

Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes:

The Call of the
Roaring Waves



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Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes: The Call of the Roaring Waves

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Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes: The Call of the Roaring Waves

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Shirota's Great Escape

Chapter 1: Shirota and the Protective Stone

"I... I'll help you. I'll find a way for you to vacation at the beach or in the mountains as much as you'd like."

Misato Miyazawa had been a freshman in college when he uttered that promise to a female student in his club. Due to a strange propensity to attract malevolent spirits, she was in dire need of help. Frustration at his inability to provide that assistance was what prompted Misato to finally face the abnormal powers he'd had since birth and to make peace with them.

But it took a lot of work. He had forfeited the majority of the power that he'd cultivated until high school—or, more specifically, until he consumed a flesh-eating snake spirit. His sixth sense was unaffected, but his capacity to exorcise spiritual beings and control them had dipped so low that he had only the slightest edge over the average person.

As such, Misato's path to recovering his spiritual energy started back at square one. He had to train all over again to reclaim what he'd lost. All the power he'd developed throughout his life had vacated him when he hurled it at his opponent, reflecting the curse of the snake spirit right back at them.

EVER since the day Misato accepted his freakish talents and started to wish for their return, the same dream plagued him every night. In it, Misato found himself in the midst of a cloud of fog with no idea where he was. He was trapped in white oblivion, the sensation of the ground beneath his feet vague and hazy. Looking down afforded him no answers either; he couldn't even discern the shape of his own limbs.

Oh. I might be about to disappear completely... Somehow, via typical dream

logic, he knew that was true beyond a doubt. *If he doesn't call for me now, I'll scatter into atoms and vanish into this endless mist. I need to say something... Please...call me to you...as soon as you can.*

The source of that plea was certainly Misato. Yet every time his consciousness floated to the shallowest level of slumber, he sensed that something wasn't quite right. In fact, he became convinced that he was *not* its origin but rather its recipient.

I need to call them to me, or else they're going to disappear. That panicked thought occurred to him over and over, but he had no idea who or what exactly he was supposed to be calling for.

Thus, each morning Misato woke with a lingering sense of unease in his heart.

"I bet that dream's the key to it all," he asserted to himself several days later. At the time, he was living in an all-male dorm on campus with a roommate who was older than him. He waited for a night when his roommate was away at an overnight training course, then sat cross-legged on his bed with his eyes closed. He was going to attempt to contact the being that kept asking to be called back—but while awake.

Steeling himself, Misato took long, deep breaths. His mind unconsciously sank deeper and deeper.

I think that voice is probably me, but...a part of me that isn't here anymore. And there was a high chance of it being precisely what Misato desired: his lost spiritual power.

When he deflected the curse, he'd physically absorbed the snake spirit for just a moment in order to sever its connection with his attacker. That way, the enemy couldn't control it anymore. The hex was created by filling a jar with various creepy-crawlies, trapping them there, and the last creature that remained after devouring the other creatures was reborn as a cursed entity. Misato was confronted with a snake that had emerged victorious after such turmoil—and it was eager to make a dessert of him.

Misato faced the snake and won through his sheer devotion to life. As a result of his victory, the spirit fell under his command instead. And Misato cast the snake right back at the person who'd turned it into a curse in the first place.

He'd lost his spiritual powers that night—almost entirely. All of the force he once commanded was gone.

The vermin in the jar get bigger with each creature they eat as they absorb the other's energy. My fight with the snake was like an extension of that battle, so... maybe it made off with my energy when I redirected the curse. Actually...I have a faint memory of thinking something like "And take that, too!" when I cast it, so...that would make sense.

Misato had certainly chanted a silent prayer that night: to send the curse, the hatred, and the resentment that had been forced on him right back at his attacker—tenfold.

With his enemy's negative emotions amplified by Misato's own anger and grief, he'd rebounded the curse with a clear vision of beating his opponent to a pulp in the back of his mind. In other words, if the "that" of "Take that!" was Misato's spiritual energy, Misato could surmise that he'd funneled it into the snake before casting the hex in turn. And so he'd been devoid of that energy ever since.

Even when separated from his flesh, Misato's power still belonged to him. That he dreamed about it every night indicated that it wasn't disconnected from him completely, so using the same reasoning, he could cling onto those residual ties and haul it back.

Where is it? Come back to me, power!

Desperately reaching out with his mind, he envisaged his power behind his eyelids—despite the fact that it didn't possess an actual appearance as such. That attempt wasn't very successful, but he persevered, calling out in a clear mental tone with an image of a white mass of light in his head. Eventually, that mass of light suddenly began to move on its own. Its silhouette was vague and undefined, a phantom of what Misato was merely picturing in his mind. It started to increase in size and warp up and down as if made of something soft and bendy. What had once been a round sphere was stretching out into a long string, coiling around itself.

W-Wait... Is that what I think it is?!

As Misato's thoughts landed on the name and image of the animal conjured

by the silhouette, the light transformed to match the vision in his mind's eye.
The snake!

Deep, deep within his inner psyche, Misato came face-to-face with a white serpent.

"Call." Something akin to the snake's cognition echoed in Misato's head.

"What do you mean, 'Call'...?"

"Name."

"Call your name? I don't know it."

"Wrong." The snake's thoughts were extremely simple. It didn't form more than one word at a time. Even so, blunt echoes of its communication continued to reverberate within Misato, dripping into his consciousness like scattered raindrops.

"You think I know your name...? How could I? I mean...you're not called Misato too, right?"

"Wrong."

"Okay. Does that mean you want me to give you one?"

"Yes."

The spirit was asking him to name it.

A name... Hmm...a name... Right. He's a white snake, so maybe...Shiro? No, no. That's more like a cat or dog's name... Hmm... Something white... Shiro, Shiro...

"Shiro...ta! Shirotai!" he finally managed to squeeze from his lips. The moment he did, the snake-shaped rendering of Misato's spiritual power leaped forth energetically and plunged into his body through his chest.

"H-Haaagh?!"

A wealth of slithering scales brushed against Misato's insides, overwhelming him with an indescribable sense of discomfort. His eyes burst open as a scream tore from his throat. He fell into a fetal position on the bed, his legs untangling as he heaved vicious breaths.

“SO I’m sure you can understand why Shirota was genuinely the only name I could think of right then. I was panicking big time.”

“That don’t mean you gotta *keep* it!”

Misato kneeled on the floor with his arms crossed. He nodded his head sagely, deep emotion etched into his beautiful features. Meanwhile, his landlord—the owner of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old Japanese-style house they both lived in—was grilling him without reserve. His name was Ryouji Karino and he was a thuggish Shugendo monk with a shock of blond hair and a habit of wearing sunglasses at all hours of the day.

They were both lounging in the shared living room of the Karino estate. It was a Sunday afternoon in early May, just before the spring holidays were due to start. The festivities began on Tuesday that year, so Misato would still have to go into the office on Monday. Ryouji, on the other hand, had been given the day off at his part-time job at the bar that weekend and wasn’t required again until Friday, giving him a full, five-day vacation. According to his manager, there was no point keeping the bar open when it operated “almost exclusively for exhausted old geezers” who wouldn’t be at work that week.

“Weeell, y’know... It’s disrespectful to go changing it after he’s already accepted it, right? That’s the feeling I get, anyway. Probably...” Misato trailed off. When he first met (or, more accurately, reunited with) the white snake, it appeared as the personification of pure spiritual energy. Coupled with its concise manner of speech (if it could be called such), the creature struck Misato as something majestic and mystical. The last thing he wanted to do was offend it.

Incidentally, at that moment, the “fearsome” amalgamation of Misato’s spiritual power and a flesh-eating snake was curled up very comfortably on Misato’s giant bean bag. While Shirota enjoyed a lovely little afternoon nap, Misato had been relegated to the floor. Notably, however, the snake was coiled protectively around a small paper box, which contained a comb made from Japanese boxwood that Ryouji had brought home from a job a few days prior. Apparently an evil spirit was sealed within.

“Aight, so...that’s how he ended up getting that basic-ass name, huh? Names

and natures do often agree; I'll give ya that." Ryouji shook his head in exasperation as he propped one elbow between their empty plates on the coffee table, stretching his other arm out toward Shirota. Alerted to movement, Shirota reared his head and flitted his forked tongue out to taste the air.

"Hey...what do you mean by that?" Misato narrowed his eyes.

"Like, he's basically a mascot at this point. He's got the cute li'l name and the cute li'l face and all."

"A mascot..." Misato echoed with a murmur as he glanced at the white snake usurping his bean bag. The spirit almost always took the form of a pearl-white Japanese rat snake. Back when it was still a cursed entity, Misato vaguely recollected it being jet-black with venom-imbued fangs, yet its current appearance certainly lacked any of the menace of days past. Its former majesty was also unaccounted for, but because there was rarely an occasion to make a show of it, that was no issue.

"Eh, I guess that's better than people being scared of him, anyway." Misato shrugged.

He recalled the delight on the face of his younger brother when interacting with the snake. Katsuki was five years his junior, and they shared a father. Katsuki had started college at a national university in Hiroshima Prefecture earlier that spring, and whenever they met up, Katsuki always asked to see Shirota and praised how cute he was—incessantly. Shirota and Misato's linked consciousnesses enabled Misato to explain the increasingly familiar word to him, and eventually, Shirota came to recognize himself as a "cute" creature. He was very good at utilizing that fact, too.

To Misato, the snake was a representation of the curse he'd been forced to consume. Its return had replenished his spiritual energy but simultaneously introduced new burdens. He'd grown exceedingly sensitive to heat and dryness, a patch of scales marred his back, and whenever he got close to spirits such as the one Shirota was presently curled around, the serpent awoke from slumber within Misato's gut and wreaked havoc on his body.

Once he'd regained his powers along with the snake, Misato's college life had become significantly more difficult—mostly due to the fact that until meeting

the man lazing in front of him, he spent four years unable to discuss the creature with anyone. For four years, he lived a completely different existence from anyone he knew, harboring the secret of the snake spirit all on his own. A mere year prior, he never would have dreamed of encountering someone who considered the creature cute—let alone akin to a “mascot.”

