust that took everything from him.

That was why he made a wish.

He refused to trust people because he was afraid of being hurt, and he was afraid of being hurt because his body was too brittle. His feet froze in fear at the thought of death. Therefore, he didn't need to be stronger—he just needed a body that would yield to nothing.

If he had an unyielding body, he wouldn't have to fear being hurt.

If he had an unyielding body, he wouldn't have to cower at the thought of death.

If he had an unyielding body, he wouldn't have doubted her declaration of love for him.

And so, after a hundred years of life, he gained the power he sought. But it did not make him strong enough to entrust his heart to another.

That was why he served Yasuhide, who presented a convenient path to solace for him. By loyally serving his master, Tsuchiura could cancel out his past mistake. Even if Yasuhide ultimately betrayed Tsuchiura, he could still simply tell himself that Yasuhide hadn't been trustworthy to begin with.

But did Tsuchiura really trust Yasuhide, then? No. In truth, he was no better than he'd been before. Even with an unyielding body, his heart remained brittle.

Fresh blood sprayed.

Tsuchiura lacked the stamina to maintain *Indomitable* now. Death was

approaching, yet his heart remained lost in reminiscence.

What had he wished for?

With the end nearing, he looked at the foolish demon and felt he finally understood.

"I just...wanted to trust someone."

He had been betrayed too many times. That was why he wanted to go back to the time when he was naive enough to trust people unconditionally. How nice it would be if he could have trusted her!

He realized just what he desired deep down, and at that same moment, he felt his body burn hot.

The demon's sword, swung with all his strength, cut diagonally across Tsuchiura's body.

The rain had stopped at some point.

Tsuchiura slowly fell to the ground face up.

The battle had reached its conclusion.

"You're...strong." Tsuchiura gazed up at the sky with unfocused eyes. There was no strength left in him. A white vapor rose from his body.

"No... I'm weak."

Jinya's weakness explained why he chose the way of life he did. If he were truly strong, he would have overcome his hatred and accepted Suzune that fateful night.

"But you know what? We're probably better off weak."

As he was now, Jinya could truly believe that.

"We became demons because we wanted to get back what we lost. We try ineffectually to become stronger despite our weakness, living trapped by our mistaken ways of life. If we were somehow even weaker than we are now... enough to accept our weakness...then maybe we could have died honorable deaths."

If they had been weaker and simply accepted their weakness, then maybe Tsuchiura could have let himself be deceived and killed by the woman he loved, and Jinya could have let his sister kill him. Those wouldn't have been happy deaths, but surely they would have been more respectable than the lives they'd led since then.

"I...see. We both missed the proper timing to die."

"Indeed."

They'd fought to the death only moments ago, and yet the two spoke like old friends.

"But it wasn't all for naught. I was able to understand what I desired."

Tsuchiura raised his left arm, as if he were grasping the heavens with his fist.

"Take my Indomitable with you."

After glimpsing his memories, Tsuchiura knew why Jinya hunted demons. Jinya looked down to see a satisfied smile on his face.

"It's a power born from an ugly fixation, but it might prove useful to you."

Although his wish had been left unfulfilled, he appeared to be at peace, like an old man at the end of his natural life.

"I'm grateful to you. You've given me a death I don't need to be ashamed of."

Jinya took his hand. It would be wrong to turn down such kindness, and so he used *Assimilation*. There was no pain this time, because Tsuchiura's sense of self was already fading. The process was peaceful, in fact.

"Forgive me, Yasuhide-sama. I could not grant your desire." Tsuchiura truly regretted failing Yasuhide. No matter what he'd said, he was genuinely thankful to his master. No matter what the man had been plotting, he had undoubtedly helped Tsuchiura, and so his loyalty had been real.

"How strange. I don't resent you in the slightest, even though you've devoured me. Perhaps if we had met under different circumstances..."

"...Yeah. Maybe we might have fought side by side instead."

"Ha, ha. Indeed."

Even if they couldn't fully understand one another, they bore a similar kind of pain. Perhaps it could have brought them to stand together.

Tsuchiura's lips curled into a smile. As the last of his consciousness faded, Jinya glimpsed an illusion brought on by his dying moments.

There was a small soba restaurant in Edo run by a cheerful man and a young woman with a graceful smile. Joining them was an overly serious samurai and a young girl still of tender age, the daughter of a merchant family who constantly bickered with the manager of her family store, and a ronin who specialized in demon hunting.

"Shall we be off, Tsuchiura?"

"Let's go."

After finishing their usual meal of soba, the two set out to go demon hunting. The girl who worked at the soba restaurant saw the ronin off as always, and *she* was there by her side.

Tsuchiura slowly closed his eyes to the heartwarming but impossible sight. It was nice to realize that the death he'd feared could be so comfortable, but he had one lingering regret.

So, he made a wish. If there was a world after this, may he live without ever doubting another person again...

The corpse faded completely into nothingness. Meanwhile, Jinya now had eerie jet-black circular and elliptical patterns lined with red all over his body—proof that what Tsuchiura had left behind remained in him.

He returned to his human form and sheathed his sword.

His arms and legs ached painfully, likely because he'd pushed himself too hard. He would've liked to have taken a break if at all possible, but there was something that still needed to be done.

The rain had stopped, and the clouds thinned to reveal the moon in the sky. It bathed the world in a soft, pale light. The tranquil mood soothed his spirit but, alas, he had no time to appreciate it.

He dragged his aching body back along the road leading to Edo. The row of pagoda trees seemed to stretch a long way. He stopped once and turned to look back.

Nobody was there. Not even a trace. Tsuchiura's body had vanished, and the thoughts Jinya had devoured were gone as well.

The only thing that could be found in the darkness was a wish left unfulfilled. "Farewell."

Jinya began walking again. He looked up at the hazy moon and the dark blue of the night and wondered where that unfulfilled wish would go.

Final Chapter: Sometime, Somewhere

Hatakeyama estate, facing the white magnolia tree outside with its scattered petals. He wasn't doing anything in particular, but he did seem to be holding something.

The tatami mat creaked, even though Yasuhide was the only one in the estate. His eyes widened. "Well, if it isn't Jinya-dono."

Jinya had appeared, barging into the estate unannounced.

"Seeing as you're here...I take it Tsuchiura was defeated." Yasuhide seemed to accept his new situation without surprise. Perhaps he'd expected both Jinya's arrival and Tsuchiura's defeat.

"That's right."

"I see... Then the shogunate is doomed. Without Tsuchiura, there is nothing left I can do. It's over." Yasuhide spoke as if the whole matter didn't concern him. He seemed like a completely different person from the one who'd spoken so passionately to Jinya before.

"Indeed. But that is why..." Jinya rudely approached him, despite their difference in status, and drew Yarai. He stopped a step away from Yasuhide and raised his sword overhead. With his face devoid of expression, he said, "...I've come to grant your wish."

"My wish, you say?"

"Yes. I've defeated Tsuchiura and devoured him. That means his duty has become mine."

"So you will serve me in his stead?"

Yasuhide seemed intent on playing the fool to the end.

Jinya softly shook his head. "No. Like I said, I've come to grant your wish."

"Is that so? Then tell me, what is my wish?"

"...It took me a while to figure it out, but I've felt like something was off from the start. When Naotsugu and I were following the demonic sword's trail, you were the one who told us where Sugino would go. You were also the one who sent Okada Kiichi to fight me and ordered Tsuchiura to kill Naotsugu. You've been trying to provoke me all along, but why?"

The Sugino incident had already marked Yasuhide as a potential problem to Jinya, and trying to kill Naotsugu simply sealed his fate. If he had succeeded, then Jinya would have certainly sought his death in retribution. Yasuhide had to be clever enough to realize that. If he were trying to achieve the Shogunate Faithfuls' aims, then he should have ignored Naotsugu and Jinya completely, thereby reducing the danger to Tsuchiura and the lesser demons he was sending to Kyoto. He knew Jinya had no interest in the ongoing conflict and wouldn't interfere more than he needed to.