Shirota allowed Ryouji to poke his head and face. As his thin tongue flickered out, the thoughts that spilled forth from the serpent were those of someone in extremely high spirits.

“*A snack! Ryouji, a snack!*” Shirota exclaimed cheerfully as he twisted around the treasured comb.

“Ya got yourself a nice li’l snack, huh? I sure hope it tastes good,” Ryouji responded with a grin.

From Misato’s experiences thus far, it seemed that, apart from him, one had to be touching the snake in order to hear its voice. Misato heaved a sigh and pinched his brow; the two interacted as though they were no different from a pet and its owner.

“I wish you wouldn’t feed him weird things like that...” huffed Misato. “Actually the ‘weird’ part isn’t the issue. Stop giving him such powerful spirits.”

Shirota could dine on almost any sort of specter or *yokai*. He referred to them as snacks rather than meals because they weren’t necessary for him to survive, merely a delicious indulgence. Night after night, Shirota could usually be found in the neglected, overgrown wilderness to the rear of the Karino estate, feasting on the spirits of the mountainous countryside. He was somewhat picky about his food at times; he exhibited a particular distaste for once-human and humanlike spirits (luckily), but otherwise he viewed most mystical beings as tasty treats. He couldn’t help but get overexcited whenever he sensed one nearby.

“Why not? Cuz he’ll get fat?” Ryouji frowned, squishing Shirota’s cheeks—if the skin between Shirota’s snout and neck could be called that—between his thumb and finger. Misato wasn’t an expert in snake anatomy.

“I’m not sure. Maybe...?” Misato paused. “But that’s not the issue here! What if he gets even bigger?! He’s huge enough as he is!”

At that particular moment, Shirota was the size of a regular rat snake as he loafed around on the bean bag. In predator mode, however, his body was about the same width as a human thigh. Misato considered that his maximum size, although when he remembered how large the serpent had been during that first meditation session, it was more likely his *true* size. It already made Misato shiver to think that such a gigantic creature lived inside him, so he dreaded the idea that the snake might grow even more colossal with the consumption of each consecutive spirit.

“So don’t feed him anymore, okay? You can’t keep taking jobs on the assumption that you can just feed the spirits to him.” Misato pouted.

Ryouji was not scared of or disgusted by Shirota whatsoever. He’d been raised by a self-proclaimed tengu and had managed to pull through an incredibly strict mountain training regime, after all. Not to mention he owed Shirota his life: Ryouji had once been prepared to die when facing off with a particularly troublesome spirit: an *inugami*. And after Ryouji’s months of preparation and anxiety about exorcising the malevolent being, Shirota had dealt with it in one swift gulp.

After that, Ryouji happily approached the snake without restraint—a development that Misato was truly grateful for. Nevertheless, he was not so pleased that Ryouji kept bringing home malicious entities for Shirota to gorge on. And whenever Misato tried to express his concerns, he just received a reply of “Is it really that bad? He was totally fine when he ate that damn *inugami*!”

“All right, all right,” Ryouji said with a shrug of his shoulders. He backed away from the snake and averted his eyes.

“As long as you understand...” Misato said in a pleading tone, getting to his knees to pick up the empty plates.

“Oh yeah. Speakin’ of which, *lady-killer*... What happened to that girl you wanted to save after you called Shirota back?” Ryouji raised his head in curiosity as he plopped back into his seat. After many meals together, it had become routine for Ryouji to do the cooking and for Misato to clean up afterward.

“Lady-killer? Pfft.” Misato scoffed. “I just did the usual, to be honest. In her

case, spirits were attracted to her natural energy, so I sealed that aura away and gave her a protective charm,” he recounted. “The rest was just helping her mentally protect herself. She couldn’t see any of the spirits, so I taught her how to sense and repel them. Then we went over basic stuff like breathing techniques, how to conceal her presence, how to put up barriers—just extra support to help her get through everyday life. Once she’d learned all of that and her life became more stable, we sort of...drifted, I guess.”

“Aww, man. I thought I was missin’ some juicy gossip...” Ryouji sounded genuinely disappointed. “In a situation like that, aren’t y’all supposed to be smoochin’ by the end of it?!”

“No? Just because we’re the opposite sex doesn’t mean we were automatically all over each other.” Misato shrugged. “Besides, I wasn’t her type.”

Their chemistry hadn’t been all too bad, considering the camaraderie that arose from their same age and mutual empathy for each other’s spiritual issues. They got along well as teacher and student, too, even though the mentorship was solely for the purpose of instructing someone very inexperienced on the absolute basics of exorcism and other occult practices. Yet Keiko Hisaka had always maintained a certain distance from Misato. It wasn’t as if Misato wasn’t interested in getting to know her better, but given his baggage at the time—the very same snake guarding Ryouji’s gifted snack—he’d hardly been in a mental position to initiate a relationship with someone who never once showed an interest in his private life.

Besides, his interest in her had less to do with her *personally* and rather the fact that she was the first female friend he had ever made. Running into her for the first time in a while at their graduation ceremony, he hadn’t been particularly surprised or disappointed when she introduced the man next to her as her boyfriend.

“To be honest, I just hope both of us get to live our lives without any unnecessary hardship,” Misato mused.

Hisaka had found a job at a company in Kansai, so he hadn’t seen her since graduation anyway. He still had her contact information from their college days

saved on his phone, but there was no reason to reach out to her. That said, if she ever encountered more spiritual trouble, he hoped that she would come to him for help.

“You softie.”

“It’s not like that,” Misato insisted. “I mean...she was the person who made me realize that I had to face my true self. Of course I want her to be happy.”

Most likely, Misato would have returned to the world of the occult sooner or later. Having lost the existential foundation of the Narukami family, he had spent a lot of time asking himself, “Who exactly is Misato Miyazawa?” In the end, he could come to only one conclusion: he was his power.

Yet, until determining that answer, he obtained a sizable chunk of self-confidence through his experiences at college. First, he recognized that he wanted to use his abilities to save others and be of help to them. And when he did precisely that, his efforts produced real, observable results that people praised and thanked him for. It was that validation that was the deciding factor in choosing what he wanted to do after graduation.

Misato stacked the empty plates scattered across the coffee table onto a tray and stood. He cast his gaze through the open sliding door and across the external corridor to the tilled earth in the garden. “You said you’re gonna plant some summer vegetables over the holidays, right?”

“Yup.” Ryouji nodded. “Wanna go buy some seeds at the hardware store in a coupla days?”

What was once a wild tangle of weeds had been transformed into a well-tended kitchen garden the previous fall. After his liberation from the inugami and reinstatement on the Karino family register, Ryouji had abruptly started to cultivate the land on the estate where he grew up.

Legumes, dormant bulbs, and leafy plants that Ryouji had sown at the beginning of spring occupied around half of the plot. The other half had been beautifully hoed in preparation for the summer vegetables, the row reserved for the tomatoes already covered by a protective plastic sheet. According to Ryouji, tomatoes were sweeter when grown in a dry environment, and shielding them from the rain ensured that no droplets would pelt their skins.

“Sure. It’s supposed to be sunny, too.” Misato smiled. “Katsuki says he wants to visit around the fifth, so we could go somewhere nice together.”

Shirota hated warm weather. They often missed their chance to enjoy the fine skies of May, and by the time the rainy season was over, the summer heat was far too intense for the pair to actually want to go out. Misato had been too busy to enjoy the milder spring days during his first year in Tomoe, so he wanted to at least go on a nice drive while the climate was still pleasant.

“Nice idea. What’s good in May?” Ryouji hummed. “Flowers?”

“Yeah, we should go to a wisteria garden or something. I love wisterias.”

They spoke casually as Misato cleared the tableware. One day remained before the holidays, and he’d requested two days off on the sixth and seventh. In other words, seven whole days of vacation awaited him if only he could survive Monday. Work was relatively hectic, however, so he merely hoped that he could tidy things up before his holiday leave began.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to Misato, that humble wish was not to be granted. His second Golden Week in Tomoe was no more than the opening act to a summer of turmoil.

ON Monday morning, several hours after Misato left for work, Ryouji finally roused from bed. He got himself some “brunch” consisting of a single sweet pastry, then rummaged in the built-in closet in his room. He produced a large paper bag that required both arms to carry.

“I was gonna feed this one to Shirota as well, but...I’ve been banned,” he sighed.

He’d been sourcing a lot of clients through an online freelancing service of late. It gave him the ability to take on jobs remotely—so rather than the exorcism of a person or location, his cases mainly revolved around possessed objects that could be delivered to his home. He was taking on clients on a personal basis, which was proof of his superior skill among the general population of occult practitioners. His previous successes and his increasing wealth of experience with past clients had truly paid off; his account was

already bolstered by a long list of good reviews and high ratings.

Many exorcists operated as members of organizations rather than alone, and they'd often received a far more thorough education than Ryouji had (although his training under a self-proclaimed tengu was not actually any lesser—just unconventional). Plenty of them also hailed from prestigious bloodlines that granted them spiritual powers from birth...such as Misato Miyazawa, the penniless lodger of the Karino estate. He not only possessed divine blood but had also endured strict tutelage in his youth, making him one of the most talented, elite exorcists in Japan. Not that one would be able to tell by looking at him—a fact that amused Ryouji greatly.

Shirota, the snake spirit that the impoverished elite exorcist commanded, was no more than a gluttonous emotional support pet—in Ryouji's eyes, anyway. The serpent's healthy appetite was nonetheless extremely useful to Ryouji's mail-in exorcism business, and he'd accepted several jobs under the assumption that he could simply feed the ousted spirits to Shirota as a little treat.

As far as Ryouji saw it, three parties benefited from his plan: the client who wanted their item cleansed; Ryouji, who was basically getting paid just for doing paperwork; and Shirota, who got to eat a tasty snack. It was a win-win-win situation. But after the resolution of a mere five cases in such a manner, the snake's master woefully shot his ingenious scheme down.

“It’s my fault anyways. I shoulda talked to him about it first.”