In fact, it was strange that Jinya had run into the lesser demons heading for Kyoto at all. Yasuhide could have easily gotten them past Jinya by dispatching them earlier, perhaps at the same time Naotsugu was attacked.

Yasuhide's planning had been so shoddy that Jinya had to suspect it was intentional. Consuming Tsuchiura's memories had lent Jinya a decent sense of Yasuhide's character, and that gave him an answer to his strange actions.

"Then I realized I'd been under the wrong assumption the whole time. I had thought your goal was to keep foreign influence out of the country and reestablish a strong shogunate, but I was wrong."

Yasuhide didn't care about Jinya's interference with his plans at all—because he didn't believe the outcome could change in the slightest, no matter what anyone did.

"You've actually given up all hope for the shogunate."

Yasuhide believed the shogunate's downfall was inevitable and willingly...no, purposefully had someone interfere with his schemes.

"Your true aim wasn't for your plot to succeed but for it to be stopped. You want someone to thwart you, then kill you." Jinya had no hard evidence, but he was certain this was the answer.

Silence returned to the room. Neither man said a word for a long moment, but eventually Yasuhide let out a heavy sigh.

"It seems I cannot hide anything from you." His voice was weary and weak. He looked down at his palms. There was nothing in his hands, but perhaps he still saw something there. "It is as you say. I've known it was over for a long time. No matter how much we resist, foreign culture will find its way across our borders. The shogunate will fall and the age of samurai will meet its end. It's inevitable... Just...inevitable."

Yasuhide was wise. That was why he knew, perhaps better than anyone, that the times were changing. A future in which the samurai were unneeded was coming.

Long ago, the demon with the power of *Farsight* saw a similar unavoidable future and took seemingly mad actions to try and avoid it. Perhaps the despair she had felt was similar to Yasuhide's own.

"Many samurai have willingly surrendered themselves to the changing times. They've abandoned their swords and instead fight to gain status in the new world on the horizon. Perhaps they are right to do so, but that is something I could never do. I cannot bring myself to abandon the way of life I've always devoted myself to."

He'd pledged half a lifetime to the shogunate, but its end couldn't be stopped, even with the aid of demons. That being the case, he at least wanted to die with honor.

"That is why I seek to be killed: so I can remain a samurai who lived and died for the shogunate."

Just as Miura Naotsugu wished to live like a samurai to the bitter end, Hatakeyama Yasuhide wished to die as a samurai while he still could.

"And so, I've sided against the anti-shogunates, expecting someone to come and kill me one day... Heh heh. And here you are to grant my wish."

The man had no malicious motives to speak of; he simply wished to die as the samurai he had always been. It was by pure misfortune that his way of life clashed with the changing times, forcing him to take such abhorrent measures.

Jinya couldn't help but think that perhaps this twisted way of life was what others saw in him. "We're both quite stubborn, aren't we?"

"I couldn't agree more. But you can't live the way you wish without being stubborn."

"Indeed."

They exchanged the same words they'd spoken some time ago. Yasuhide truly was unchanging. But it was for that very reason that Jinya had to end things for him here.

Jinya did not hate the man, but he did feel they were incompatible as people. Even so, he could respect Yasuhide's adherence to his way of life, as a kindred spirit who had followed a similarly mistaken path.

"Will you kill me?"

"Yes. I shall grant you your wish."

Jinya gripped his sword tightly. It was clear what would happen next, yet the mood was calm. Even the breeze coming in was soft. He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the cold air of the night.

He held his breath and froze, but there wasn't a trace of hesitation in him.

"Farewell, Hatakeyama Yasuhide. You will die here, failing to protect the world of the samurai, but you remained a samurai to the very end."

He stepped in and swung Yarai down from overhead with all his strength, just as he did when he fought demons. Not holding back was the least he could do.