It was inconsiderate to feed other people’s pets, after all. Too many high-calorie treats might have an effect on the creature’s health...were Misato’s beloved snake not a spirit. Even so, it was rude to go against the owner’s wishes, so Ryouji would simply have to adjust. He’d managed to feed two out of the three packages he’d received to Shirota, but unfortunately, he would have to deal with the final one—the object in the paper bag he was clutching—all on his own.

He kicked away the comforter that had been left disheveled on his futon since he woke and made a space to sit. He thrust the pastry wrapper and empty bottles scattered on his *kotatsu* table aside. Golden Week was probably a good time to put the table’s quilt away, though mornings in early May were still

rather chilly in Tomoe.

“...But if I pretend to put it away, Misato might help me clean.”

Ryouji could easily imagine the way Misato’s thin eyebrows would shoot up his forehead if he heard Ryouji say that; he’d definitely get angry. Misato was magnitudes neater and more meticulous than Ryouji, and he fussed a surprising amount over the people he cared about. Every time he entered Ryouji’s room, it was almost customary for him to snap, “Clean up for once!” Ryouji sometimes begrudgingly started to tidy things up in response, at which point Misato usually helped him.

“Gotta buy vegetable seeds, plant ’em, store the kotatsu, go out somewhere nice... Hehehe,” chuckled Ryouji to himself. “It’s gonna be a real busy Golden Week.” His days were full of plans to interact with people. That didn’t make him nervous—in fact, the excitement was making him rather gleeful. Giddy, even.

He casually placed the paper bag on the table. If he remembered correctly, it housed a talisman-sealed tea caddy, a piece of lacquerware about the size of Ryouji’s palm used for storing matcha. His target lurked inside the tea caddy, although he hadn’t yet confirmed what exactly dwelled within. First, he had to open the paper packaging. Ryouji’s hand hovered above the mouth of the bag. The thick kraft paper, stuck fast with glue, seemed to be the only physical barrier securing it. He slipped his thumb under the edge only to find that the adhesive was surprisingly strong. He wanted to avoid rummaging for scissors or a box cutter in his ever-disorderly room, so—

“Grrrrh! Open up, ya stupid lump!”

Rrrrip. He split the bag mercilessly down the middle, and the unprotected tea caddy tumbled out, rolling away.

“Ack!” squawked Ryouji. He didn’t even have enough time to complain about it not being packed in bubble wrap: as it fell, the rim of the tea caddy struck the corner of the kotatsu table. With a dull *pop*, the lid flew off, the talisman tragically tearing in half. The caddy was open—and the contents immediately spilled onto Ryouji’s futon.

Slk-slk-slk-slk-slk... A large, dark mass of stringlike creatures squirmed, writhing against one another as they poured out of the container.

It was a huge swarm of millipedes.

“Eeeeeeeeek!” Ryouji screamed his lungs out, jolting backward as if he’d been electrocuted. He’d slept outdoors for days on end during his training, so naturally he wasn’t so weak as to lose his cool over a couple of bugs, but...a whole pile of them twitching and crawling on his sheets was impossible to ignore. Actually, the memory of sharing a bed with similarly unpleasant creatures was likely what had caused such a visceral reaction.

“Damn, shit, crap!” he yelped as the flood of millipede spirits seeped into the mounds of trash and clothes scattered across the floor, spreading in an outward radius at an alarming rate. He could even see some crawling into the empty boxes he’d readied to mail items back. If he let them advance any further, there was no way he was going to be able to find and exorcise them all. “Bug spray. I need bug spr— ...Ugh, who am I kiddin’? That’s not gonna cut it. I need... I need... Aha!”

He scrambled over to the closet and reached for the top shelf where he’d stashed some talismans Misato had forged in recompense for falling behind on rent.

“I’m gonna be stranded outside my own home if I go ahead with this, but what choice do I have?” grumbled Ryouji, panicking. “Talismans, talismans... Aight, I’ve still got some left from last month. *Oh*, but now I need... Nah, nah—I’ve got just the thing to deal with this. I *know* I do. If not...damn, I’m screwed.”

On tiptoes, he stretched further into the closet. Finally, his fingers found their desired quarry, and he stumbled back with the item safely in hand.

“*There* it is! The Pestergeist Control!” He grinned. “It hasn’t expired yet, either!”

Pestergeist Control was a brand-name bug fogger designed specifically for insectile spirits. It was exorcist-manufactured and sold only in niche online circles that required membership to access. It was dangerous for people to be in the house while the apparatus was lit, so Ryouji would have to conduct the sealing process from outside. Regardless, it was his biggest trump card when he needed to purify the estate. It only worked on the smallest of pests, meaning Shirota was safe. And if he did happen to inhale some by accident, he’d

probably only develop a sore throat.

“Dammit,” he sighed. “This’ll just have to do.”

Just like any run-of-the-mill pesticide, Pestergeist Control came with a warning: ensure that any clothes, bedding, or tableware that come into contact with the fumes are thoroughly cleaned afterward. Any food in the room had to be removed, too. In a rush, Ryouji bundled everything he wanted spared into his arms and shoved it into the closet. He prepared to leave the house, locking doors and windows before setting the fogger. He vacated the building as the room began to fill with haze, then slapped a talisman on the door from the outside.

The sky was blue and the sun hot. Ryouji looked up at the thicketed mountainside at the back of the estate, the slope coated with dense swathes of silky wisterias blooming in spindly clusters. Beyond, bamboo shoots fortunate enough to escape the greed of humans, monkeys, and deer alike extended heavenward, the verdant stems aglow as they matured into full-fledged stalks.

“Ughhhh... I gotta kill some time. But...where?” Ryouji frowned as he considered his options. “I gotta contact Misato and tell him the bad news, too...” In the countryside town of Tomoe, there were no attractions that could keep Ryouji entertained for an entire day.

Maybe I should just drive to the city... He pondered, flipping his car keys in one hand while the other reached into his pocket for his phone.

IT was the evening of Monday, May 2, and Keiko Hisaka was out of Osaka for some sightseeing in another prefecture. She had the day off according to her company calendar and was exactly halfway through the weeklong vacation she’d been enjoying since the previous Friday. Her intention was simply to travel, let her hair down a little, and fully relish her seven days of freedom.

Currently, however, Keiko’s shoulder-length hair was scraped back and sprayed into a neat ponytail, her body squeezed into a dress with a price tag boasting a few more zeros than she was usually comfortable with, and her toes agonizingly crammed into some heels about an inch taller than her normal footwear.

Keiko and her companion—the man who'd asked her out during their college graduation ceremony—were sitting in the back of a taxi as it climbed up a steep, cobblestoned road. The man's name was Kouichi Kasahara, and he'd studied in the same department and class as Keiko. Their university lecturers were close friends, so the couple had met each other at drinking parties organized by the department during their schooling.

They were visiting Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture. It was a city of trade and religion, known for its natural harbor as well as the strangely shaped, towering mountains surrounding it. Three peaks cradled the city, the mountainsides, the site of multiple ancient temples, and a major center for Buddhist training for centuries. The narrow, steep roads of the urban district were home to a commotion of houses, shops, and plenty of shrines and temples that overlooked the Onomichi Suido Strait, which connected to the Seto Inland Sea. Onomichi's peculiar, hilly scenery rife with religious architecture at every turn made it one of the most famous tourist attractions in the entirety of the Chugoku and Shikoku regions.

Onomichi... I don't think they could cram any more hills or temples here if they tried. Come to think of it, Miyazawa ended up working in Hiroshima Prefecture, right? What was the name of the town again?

Earlier that day, Keiko had sported somewhat more comfortable clothing to visit Senkoji Park, the most famous sightseeing spot in the city. Then she and Kouichi had taken a nice stroll around the shopping district at the foot of the mountains. When she lit a candle in offering at the main building of Senkoji Temple and recited the Mantra of Senju Kannon with her palms together in prayer, the sight of the mantra inscribed on the wall had reminded her of the man she'd met back in college. She owed a lot to him.

Keiko had been born with the power—or curse—to unwittingly attract specters and spirits. She was sure some specters were good, yet in her otherwise incredibly normal life, she had not a single memory of her “special ability” being of any use to her whatsoever. Her attempts to repress or control the power were woefully unsuccessful, nor could she find anyone to consult about her troubles. After enduring much of college with constantly bated breath, however, she encountered the man who saved her: Misato Miyazawa.

Before she met him, a dangerous number of spirits used to follow her around, and worse, she was incapable of dealing with them. But Miyazawa taught her exactly *what* those strange beings were and how to perceive and mentally ward against them. Once he helped her shield the energy that made her so susceptible to spiritual entities, he showed her how to avoid them once she sensed them, allowing them to pass harmlessly by.

Armed with a protective charm and the knowledge Miyazawa imparted to her, Keiko had managed to maintain a balance between her natural proclivity and the spirits that pursued her. She and Miyazawa had drifted by her third year of college, though she saw him one last time at their graduation ceremony. His straight, black hair had reached halfway down his spine, tied back in a beautifully neat ponytail—an image that had remained with her ever since. The traditional *hakama* he'd worn had paired so perfectly with his long hair despite the fact that he claimed only to have rented it for the day. Keiko couldn't help but remark that she felt she'd finally witnessed how he was always meant to look.

This thing is always keeping me safe, she mused, her fingers tightening around the *magatama* pendant she lifted from her purse. The charm was relatively big—about the same size as her thumb. *I don't really want to take it off in a city so ancient, but...*

The obsidian *magatama* was threaded on waxed, five-colored hemp twine. The green, red, yellow, white, and black cord wound around the *magatama* as if to capture it, decorating the dark stone with pigment, before twisting away and coming together at the other end to function as the pendant's chain.

The *magatama* itself was large, and the flashy hues of the cord gave it an overwhelmingly traditional aura; it would most definitely clash with the elegant ensemble she'd so painstakingly put together for a formal dinner. The neckline of her dress was low, so she decided to forgo the necklace after realizing she couldn't hide it. She was intensely aware of the pendant's efficacy, considering she'd experienced no spiritual mishaps since Miyazawa first gave it to her. She had worn it ever since, and the peace it afforded her was precisely why she was so terrified of removing it.

But if I keep it on all the time, Kouichi will surely ask why I don't take it off—

and I have no idea how to explain. He's gonna think I'm crazy.

Keiko still didn't feel comfortable enough to tell Kouichi about her "power."

So long as she was wearing the pendant, nothing weird ever happened to the two of them—so she'd had no reason to reveal her plight in the first place. She didn't know how she could possibly bring it up out of nowhere, especially because she wasn't certain Kouichi would believe her. She hoped he would at least genuinely listen to her instead of laughing her off, but...

Maybe that means I don't trust him as much as I should. Even so...it's just hard for me to talk about.

Until meeting Miyazawa, Keiko had lived never knowing sympathy from anyone for her condition. Whenever she tried to talk about it, no one listened. Not family or friends, nor her teachers or any adults in her life. Miyazawa, as someone who could see spiritual entities with his own two eyes, had finally confirmed that there really *were* spirits tormenting her and that there *were* ways to deal with them.

Kouichi can't sense spirits. Why would he believe something's there when he can't even see it? Tonight isn't just about him either...

She was about to meet his parents. They'd made a reservation at the restaurant for six o'clock. Keiko's knuckles went white around the pendant in her fist.

The taxi was heading for the main gate of Saikokuji Temple on Mount Atago, one of the three mountains embracing Onomichi. It was 5:50 p.m. when they pulled up at the bottom of the flight of stone steps that led to the plaza outside the Buddhist Nio gate. They paid the driver then climbed out of the vehicle. Keiko stuffed the pendant she was clenching back into her purse.

A pretty, pale blue sky stretched overhead, sunset not quite upon them yet. The peak to the west was blocking the last rays of evening light. There appeared to be no tourists around apart from Keiko and Kouichi; perhaps no one visited at that time of day on a Monday, even during Golden Week.

They retrieved their luggage from the trunk of the taxi and began the ascent up the stone steps. They continued a few hundred yards up the stairs to the

temple, and the majestic Nio gate that towered over the grounds came into view. Large bundles of straw hung on its right and left columns, obscuring the guardian god statues inset on either side. The taxi driver had told them about the straw on the way: it was woven into the shape of huge zori sandals. Keiko stared up at their ancient, imposing aura in awe as she heaved up the final few steps to stand in the plaza. The temple was surrounded by a peaceful residential district and, unlike the great Senkoji Temple, boasted no special viewing platforms or park areas.

“At the end of these steps on the left-hand side, there should be... Oh, yeah. I can see a sign. This way,” Kouichi deduced as he zoomed in on the map on his phone. Veering off to the left, he peered back over his shoulder at Keiko. He was pointing toward an incline that was worlds steeper than the hill the taxi had cruised up—as well as much, much narrower. There was a set of concrete steps provided halfway up the slope for those who didn’t want to chance its precipitous terrain, yet Keiko didn’t fancy either in her heels and tight skirt. Silently screaming, she nodded and joined Kouichi at its base. He turned to her and considerately tugged her luggage from her grip.

“They said the hotel’s an old-style hidden gem in a beautiful location, but... surely this is *way* too hidden,” sighed Kouichi, shooting Keiko a sympathetic smile. “Are you okay? Looks like we’ll have to climb some more steps...”

Keiko eyed the concrete stair. The incline was so severe that she hesitated to say she *would* be okay. The best she could offer was a weak smile.

“Hey, don’t suffer in silence. I’ll carry you, okay?” Kouichi said as soon as he saw Keiko’s face. He immediately crouched and offered her his back.

“What? No! I’ll be fine!” Keiko insisted, shaking her head vehemently.

Kouichi had studied sports education at college and belonged to the university’s karate club. The swell of his sturdy muscles was visible even through his light spring jacket. Keiko had no doubt that he’d be able to carry her, yet to tote her along with *both* of their suitcases was surely impossible. Not to mention she was stubborn, nor the type to admit she needed help until she physically couldn’t bear it any longer.

The sign Kouichi had indicated was simplistic in design and consisted of a

sweeping English logo on a dark blue background. As they approached, a smaller font stating “Hotel & Restaurant” grew visible underneath the establishment’s name. Apparently, Kouichi’s cousin had bought the old, Japanese building, remodeled it, then opened it as an inn and eatery the previous year. Kouichi’s childhood home was not in the tourist city of Onomichi however—rather a mountain town some distance away.

Both Kouichi and Keiko worked in Kansai and lived half an hour apart by train. It had been a year and several months since the beginning of their relationship, and Keiko had jumped at the chance when he invited her on a vacation to his home region. They were planning to spend three nights and four days touring the best sights of Shodoshima, Onomichi, Setouchi, and more.

They were to spend their second night of the trip at the old-style inn Kouichi’s cousin ran. Upon hearing the news, his parents arranged to have dinner with them to “see how our nephew’s business is going,” which ended up becoming the main event scheduled for the evening. Thus, Keiko was going to be meeting his parents for the first time, hence her fancy getup that she wasn’t at all accustomed to.

“If I fall to my knees, *then* you can help me out,” Keiko compromised in a quiet voice. Her cheeks heated in embarrassment as she imagined what she would look like sprawled on Kouichi’s back.

“Just leave it to me.” Kouichi grinned, and Keiko grinned right back at him.

He really is charming. God, I love him.

The thought came straight from her heart. Since meeting Kouichi, Keiko had known good fortune and happiness for the first time in her life.

I have to tell him that one day. I mean, he’s even introducing me to his parents. That means we have a future together. If I want that future, I need to own up to my feelings...

Hope, anxiety, fear, euphoria—with that plethora of emotions amalgamating high in her chest, Keiko was utterly unaware of her surroundings as she advanced with faltering, wobbly steps.

Accordingly, she was not paying attention to the obsidian magatama stuffed

in the shallow pocket of her small purse. The pendant's cord dangled out of the pocket, swaying in the evening breeze as she walked. Then, while she hauled herself up the extremely narrow steps, her shoulders squeezed together and her hand clasping Kouichi's, the cord caught on a branch of overgrowth extending from an abandoned lot's garden.

Clack.

The small stone clinked onto the concrete, escaping with naught but a muted, high-pitched tap.

BY the time the pedant rolled to the foot of the Nio gate of Saikokuji Temple, the six o'clock temple bells were just about to toll.

In the empty plaza, the small stone clattered against the cobble paving.

"Well, well... What do we have here?" Noticing the soft noise, *something* let out a quiet murmur.

Its voice was silent to most humans—and even if they *did* hear it, its utterances resembled nothing more than the low groan of a passing breeze. A breeze that originated, incidentally, from behind the huge straw zori sandals hanging from the Nio gate.

"She musta dropped it..."

"That can't be good..."

The two Nio statues muttered to each other, one's mouth fashioned open and the other's shut. They were always watching passersby and visitors through the obscuring straw zori and bird-proof wire mesh. In the modern age, they were mostly committed to being cultural assets, given that most people could not hear them even if they tried to attract attention. But in times long past, the Nio statues had broken free from the columns of the gate and walked in the moonlight of Onomichi night after night, patrolling the area. They were strong beings whose legacy yet endured.

"I hope that young'un quickly realizes she dropped it..."

"Aye, but I doubt it. She'll be merry with liquor tonight."

Despite their previous escapades, at present the Nio statues were securely contained by the wire mesh. The rigid metal not only deterred birds, but also prevented the statues from roaming free.

"In that case, we gotta hope nothin' happens to her by morn," the openmouthed Nio mused.

The closemouthed Nio agreed with a solemn sigh of assent.

MEANWHILE, at the southernmost point of Tomoe, Misato was driving a government car up a densely vegetated mountain road—though the workday had technically ended. Due to municipal mergers in the Heisei era, the city of Tomoe covered far more land than in the past. In the modern day, it encompassed what was once one town, four districts, and three villages. It took almost an hour to reach the southernmost tip from the town hall's main office, so even if Misato were to turn around for home right that moment, he'd still clock at least an hour of overtime.

"No!"

The snake had started to struggle in Misato's gut during the drive.

Misato attempted to console him in a voice strained by exhaustion. "What's the matter, Shirota...? We have just two more places to visit, then we'll have a nice, long vacation. Please hold tight for a bit longer..." He was already well-accustomed to the peculiar, slithering sensation brushing his insides.

The move to Tomoe and Misato's work with spirits provided numerous stimuli for the snake—far more so than when Misato was in college. The stirring in his stomach usually meant there was a tasty-smelling specter nearby, although other times the spirit hoped to alert him to danger. But neither reason seemed to fit the bill that evening.

Misato's overtime venture involved checking on the *hokora*—miniature shrines dedicated to lesser gods—that dotted Tomoe and whose function was to sustain a spiritual barrier. The days were lengthening as the season approached the summer solstice, illuminating the sky with lingering light. The mountain blocked most of the sun's fading rays but for those making the fresh

greenery at its summit glow; the shadow it cast was not yet severe enough to warrant Misato turning his headlights on.

If he could just push through that last bit of work before the holidays began... He'd left the office in high spirits, determined to finish up his outstanding duties before his vacation. Yet after spending all day traveling from job to job, he was both physically and mentally at his breaking point. He hadn't even found the chance to grab some lunch.

"Ugh, that Mochida..." he couldn't help but grumble. "Couldn't you have given me more precise instructions?"

Had he been planning on doing overtime from the beginning, his mood would've likely been less foul. But not for a moment had he intended to be still driving a Town Hall car around after hours on an empty and angry belly. He should have been able to visit his assigned locations by around three o'clock. He'd thought he could get the preholiday chaos over and done with early if he worked through lunchtime. Alas, those had been naive assumptions.

"There's two more. Just two more. They're far, but still..." Misato winced. He would reach the first destination after another twenty minutes' worth of driving through alpine terrain. The second one was even farther away.

"No! Shirota go home!" The snake writhed uncomfortably, throwing a squirming tantrum inside him.

Misato pulled over and turned his headlights on, unable to bear the sensation. The breeze pouring through the open window stilled, and the heat that had accumulated in the body of the car after a long day of sunshine gradually stifled the air.

"Can't you just wait until we're done?! It's not like I don't wanna throw in the towel and go home, too!" Misato retorted, his enraged tone at a near scream.