Yasuhide sat formally on his knees as the sword fatally tore through his chest. The room filled with the rust-like scent of blood. Even so, Yasuhide did not fall. He remained seated, straining the last of his vitality to speak.

"I know what shall come to pass," he sneered. His expression was filled with guile and wickedness. "The new world that invades us will have no need for samurai or the sword. Our Land of the Rising Sun will advance thanks to the technology of the wider world, but we will lose something dear in the process." He stopped to hack up blood, but despite his fatal wounds he continued to keep his composure and speak. "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." Like a doll whose strings had been cut, he collapsed forward, yet the mockery in his voice remained. "I wonder how you will fare against the swift currents of time. I shall enjoy...watching you...from the depths...of...hell..."

Leaving behind an ominous prediction, Hatakeyama Yasuhide breathed his last.

Jinya didn't feel a trace of worry or fear, but he was still somewhat conflicted. "...A dishonest man to the end."

There was no doubt in Jinya's mind that Yasuhide had said all that for his sake. Yasuhide had cursed Jinya in his final moments to play the role of villain, as a reward to Jinya for killing him. That meant Jinya need not feel any guilt for his fatal deed.

"A samurai leaves no favor unreturned, eh?"

He was certainly a man Jinya could never see eye to eye with, but he had undeniably remained a samurai to the very end. For that reason, Jinya would not mourn his death. To do so would be to cast dishonor on his last moments.

"...Farewell. I won't forget your name." There was no emotion in Jinya's voice, of course. Any sentimentality here would be discourteous.

After one last look at Yasuhide's corpse, Jinya left the room.

In year three of the Keio era, Hatakeyama Yasuhide was assassinated in his home. As he had already retired from the headship of the Hatakeyama family, there was not much tumult among the Aizu domain. Still, he supported the shogunate from behind the scenes, so his death was a major blow to the Shogunate Faithful faction. Many believed that his assassin was from the Choshu or the Satsuma, but the truth never came to light.

The testimony of a demon would not enter the written records.

Morning comes fast if one can fall asleep, but a night spent waiting for someone to arrive feels like eternity. By the time the sun rose, Jinya still hadn't

returned.

"He's late..." Nomari dangled her feet off her chair, looking bored as could be. She'd managed to sleep the previous night but woke up early to wait for her father.

"Very late," Ofuu said wearily. She sat next to Nomari and hung her head. She hadn't gotten a wink of sleep. The image of her parents swallowed by flames still hadn't left her. No matter how much she told herself things would be fine, the thought of losing someone again kept her awake as she waited through the nights.

"Oh, you're both up." Jinya crossed under the entrance curtains of Kihee and saw the two. The fatigue in their faces told him all he needed to know: They had been worried sick about him. "I'm sorry for taking so long."

Nomari went stiff with surprise but slowly began to ease into a relieved smile.

Ofuu's reaction was more subdued. She was relieved to see he was safe, but she fought to hide her exhaustion. "Isn't there something you should be saying instead of apologizing?" she said with a teasing smile.

"You're right. I'm back," he said, feeling for the first time like he had truly returned.

"Father."

"Hey, Nomari. Were you a good girl while I was away?"

"Uh-huh."

Nomari smiled happily as he patted her head. He realized he was glad he hadn't done anything to make her sad. He'd come that far as a parent. Even he could change, albeit in small ways.

"What will you do now?" Ofuu asked.

Jinya tensed a bit and said, "I'm thinking of leaving Edo." His true form had been revealed. There hadn't been any major commotion yet, but he couldn't stay. The sooner he left, the better.

"...I see."

From her reaction, Jinya could tell she'd expected as much. He expected she wouldn't try to stop him, given how well she knew his stubborn personality.

"...Hypothetically, what if we were to continue running this soba restaurant together, like my father always wanted?"

But that was exactly why her proposition left Jinya so stunned. Never in a million years had he thought *she* would suggest such a thing.

"We could call the place...Demon Soba. Yes, Demon Soba would be nice. A perfect name for a soba restaurant run by a demon couple, don't you think?"