Mochida—the colleague Misato was teaming up with for the task—was quiet at best. To put it nicely, he was clumsy with words. In more honest terms, he was almost impossible to communicate with. There was no telling how much of anything he truly understood, and if one was careless enough to assume their own interpretation of his lacking instructions, they would find themselves suffering a catastrophe much like Misato's. Just before the end of the workday,

Misato had realized he had, in fact, much more to do than originally established. He had been under the impression that the last two hokora were part of Mochida's patrol.

It wasn't as if he'd jumped to a conclusion without asking for clarification either. He'd repeated the instructions back to Mochida. He *thought* he'd confirmed that they were both on the same page.

A great, heavy sigh fell from Misato's lips. His current predicament wasn't the first time collaborating with Mochida had led to issues. Any working adult was bound to encounter plenty of situations that were simply unfair or irrational—an unavoidable fact that did not appear to be of any concern to Shirota.

"Shirota go HOME!"

That booming sentiment echoed the intent of a snake who'd had *enough*. Misato had no time to react before the serpent broke free and slithered away, his pearly white body slinking up the open window and out the crack at the top fast enough that he was surely defying the laws of physics.

"Wha—?! H-Hey! Stop!"

He was gone before Misato could finish his sentence.

He'd lost him. He'd lost Shirota on the side of a prefectural road in a completely unfamiliar district that was so far south it was barely in Tomoe. Disappearing into the thickets of silky wisterias that blanketed the mountain, Shirota left Misato alone and speechless.

SHIROTA was hungry.

Shirota was tired. All he wanted to do was curl up somewhere safe and sleep.

Shirota wanted to stop moving. Yet if his host wanted to continue on, he had no choice but to follow.

Shirota and Misato shared the same existence.

They had once separated and formed their own discrete bodies. Shirota therefore possessed his own will to a certain extent, but Misato composed about ninety percent of what shaped Shirota.

Consequently, there should have been no situation in which Shirota's desires did not align with Misato's—technically speaking. Even if something didn't sit quite right with Shirota, he would abide so long as Misato wished it. They shared the same existence, after all.

But that day, Misato was trying to force Shirota to go along with something even he *himself* did not wish for.

Shirota did not like that at all.

Misato was repeatedly refusing to listen to Shirota's complaints. And Shirota was well and truly sick of it.

Want home.

He wanted to return home, satisfy his appetite somewhere safe, then fall asleep.

Unable to contain himself any longer, he leaped out of the window and slithered along the ground. He was heading for his nest—the place already permeated with his presence.

His tongue flitting out to determine which direction he should take, Shirota glided into a spiritual, otherworldly pathway.

There was one problem, however, that the snake did not account for. His nest—the destination he sought—was, at that moment, full of cleansing vapors and sealed off with talismans. Amid his packed, lunchless schedule, Misato had never checked his phone to find the message from Ryouji telling him as such.

THUS, Shirota became lost.

After traveling the spiritual pathway—something Misato called a *nawame*—Shirota found himself in an unfamiliar mountainous area. Having fully expected to emerge in his territory on the Karino estate, Shirota lay still for a moment as he surveyed around him nervously.

“*Where this?*” he wondered, his tongue quivering in the air to taste the surrounds. Surprisingly, he thought he could smell the sea, of all things. Evidently he had appeared somewhere far, far away—in a place he didn't know.

Yet he sensed an object seeped in his own energy nearby. Most likely he'd mistaken that scent for his nest.

Slithering down the mountain, he first found two tiers of vast, unoccupied lots, then a pretty space with gravel neatly lining the ground and an enclosing fence. Strange buildings surrounded him, and the air was swamped by a dominating presence. The entity was slightly different from the snacks Shirota liked to hunt; it possessed a dense, smoky sort of odor that Shirota didn't like very much. If he remembered correctly, the presence occupied what was called a "temple."

"Why Shirota here?"

He stole down the stone steps in an attempt to evade the uncomfortable pressure pervading the site. Luckily, he didn't see any people nearby, but he could feel sharp, imposing stares lingering on him from behind. It was the gaze of whatever being was enshrined in the temple. Fleeing that razor-edged glare, Shirota reached the bottom of the stairs and crawled across the cobblestones of a plaza before descending a few more steps and rushing out through the huge wooden gate. He smelled the object emitting his scent up ahead, so he scoured the path for its source.

"There!"

It was a small, black rock. Shirota remembered it well; it was a protective charm fashioned by Misato. He recalled Misato summoning him to imbue the shiny, jet-black stone with spiritual power.

"Why? Where Shirota?"

The rock did not belong to Misato anymore—at least Shirota thought so, anyway. So why had it attracted him there? Confused, Shirota approached the stone and stretched out his neck to inspect it, but—

"Hold it!" Two ghostly, angry voices rang out from behind him with the timbre of an earthquake.

Shirota reared high into the air in terror. *"Wh—?!"*

"Don'tcha go touchin' that!"

“Stay away!”

Thunderous yells stopped Shirota in his tracks. But their pleas went unheard as Shirota panicked, acting opposite to what they intended. To escape the voices, Shirota dashed straight ahead—right toward the rock.

The moment he touched Keiko Hisaka’s protective pendant...

“Wah?!”

The stone sucked Shirota in.

Without so much as a rattle, the rock absorbed Shirota. A piercing silence hung over the plaza. The stone just lay on the ground as if nothing had happened at all.

“Now look whatcha done!”

“What just happened there? That big ol’ serpent got sucked right up.”

It was over in seconds. Confronted by a situation they never could have imagined, all the Nio statues could do was lament, their cries riding the wind.

THE sun dipped below the horizon, and the bright glow of Saikokuji Temple emerged from the twilight. The season for admiring *sakura* trees at night had passed, and drunken voices sounded distantly from the quiet of the temple gates as a tiny silhouette materialized in their shadow. It had surfaced from the mountains, padding around on four legs as its nose worked hard at the ground, sniffing everything in its path. Finally, it reached the floodlights that illuminated the Nio gate.

“Mmm, somethin’ smells good! Real good! Mmm, smells tasty!” With that gleeful exclamation, a skinny, haggard tanuki appeared in front of the pendant.

“Ahoy there, little tanuki!” A slightly more reserved tone rang out from behind the creature—yet the voice still managed to resonate like thunder. The openmouthed Nio had reflected on his ferocity after his previous warning had led to the snake spirit’s doom.

“Hmph, what is it? Y’all are some funny Nio statues. All tied up in wire mesh!” the tanuki replied, turning to peer at them with a scathing smirk.

"That there belongs to a human. They dropped it when they passed through earlier this evening. It's nothin' valuable, so I ask that yeh leave it be."

"Really now?" the tanuki remarked eagerly, standing up on its hind legs as the Nio tried to dissuade it. *"Did yeh see who dropped it?! What kinda human were they?! Male? Female? Young? Old? Eh, it'd be nice if it was a lovely young woman!"*

"Why would yeh need to know that?"

"Cuz I'm gonna eat 'em, obviously! Once I do, I'll finally get my disguises back!" The tanuki puffed out and scratched its chest proudly. Its fur was remarkably thin and straggly for the time of year. Most alpine creatures were only just beginning to lose their winter coats, and the tanuki's was already sparse enough for summer.

"Don't tell me..." The closemouthed Nio, who had fittingly kept his mouth shut until that point, finally spoke up. *"Are yeh that tanuki who disguised himself as a mooring post and got up to all manner o' mischief?"*

"That's me all right! I ain't been able to shapeshift ever since the young'uns in the city tore off my disguise. But if this human's a real tasty one, an arm should be more than enough to restore my powers just fine!"

The tanuki originally inhabited a village a short distance from Onomichi. After he'd lived most of his life as a normal tanuki and reached a ripe old age, powers awakened in him, giving him the ability to shapeshift. He spent most of his days transforming into all sorts of things in hopes of pranking the village people, then laughing at them. Once he'd had his fun as almost every object he could think of, he came up with the idea of disguising himself as a mooring post used to dock boats in the harbor.

The villagers often sent vessels to Onomichi, and the tanuki anticipated their arrival at the port. He shapeshifted into a perfectly placed post for the visiting villagers to moor their boat, then ran away with the attached watercraft in tow. That method of mischief was extremely amusing to him, so he did it time and time again. Alas, his crime bore victims: the people whose boats he was stealing, naturally. As a result, the villagers sailed for Onomichi less often, and the city experienced a decline in tourism as a result. In that sense, the people of

Onomichi also suffered due to his capers.

Young denizens of the city devised a plan to stop the thief for good. They set sail early in the morning—early enough that the tanuki didn’t notice—and when twilight fell, they pulled back into the harbor acting as if they were villagers traveling to Onomichi. By that point, the tanuki was so mind-numbingly bored without any boats to swipe that he immediately rejoiced. He transformed into a post without hesitation, confident that he’d secured yet another victory—completely unaware that in reality, *he* was the one who had been captured.

The youth of Onomichi tied their mooring rope around the post as tightly as possible, hauled it up onto shore, then proceeded to beat it as hard as they could. Stripped of his power of disguise, the tanuki fled for the mountains—back home. After that, he was unable to restore his ability and had been merely scraping by with what sustenance he could find in the wilderness.

“My sad, wretched days of huffin’ and puffin’ just to live are finally over!” the tanuki proclaimed, bewailing his lengthy misfortune.

“Hold yer horses!” The openmouthed Nio stopped him. *“I can appreciate that yeh’re bitter about the people treatin’ yeh so cruelly, but that was retaliation for yer own unkind behavior. I woulda thought havin’ yer disguise stripped away would be a good opportunity to reflect on yer actions, no?”*

Unfortunately, the tanuki wholly ignored his advice. *“All I gotta do is track ‘em down and lie in wait. They might even come lookin’ for this thing!”* he exclaimed in high spirits, sauntering forward to pick up the pendant in his mouth.

“Don’t touch it!” The closemouthed Nio called out, just slightly faster than his partner. *“That stone made a mighty big snake disappear earlier tonight. It might suck yeh in, too, so don’t go puttin’ your paws on that.”*

At that chilling warning, the tanuki froze for a moment. But his alarmed gaze soon morphed into a glare as he eyed the Nio statues.

“Yain’t gonna fool me with that big ol’ whopper of a lie! If yeh think I’m that gullible, yeh’ve got the wrong dog!” yelled the tanuki in an attempt to stave off the shivering fear in his voice. He leaped forward, snatched the cord of the pendant between his teeth, and made a run for it.

“A wasted effort, eh...? What are we gonna do?” the openmouthed Nio sighed, gazing after the tanuki in exasperation as he vanished into the undergrowth.

“Well, we can’t do anythin’ at all on our own. Should we try prayin’ to Tathāgata...?” the closemouthed Nio deliberated in concern.

“That’s a fine idea. The Buddha Bhaisajyaguru might be able to save ‘em somehow.”

The Nios nodded at each other, then faced the temple that they usually guarded with their backs. Looking up at the main structure, they prayed. And with an azure glow so faint that it would have been unobservable to the human eye, the temple began to shine.

“Fear not. I can see a blessed future for that protective stone.” The gentle words of Bhaisajyaguru, the Buddha enshrined at Saikokuji Temple, encompassed the tranquil air around the Nios. The plaza quivered with its resonance. *“All you must do is remain here so that those whose fates are entwined with the stone may find their way.”*

The Nios breathed sighs of relief at Bhaisajyaguru’s guidance, each nodding with firm determination.

THAT night, after somehow finishing his work for the day, Misato returned home in deep distress. As soon as he stepped foot onto the wood-floored entrance of the main house, he called, “Ryouji! Is Shirota home yet?!”

“Huh?” listlessly replied Ryouji, who seemed to *actually* be cleaning his room for once. Misato popped his head around the open sliding door to the living room, and Ryouji turned to look at him in confusion. “No...?”

Misato noted that Ryouji was in his gardening clothes for some reason.

“Hang on—why would Shirota be comin’ home by himself to begin with? Did something happen?”

Misato’s voice died in his throat. He was certain Ryouji would lecture him if he was honest about what happened; the man spoiled the snake like it was his job.

"Well, um... Not really," he supplied awkwardly.

"I got home just after seven, but I ain't seen any sign of Shirota. He couldn't have gotten inside 'til I got back anyway. Maybe he went to hang out in the mountains in the meantime? I dunno." He didn't even question Misato's unnatural response before launching into his hypothesis. His next words, however, made Misato's face pale: "Anyway, did ya see the message I sent ya? There's no read receipt or nothin'. I wondered what you were up to."

Misato silently cursed as he realized that he hadn't checked his notifications at all. He had no excuse for that aspect of his negligence. In a panic, he pulled his phone out of his bag and unlocked it.

"Pestergeist Control...?" It was Misato's turn to be baffled as he read the message. "What?"

Ryouji gave him the lowdown on his earlier dilemma. The words "What the hell's wrong with you?" might have left Misato's mouth in pure exasperation but for his recognition that the same response would rebound his way once he explained what had happened with Shirota—only ten times worse. As the thought occurred to him, he immediately froze, choosing to keep his opinion to himself. And Ryouji was wearing his gardening clothes as a precaution: apparently, the instructions on the fogger had stated not to expose any skin while handling items that had been in contact with the fumes.

"So that's why I was out all day," Ryouji explained. "The estate was all sealed up, so Shirota couldn't have wormed inside. Don't you guys communicate by telepathy or somethin'? Just call the dude back here." Ryouji paused and straightened, one hand holding a trash bag and the other hanging limp as he peered at Misato in bewilderment.

True enough, Misato and Shirota could call to one another within a certain distance. But that was a surprisingly recent development; only since the previous year were they able to communicate that way. Before then, Shirota simply dozed while Misato worked, alerting Misato only when he sensed a specter.

"I tried, but...I didn't get an answer." Not much time had passed since they started to speak to each other proactively, so Misato wasn't sure how far the

range of their telepathy stretched.

One thing was for certain though: his naive hopes of Shirota sulking home and going to bed in a huff were well and truly crushed. Misato slumped in disappointment.

"...Did he get lost again?" asked Ryouji, raising an eyebrow that suggested he hadn't yet grasped the gravity of the situation. Shirota had become lost as a result of an unfortunate incident the previous year, too.

Alas, on this occasion, Misato could only shake his head feebly. "No, um... Actually, I think that he, um... Rather than getting *lost*, it's more like...he ran away."

"Huh?! He ran away?!" Ryouji yelped hysterically, his voice echoing over the dirt pit on the other side of the door. Twilight darkened their surroundings, and a frog responded to his exclamation from the pond at the back of the estate.

A beat of silence. "Nah, nah," Ryouji scoffed in denial. "He wouldn't do that. Even if he *did*...where the hell would he go?"

"I'm not sure, but, um... I sort of feel like he was seriously fed up with me this time?" The strong sentiment in Shirota's wake when he fled the car had been something akin to exhaustion and frustration. He seemed to truly resent Misato for forcing him to come along when he didn't want to be there. It was possible that Shirota wasn't responding to his calls because the snake was shutting him out on purpose.

"Right, yeah. But like I said, even if he's fed up with ya, where could he go? Are y'all okay being so far apart?"

"I don't know..." Misato deflated. "When he got lost before, it was way too hot for him to function on his own, but...as long as he finds somewhere safe, I don't think any harm will come to him. Though to be honest, I have no idea what effect being separated for a long time might have."

When he first summoned Shirota, the white serpent—a manifestation of Misato's spiritual powers—was most likely on the verge of disappearing altogether. Separated from his host and without name or form, he probably wouldn't have survived as a mere bundle of energy for very long.

Misato had to wonder whether the same concept applied to the spirit when he had his own name and appearance—as well as the ability to hunt “snacks” on his own. He honestly did not know.

Misato decided to tell Ryouji about how he’d summoned Shirota for the first time, as well as the events leading up to it.

Ryouji listened with a cigarette propped between his lips, then folded his arms with a displeased frown. “So basically, you can’t even use incantations properly when he ain’t with ya?”

Misato eyed the tobacco smoke with mild unease as he noticed the piles of trash that littered the floor.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “I don’t think that’s the case anymore...probably. I mean, I managed to finish work without a hitch, and Shirota was already gone by then.” It was normal for Shirota to go out at night of his own volition, too. As far as Misato could remember, that had no effect on his powers. But the snake’s evening jaunts only lasted for a few hours; there was no guarantee a longer period of separation would be safe for them.

“First of all, we’d better contact people he might seek refuge with,” Misato suggested.

“Huh? Like who?”

“Well, Katsuki would be the most obvious choice.” As soon as the name of Misato’s energetic half brother left his lips, Ryouji’s face wrinkled with blatant distaste. They did not get along well. “It wouldn’t be the first time either. Back when we celebrated him getting into college, Shirota sneaked into his coat pocket.”

Katsuki didn’t have a driver’s license yet, so Misato drove out to him every time they met. Unlike his little brother, Misato most certainly did not receive a comfortable allowance from his family, so the very best he could do was treat Katsuki to a meal at a family restaurant in the lower level of a mall—and even that was a stretch for his wallet. He also recalled how hunched his fast-growing brother had looked when cramped into his tiny, cheap, secondhand car. Yet, with a lifetime of opulence behind him, to ride in a little old car and eat at a mediocre diner was actually rather novel for Katsuki. Despite everything, he

seemed to enjoy it immensely.

The hijacking happened after that humble feast, when Misato was dropping Katsuki off back at his apartment. Shirota had slithered into the pocket of Katsuki's lightweight coat in an attempt to go with him. Katsuki evidently noticed him in there when he climbed out of the car, and he found it so endearing that he considered humoring the snake. Unfortunately for Shirota, Katsuki suddenly spun on his heel just before unlocking the door to his apartment building and rightfully returned the spirit to Misato.

Misato had been watching Katsuki walk away with tearful eyes, touched by how fast his little brother had become an adult. He was taken by surprise when Katsuki abruptly swiveled around and rushed back with a remorseful frown tugging at his lips. His soft, curly hair had grown noticeably since Misato saw him the previous year, and it flew high in the wind as he ran over breathlessly.

"I'm so sorry, Misato! I...I almost...I tried to..."

Kidnap Shirota. Or snake-nap him, strictly speaking.

Katsuki faced him with a grave expression, tearfully confessing his guilt. Misato consoled him with a smile, of course—while harshly rebuking Shirota. Apparently the serpent didn't want to say goodbye to Katsuki; he always showed him lots of love.

The Narukami clan had assigned Katsuki a new assistant, and fortunately, the person was far more respectful of his wishes than Wakatake, their predecessor. Misato had never actually spoken to the aide directly because Katsuki was opposed to him seeing any of the Narukamis. Whenever Katsuki spent time with Misato, he did so under the pretext of meeting up with the "exorcist from Tomoe who saved him"—which wasn't exactly false. Misato wasn't sure whether the clan was simply buying that story with no questions asked...or whether they were secretly gathering evidence behind the scenes and merely turning a blind eye to their rendezvous in the interim.

"I'll call Katsuki before we get any more worried than necessary, okay? Good luck with the cleaning," Misato said in parting as he left Ryouji's room.

"Thanks," came the casual reply aimed at Misato's back.

Misato dug in his work bag for his phone as he traversed the outer hallway illuminated by incandescent bulbs. Next to Ryouji's lair was the flight of steep stairs to the second floor. By the time Ryouji inherited the estate, the upper level had been out of use for quite a while. Misato had never so much as peeked up there before.

Nearing the end of the wooden passageway, he turned left.

On the right-hand side of the corridor that ran the northern length of the main house, he first passed a glass door in an old wooden frame. It exited to the overgrown rear garden, the glass panes protected by a sliding storm shutter. About midway down the hall was a door to an annexed bathroom. Meanwhile, the left wall boasted a storeroom and several bedrooms that any normal family most definitely would have been using but remained abandoned, much the same as the guest rooms on the south side of the house. The very end of the corridor opened into the storehouse, and the left-hand door just before that led to the outbuilding in which Misato woke every morning.