Perhaps this was her roundabout way of courting him. He couldn't tell if there were any feelings of love involved in it, but the two of them were close enough that he could imagine a future with her.

He took his eyes off Ofuu and gazed at the kitchen while she waited for his answer. He murmured, "A life like that might not be so bad."

"Right? How about it?"

The two would run the soba restaurant together, raising Nomari as a family. Being human, Nomari was fated to eventually pass away before Jinya, but Ofuu was a demon. He could live through the long, long eternity together with her. Such a life had to be more pleasant than one spent pursuing nothing but strength.

"I'm sorry."

Even so, he could not choose it.

"...As expected," she said.

"I cannot change my way of life. I am not so flexible. You told me you accepted that already, didn't you?"

"I did, but... Wow, you really are an obstinate man."

"More than even I can stand."

Happiness was within arm's reach, but he let it slip away. But surprisingly, it didn't bother him. He didn't think the path that awaited him would be full of anguish.

"Ofuu... My path might be wrong, but I'm not so hard on myself anymore."

The way his journey began was undeniably awful, but the things he found along the way proved there was still something worthwhile about it all. Similarly, the fact that he used to love his sister was not a lie. He wanted to forgive her, and that was one of the few things he was doing right.

"I still don't know if I can forgive my sister in the end, but you've shown me that some things can be saved by my mistaken way of life. That's why I think I want to stay lost a little longer."

He had no idea if he'd ever truly be free of his hatred. Part of him constantly worried that she would still wish ruin upon man, and that he would have to kill her. But he didn't want to give up.

Even Jinya had to admit to himself that his determination was foolhardy. But if there were some things even his bloodied hands could save, he wanted to try struggling just a bit more.

"Do you still hate your sister?"

"My hatred will always remain. But for now, I think I can be a little kinder."

He'd experienced kindness from many of the people he'd met in Edo, and it had cleansed his clouded heart.

"Let me ask you instead now, Ofuu: Will you come with me?" He held out his right hand. He meant it. If she was willing, he wanted her to join him on his journey.

"...I'm sorry," she said, sadly casting her gaze down.

He was certain they both wanted to be together, but she didn't take his hand. He had a feeling it wasn't because she was having a change of heart—there was simply something bigger that she couldn't abandon.

"I can't believe myself," she began. "I can see you've changed so much, but I haven't changed at all. I've been relying on Dad ever since the day he took my hand and led me away... All I did was change my crutch from my place of memories to him." With a distant look in her eyes, she summoned the memory of her long-lost garden of happiness. "If I took your hand now, I would only be

making you my new crutch. I'd be no different than I was when I locked myself away in my garden. I don't want to be so weak. I'm sorry. I may have made the offer first, but I cannot take your hand."

Her gaze fell and she went silent, seeming to hesitate over something. When she finally raised her face, she wore a smile that was sunny and refreshing, like the spring breeze.

"I want to try to stand on my own. If I can't do that much, I'd only be sad by your side."

Jinya let out a slightly exasperated sigh. After all she said about his stubbornness, she really was one to talk. "We're both kind of awkward, aren't we?"

"We are."

It was clear they would part now, yet he was somehow happy. Perhaps the fact that he could say farewell with a smile like this was further proof that he had grown.

"One more thing. I'm sorry, but do you think you could look after Noma—" Before he could finish, his daughter pulled at his clothes. He looked down to see her glaring at him with tears in her eyes. He would continue to spend his life fighting demons, and it would be better for her to live somewhere peaceful, but...

"No. I'm staying with Father."

"So she says," Ofuu teased.

Nomari gripped Jinya's clothes with all the strength her little body could muster. Apparently, he and Ofuu weren't the only stubborn ones.

He couldn't help but smile wryly. "...All right. Let's go together."

The way she beamed at his words warmed his heart. This may not have been what he thought he wanted, but it made him happy all the same.

"It's time for us to go," he said, picking Nomari up. He was reluctant to part, but drawing things out any longer would only make it harder.