It was the time of year where the temperature was warm enough during the day to eschew a jacket yet still so cool come night as to welcome a fan heater. The cramped, snarled thicket that ensnared the northern boundary of the estate bordered the mountainside, which blocked out the sun and made that part of the house the coldest. Misato could feel the chill of the floorboards through his socks as he quietly padded down the passageway, looking down at his phone. He squinted as he tapped Katsuki's name in his contact list, the light of the screen blinding him in the evening gloom.

It rang twice before Katsuki picked up. His cheery tone immediately echoed through the receiver. "Misato!"

The hour was nearing nine o'clock—the perfect time for Katsuki to be at a part-time job or club activity. Luckily, no background noise or voices seemed to be interrupting their call. He was probably in his apartment.

"Sorry to call you out of the blue. I'm kind of panicking, so..."

Though I suppose I could've left him a message instead of calling.

He did a bad job of composing himself around his brother. In fact, in talking to him, Misato realized he was far more alarmed than he first thought.

“No, don’t worry! What’s wrong?” Katsuki asked, his melodious voice coming through clearly despite the muffled distortion of the phone speaker. His eager, carefree tone alone was enough for Misato to surmise that Shirota was not with him.

“I just wanna check, um... Shirota’s not at your place, is he?” guessed Misato.

“No?” Katsuki’s reply radiated sheer confusion. “Why would he be here?” he gently queried, his voice thick with worry.

Misato laughed feebly as he slid his bedroom door open. His brain began to fire at full capacity to calculate how to pretend everything was fine and nothing was wrong—his little brother loved Shirota, after all.

Chapter 2: The Lovers' Trial

“SHIRO...TA! Shirota!”

The moment Misato called that name, the creature became Shirota.

Shirota go home.

Amid a dozing slumber, Shirota’s thoughts whirled. All he wanted was to return home—back to his nest where he could sleep and stretch out as much as he wanted and jaunt around the gardens with nothing to fear.

THUS Shirota had returned to Misato, materializing in the form the man had envisaged. Ever since, the snake dwelled within his host, although things could become rather cramped with two creatures shoved into a single body.

“No, Shirota. Not right now.”

He often heard that phrase when he wanted to get out and search for the delicious spirits he could smell. Misato always stopped him.

“C’mon, Shirota. Just be a good boy, okay? You can’t come out right now.”

He heard that phrase when he wanted to slink into a nice, cool stream and relax, too. Again, Misato always stopped him.

He was not permitted to go out for a stroll whenever he pleased, nor was he granted any quarter to lengthen as long as he liked. Every time the snake tried to act, Misato stopped him and scolded him unsparingly.

It was hard on Shirota. Even so, he bore no grudge against Misato; Shirota’s pain was Misato’s pain, and Misato’s pain was Shirota’s pain. When Shirota suffered, his distress belonged equally to Misato.

That changed sometime after Misato moved to Tomoe—or, more specifically, sometime after he moved into the Karino estate.

Unlike the other place the spiritual pair had once lived, only three beings

resided there: Shirota, Misato, and the landlord named Ryouji. That was when Misato became slightly more lenient. He let Shirota leave more often and was less anxious doing so—mainly because the only other person around was in the same line of business as Misato.

Plus, Ryouji fully accepted Shirota when they happened to meet.

“Ryouji says not to eat such weird stuff in the future. You’ll get a stomachache.” Misato’s smile was bittersweet when he relayed that message to Shirota, and accompanied by a gentle rush of relief. When Shirota got lost that summer, Ryouji watched over Misato as he returned. After that, little by little, Misato allowed Shirota to roam the Karino estate freely.

First, Misato stopped sealing Shirota away with a talisman each night, and the barrier surrounding the outbuilding disappeared. His constant plea of “*wanna go out*” was finally acknowledged, and he even managed to determine what had been calling out for Ryouji since they arrived: two protective dolls who were worried for Ryouji’s safety. Shirota was praised greatly for finding them and then devouring the spirit to which they led him, so he was rather proud of himself for that. From that day forth, he was given complete freedom at nighttime.

And so, Shirota’s pain and suffering ended. Naturally, he was reprimanded if he ever got too excited while Misato was at work—but unlike before, Misato at least listened to his assertions. He could roam the mountains as much as he desired, winding among crowds of different spirits. Ryouji gave him a few words of greeting whenever he saw him out and about and even fed him tasty treats on occasion.

Shirota led a happy life. He loved the Karino estate. It was the first place he’d ever felt safe since he was born—somewhere to call home.

Shirota go home...

He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home and massage his scales along the external corridor, chase after snacks in the back garden, and nestle up to Ryouji for some nice pats.

“WANT home.”

Those forlorn, lonely words stung Misato’s heart and constricted his chest.

The familiar sensation of his futon brushed softly against his skin. Birdsong twittered in his ears, signaling an early summer morning. A lukewarm, sleepy tear trailed from the outer corner of his eye and down his temple.

Slowly, he began to process the fact that he was awake. He’d been dreaming; he was sure of that. But not his own dream. It had been Shirota’s.

“You wanna go home, huh...?” murmured Misato hoarsely. Perhaps he hadn’t run away after all; maybe he really had gotten lost.

Half-asleep, Misato’s voice was weak and his throat dry. He sat up, pressing the palm of his hand to the top of his ribcage. His disheveled locks of hair tumbled across his shoulders.

“Oof...” he grunted. “This sucks. I still feel pretty exhausted...”

But I have to look for him.

Misato crawled out of his futon—yet adorned with its winter quilt. Reaching toward the ceiling, he stretched with a deep sigh.

MEANWHILE, a sleepless someone was dressing as quietly as possible. After spending the night at the old-style Japanese hotel in Onomichi without a wink of rest, Keiko Hisaka had risen the instant the sun peeked through the paper sliding door.

The owner of the hotel had invested a lot in its interior design: the room was decorated with aged, fine-quality wood that shone a beautiful, polished amber, and the white furniture was simple and modern. The transoms and fretted sliding doors suggested that it was originally outfitted in the Japanese fashion but had been transformed into a beautiful Western-style suite with a giant double bed that welcomed both Keiko and Kouichi. At any other time, Keiko likely would have been ecstatic to stay in that stunningly stylish room without a worry in the world.

She deeply cursed her own carelessness for ruining the opportunity.

She first noticed her pendant was missing when they arrived at the inn and checked in their luggage. The first floor of the two-story hotel comprised the restaurant, while the guest rooms were situated on the second level. The receptionist promised to ferry their luggage up to their suite and immediately guided them to their reserved table in the restaurant. So, by the time she realized what had happened, she was already at the table and expected to impress Kouichi's parents—the worst possible moment to panic and make a scene. She desperately attempted to conceal her inner turmoil, and eventually, they finished their meal without incident.

Kouichi's parents were cheerful, bighearted, classy people who radiated the same sunny aura as Kouichi. Keiko felt as if she'd managed to play the part of a gentle, charming, extremely normal woman with an extremely normal family.

And “playing the part” did a lot of the heavy lifting there, Keiko scoffed to herself. After a restless night, she was painfully aware that she was none of those things.

The married couple that ran the inn also joined them for dinner, and it was almost nine o'clock by the time everyone went their separate ways. As they waved farewell to Kouichi's parents in front of the hotel, Keiko glanced around. The building was surrounded by a quiet residential area and adjacent to a large temple. Although illuminated by floodlights, the temple grounds were empty of visitors at that point in the evening. There was no way Keiko could go off on her own in pursuit of the necklace—partly because the night was dark and late, and also because she couldn't handle the terrain in high heels.

For a moment, she considered saying “screw it” and telling Kouichi everything so he could help her look for the charm—but the courage to do so evaded her. Nevertheless, she somehow marshaled the determination to calmly wait until morning. She'd had a lot of practice composing herself no matter what she saw, no matter what tried to get her attention.

Alas, her practiced composure was all for naught once the situation expectedly worsened. No harm had come to Keiko—instead, it advanced on Kouichi, who was still sound asleep next to her, completely oblivious.

Still in a silent frenzy about the pendant, Keiko had managed to ascend to

their room and bathe, then suggested that they retire early after such a long day.

“Sure. We did a whole lot of walking, and this evening was pretty mentally taxing too, huh?” Kouichi had nodded, expressing both empathy and appreciation for Keiko. Thus, the two climbed into bed and turned off the light well before usual.

They were planning to grab some breakfast at the hotel restaurant in the morning around eight, then slowly get ready to move on to their next destination by lunchtime. Keiko intended to get up long before any of that to search for the necklace though.

Shortly after they had gone to bed, *something* began to filter into the room little by little.

Masses of pale, flaming orbs danced through the air yet emitted no heat. Perhaps they were phantoms—something like will-o’-wisps—or maybe souls of the dead.

But why are they aiming for Kouichi?!

Keiko was the one whose aura attracted spirits. Yet that night, the chill-inducing balls of fire drifting through the transoms from the external corridor swarmed not around Keiko but Kouichi, who slumbered at her side. They floated around his face and particularly his mouth—as if they were trying to slide inside and take control of his body. Keiko swatted them away ferociously, easily putting herself in danger for his sake.

Miyazawa had taught her what she needed to know in college: what to do when confronted with spirits, as well as what not to do. But those were methods to best avoid specters and to allow them to pass without incident; she hadn’t learned how to fight back or drive them away. His curriculum had been similar to the self-defense strategies and preventative measures utilized in human conflicts: don’t get involved in the first place. As such, Keiko didn’t know any incantations that would stop the will-o’-wisps’ onslaught on Kouichi. Back when it was her own problem, her lack of offensive skills had served her just fine. But it wasn’t just about her anymore.

Even as she flailed her arms around haphazardly, the orbs simply darted

sideways like flies. Regardless, she believed she was at least deterring them from sneaking into his body. Although she was repeatedly flapping her hands in front of his face, he didn't wake; he simply groaned in anguish, perhaps due to the will-o'-wisps' influence. She tried to rouse him, but no matter how much she shook him, he continued to cry out all night in his sleep.