Ofuu's eyes teared up a little. "Will we be able to meet again?" She wouldn't

dare stop him at this point, but she had to ask.

"Who knows? But we'll be around a long time. We might run into one another somewhere if we're still alive."

"I'll have you know you're supposed to say 'Of course we'll meet again' at times like this, even if it's a lie."

"But demons can't lie."

His inflexible reply made her puff her cheeks out in frustration. The two then broke out into soft laughter, finding their exchange too silly to bear.

Even at the very end, there was no sorrow. It made Jinya's chest feel warm.

"Goodbye then, Ofuu."

"Yes, goodbye. May we meet again."

With those few words, they parted.

He tried to hide it, but he did feel a little sad. Still, he felt an equal amount of contentment.

He let his eyelids droop and thought back over all the days he'd spent here. He had gained so much from so many people. He opened his eyes again and stepped through the entrance curtains.

Kihee grew smaller and smaller in the distance, but he felt as though the spirit of the place was still right there beside him. Of course, this was just a fantasy, but he allowed himself to indulge in it.

The townscape drifted by. The rumors about Jinya being a demon didn't seem to have spread much yet, since no one made a fuss as he walked by. His heart and the sky were both clear, perfect for the beginning of a journey.

"Father, are you happy?" asked Nomari from Jinya's arms some time after they left the restaurant.

He hadn't realized it, but a smile had formed on his face. Though he felt a bit embarrassed, he didn't deny it. "Yeah, I think I am. It'd be nice if we could meet Ofuu again."

Ofuu had asked whether they would ever see each other again. Jinya hoped

so. Perhaps, after many years had passed them by, they would meet again sometime, somewhere. Maybe they'd go see the snow willows together then.

The streets were as bustling as ever. It felt like he'd spent both a mere moment and a lifetime living here, contradictory as it was. With that thought in mind, he got ready to leave Edo behind.

He abruptly stopped, then turned around. He felt as though he had glimpsed a familiar face in the throng of people.

"...Farewell."

Holding the bygone days dearly within himself, he turned his back to the crowds.

Twenty-seven years ago, he'd come to Edo bearing nothing but his hatred and Yarai. He'd never expected to feel such a sense of peace when he left. Still, his journey wasn't over. He shifted Nomari in his arms and fixed his gaze ahead.

"Ready to go?"

"Mm-hmm."

Without a clear destination in mind, a single demon left Edo behind.

One month later—on October 14th in year three of the Keio era—Tokugawa Yoshinobu, fifteenth shogun of the Edo shogunate, relinquished administrative power to the Imperial Court. The new arrangement was officially accepted by the emperor on the following day. This event is informally remembered as "The Great Restoration of Imperial Rule." Later that same year, on December 9th, the Edo shogunate was officially abolished and the Meiji government was established.

The long-standing era of samurai had met its demise, and a new era began to unfold.

Sword of the Demon Hunter: Kijin Gentōshō — Bakumatsu Arc END

Final Chapter: Lucky Sparrow

... For some reason, their voices reached me with terrible clarity.

"Father, are you happy?"

"Yeah, I think I am. It'd be nice if we could meet Ofuu again."

I stopped and listened to the conversation of the passing father-daughter pair. The father's expression was tender enough to make my heart ache, but I didn't let my feelings show on the outside. I was often called bratty when I was a child, but I was now a well-mannered lady who carried herself with grace.

Then again, perhaps I hadn't really changed all that much. Didn't hiding my feelings now make me no different from the child I once was?

Slowly, I spun around. All I could make out was his broad back as he continued walking. He'd passed us by without a word. That hurt me, even though I knew it was no fault of his own.

"Is something wrong?" Seeing me stop suddenly, my husband spoke up. He probably sensed my gloomy mood. I appreciated his kindness, but the smile I returned was stiff.

"It's nothing. I just met a familiar face." Met? Not saw? My own wistful words made me want to laugh at myself.

I still gazed at his back, which grew more distant by the moment. I couldn't call out to him. I had hurt him, and yet he had been smiling. The girl in his arms must have been his daughter. I had never seen such a tender expression on him before. He'd never shown such a face to me.

"A familiar face, huh?"

"Yes. Someone you know too."

The man I once hurt with my cruel words now smiled so joyfully. I was happy for him yet vexed at the same time. It was humiliating to realize that he could smile like that without me. His wounds had been healed by someone else.

Sometimes, I thought about meeting him. I imagined running into him somewhere and taking the opportunity to apologize for the cruel things I said. He would forgive me with his usual impassive look, and then we'd continue those fun-filled days right where we left off.

But that was just a fantasy. Here in reality, things were not so easy. I didn't have it in me to call out his name. There was simply too much distance between us.

Perhaps if I had said something kind that day instead, then maybe the small girl in his arms would bear a trace of myself in her... No, what am I thinking? I was the one who pushed him away; I have no right to imagine such a thing.

"Sorry for stopping so suddenly. Let's be off, dear," I said. My face must have looked awful from trying to hold back tears.

My husband looked at me with worry, but after a thoughtful pause, he smiled. "...Right. Let's head back to the store, Miss Natsu."

My eyes went wide when I heard him call me that.

After my father died, I married my husband. He'd always been such an unreliable man, but he looked so dependable when he swore to support me in my father's place. True to his word, he took over Sugaya and supported me. After many years passed, we had a child, and we now spent our days in peace. Before I knew it, we had become a couple worthy of envy.

"Dear...?" I looked at him in confusion. He hadn't called me that since the days when we often went to that soba restaurant.

He scratched his cheek bashfully. "Aha ha... It just felt right to call you that right now. I'm not so sure why myself, though."

It was sudden, but he was clearly trying to soothe me by bringing back a name from the old days. The two of us were close enough now for me to understand that, and it made me smile from the bottom of my heart.

"Shall we be off then, Zenji?"

Time passed us all by. We could not return to the way things once were. Even

so, I felt like I'd managed to return to my old self for a moment.

"Yes, ma'am! Ha ha. I don't know why, but this is kind of embarrassing."

"You're telling me?"

The two of us giggled and drew closer together.

Suddenly, the man with the young girl stopped and glanced back at the two of us. Of course, it was only by coincidence. But it felt as though our gazes might have met, and my chest ached slightly. Perhaps this was the sorrow of parting. The pain soon faded, and the man turned his back once more.

"...Farewell, Jinya." As he disappeared farther into the distance, I whispered a goodbye. I did not expect him to reply. After a blink, he was gone.

I started walking again with my husband by my side. Looking at the restlessness of Edo, I began to think to myself.

The reign of the Tokugawa was nearing its end, and a new era was approaching. This was a joyous thing for most people, but time had a habit of leaving things behind. I wondered, how would Edo change in the new era? Perhaps it would thrive more than it did now. Perhaps an age of decline would come. I did not know.

The one thing I could say for certain, though, was that the Edo of my youth would disappear. This place that I held dear would change, and some of my feelings would forever be left behind in the old world.

May the feelings tucked under this lucky sparrow's wings one day become a clam shell you can share with ease... I once bought a trinket with that wish in it. But that lucky sparrow had merely adorned my room without changing one bit. Similarly, the something-that-couldn't-become-love smoldering in my chest lingered. The world moved on, taking our unchanging selves with it.

I glanced up at the sky and squinted at its expanse of sheer blue. For a moment, I thought I saw a sparrow flying in the distance, as impossible as that was.

And so, the story of him and me came to a close with no true ending.

Without managing to become a clam, a single sparrow was left behind in Edo.



Footnotes

- 1. An old Japanese unit of measurement. One shaku is equal to 0.9942 feet.
- 2. An old Japanese unit of measurement. One sun is equal to 1.193 inches.
- 3. An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ken is equal to six shaku.
- 4. A time measurement used only in the Edo Period. One koku equals roughly two hours.
 - 5. An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ri is equal to 2.44 miles.



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