In the end, his breathing only returned to normal once the first signs of pale blue daylight shone through the paper sliding doors and the strange balls of fire disappeared. Keiko slipped from the futon to hunt for her pendant only minutes after ensuring that Kouichi was peacefully asleep. She'd had no rest whatsoever.

She changed into clothes that were—unlike the previous night's—easy to move in and attempted to make herself at least somewhat presentable enough to venture out in public. Before leaving, she quietly sidled up to the bed to peer at Kouichi's face one last time. He was fast asleep, almost as if he was finally recovering from his disturbed slumber throughout the rest of the night. She stroked the top of his head remorsefully, sad to have dragged him into trouble due to her condition.

I'm so sorry, Kouichi... It's all my fault.

Her heart sank pathetically amid her guilt. If he'd never spoken to Keiko, he never would have had to fear being mobbed or possessed by spirits.

What will he do if he finds out about this?

It had been some time since she last felt that constant, soul-sucking fear—but dread was suddenly gnawing at her gut. She was scared that he wouldn't be sympathetic about her spirit-summoning aura. Additionally, she was scared that he would start to avoid her if he found out.

Ugh, crap. I'm thinking way too negatively again. For an instant, she contemplated running away. *How can I ever find happiness? How did I ever think I could live a normal life with someone else?* Downtrodden inklings of despair whirled around her weakened mind, her brain exhausted from a night spent desperately shooing away weird fireballs in spite of her encroaching horror.

She wondered whether Kouichi would think it a joke or laugh it off if she tried

to be honest about her condition. Or maybe, even if he *did* believe her, what if he decided she was creepy or too much trouble to be worth his time? Keiko was very fond of Kouichi. She loved his sturdy appearance as well as his gentlemanly, positive attitude. She wished that he would always be at her side, never absent, when she turned her head to look at his handsome face. She was overjoyed that out of all of the women he'd ever met, he chose her to be at the center of his world. She was very proud of that fact.

And that was exactly why she was terrified that he would find out that the Keiko he knew did not truly exist.

She withdrew her hand from Kouichi's hair and straightened. Unfortunately, due to the plush flexibility of the exquisitely soft mattress, the bed immediately transmitted the shift of her body.

"Keiko...?" Kouichi slurred weakly, clearly half-asleep.

Her heart pounded. "Did I wake you? Sorry. It's still super early." The room was barely lit, and she burrowed down into the bedsheets so he didn't notice that she was already dressed. "I just got up to use the bathroom. Let's get some more sleep, yeah?" She lulled him back to his pillow, whispering in a muted, drowsy tone.

"Mmh, yeah..." Kouichi agreed easily, possibly dipping in and out of a dream. "Are you still sleepy, Keiko...?"

"Yeah. I haven't slept much."

"Mm, then let's sleep in...together. We can sleep right 'til lunchtime..." he replied with a sweet, somnolent smile. It made Keiko's heart ache.

"Yeah, let's."

Kouichi had mapped out the itinerary for almost the whole trip. He'd devised a schedule that was neither too busy nor too idle and taken Keiko's wishes into account all the while. Keiko was sure he'd spent a lot of time and energy on its preparation, and even so, he was willing to throw it all up in the air as soon as she said the word. It had always been that way between them. He prioritized Keiko's feelings above all else, insisting that he didn't mind what happened so long as they were together.

Even in that moment, his words fragmented and fuzzy with sleep, the smile on his lips and the shine of his eyes said it all: with her, he'd be happy just lazing on a hotel bed for much longer than was necessary.

I'm so stupid sometimes. How could I ever run away? If I were to hurt him out of my own cowardice, I'd never forgive myself.

Perhaps he would ridicule her. Perhaps he would criticize her or fear her. Either way, those anxious hypotheticals focused entirely on Keiko's potential pain; she wasn't considering him.

I really don't want to hurt him.

If Keiko ran away without a word, she would undoubtedly do so. In that sense, it would be better to come clean about everything—no matter what happened or the hurt *she* might feel. Even if he ultimately couldn't accept her true self, she at least wanted to be honest. That was what her heart was telling her.

Yet unrested, Kouichi quickly succumbed to slumber once more. After checking that his breathing was calm and regular, Keiko quietly got out of bed again.

Okay. Time to find this pendant as soon as possible!

Apart from the obstacle of those steep steps, it wasn't a difficult or far trek from the hotel to where the taxi driver had dropped them off. The area wasn't the sort of place people explored at nighttime, so that early in the morning, the pendant was most likely wherever she'd dropped it. She was determined to confess her condition to Kouichi, but securing the protective charm took priority—especially because she'd feel terrible about waking him again to help her search.

I'm sorry, Kouichi. I'll be back soon.

Silently apologizing to him one last time, Keiko closed the door softly behind her.

“I can't find it anywhere...”

Over half an hour later, after canvassing between the inn, the plaza, and the stairs leading up to the temple several times, Keiko crouched on the ground with a deep sense of fatigued disappointment.

The area to survey was about fifty yards wide at most. She had most likely dropped the pendant on the narrow, straight path up the hill, and the only other locations between the Nio gate and the hotel were unoccupied houses barred by fences. She doubted that a passerby had picked it up in the dead of night, nor did she think it could have rolled far given the irregular shape of the large magatama stone.

The cobblestoned road at the foot of the temple steps was wide and unobstructed, so it had taken her no time at all to scan across it. She focused her search, therefore, on the small, sheer path. First, she slowly scrutinized its surface. Then she squatted to examine both sides of the trail, straining her eyes to minutely study the gutters, abandoned gardens, trees, and walls that abutted it. Yet there was still no sign of the pendant. She realized that perhaps she was missing something by peering from side to side, so she decided to search just the right. Step by sheer step, she scoured the incline until she reached the plaza at the bottom of the stair, then did the same on the left side all the way back up again. Afterward, she was equally clueless as to its whereabouts.

Maybe she had dropped it in the hotel lobby or even in the restaurant. In a last-ditch effort, she returned to the inn, greeting the married couple that ran it as they began their work for the day. She thoroughly inspected the grounds and the entirety of the first floor—nothing. Growing desperate, she backtracked to the plaza by the Nio gate and the road approaching the temple again, yet she was gradually starting to accept that the necklace was nowhere to be found. Eventually, she could do nothing but slump helplessly on the pavement.

“What the hell should I do...? Where could it have gone?” she mumbled faintly as she stared down at her sneakers. Droplets began to spatter on the white cropped pants that covered her knees, darkening the fabric in blotches. The big, burgeoning ball of fatigue and shame and sorrow in her chest welled over, and she wept, the tears that had threatened her for the past several hours finally breaking free. For some time, she simply huddled on the ground and sniffled pitifully. She’d lost even the willpower to stand again.

“Hey, you there. Heya!” A strange voice suddenly sounded. It was hushed but high, and its hoarse, scratchy quality might have belonged to a middle-aged man.

Keiko lifted her head and looked around. Aside from the cobblestones that stretched from the road to the plaza, the site was bare earth; not even a weed poked through the beautifully landscaped soil, giving the onlooker a nice, clear view of the temple grounds. Both mud and stone walls enclosed the area, and information boards and well-tended shrubbery dotted the perimeter.

“Heya! You there, miss. Are yeh lookin’ for a stone, perchance?” The voice was coming from under a bush.

“Y-Yes! Yes, I am!” replied Keiko, latching onto that peculiar glimpse of hope.

Although the voice seemed human, it really didn’t look like there was enough space underneath the bush for a person to fit. By that point, however, Keiko was far more fixated on finding her pendant than fearing the unknown.

The shrubbery rustled, then the owner of the voice popped out: a thin, haggard tanuki. With a resounding *plonk*, the tanuki set a charm on the ground between its legs.

“And would this be the particular stone yeh’re lookin’ for?” the tanuki asked Keiko—somehow. He was definitely speaking Japanese, though something about the timbre of his voice told her that it definitely did not belong to a human.

“Well...yes...” She paused. Her sense of danger had kicked in an instant too late; she realized abruptly that it might have been dangerous to admit to it so soon.

“Oh really now! Well then, I betcha want it back, don’tcha?” he exclaimed with a hint of mischievous glee. Had he been a human, he probably would have grinned and clapped his hands together buoyantly.

Keiko nodded extremely cautiously. The corded rock at the tanuki’s feet was definitely the pendant Miyazawa had given her.

“I don’t mind givin’ it back, but I did go pickin’ it up meself, y’know? That makes it mine now. If yeh want it back, yeh gotta pay me somehow,” he

pronounced proudly.

“Pay you? With money?”

“Naw, I’m thinkin’ an arm will do. Oh—I don’t mind a leg either, if yeh think yeh’ll need both of ‘em. How’s that for yeh?” He padded one step toward Keiko.

An arm? A leg? Her mind reeled as she attempted to make sense of his request. It was so absurd that she momentarily couldn’t understand what he meant.

He wants...my arm? Or my leg? This can’t be real!

A brief image of the small tanuki tearing off her limbs flashed through her mind. A squeak left her lips as she scrambled backward, trying to get away from the animal. His tone was unbelievably casual—as though he were asking for some candy rather than her literal limbs. She recognized then that human logic would not sway him, and fear bubbled in the pit of her stomach.

“No way!” she protested. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s an arm or a leg! I’d die either way!”

In that moment, she could see no other outcome than her being viciously torn apart in isolation and soon dying from blood loss. Should she survive, the pain she’d suffer for the rest of her life was a far heavier price than losing a protective pendant.

“Alright, then. What about an eye?” huffed the tanuki as if he were doing her a favor.

“That’s not the point! Why...why does it have to be part of my body...?” she retorted in disbelief, her voice quivering in fear.

A displeased silence ensued. Keiko’s brow furrowed as she desperately foraged her mind for an idea.

Okay, let’s just give up on this. My only choice is to run away.

She could find something to replace the pendant. She still had Miyazawa’s number in the phone that was in her pocket. And in the worst-case scenario, even if she couldn’t acquire a new protective charm, that didn’t necessarily mean her life was doomed. But if she gave an arm or leg or an eye away, there

was no treatment on earth that could get it back.

“Hmm... Okay, okay. How about this, then? We could play a game of tag,” the tanuki suggested. *“So, I’ll take this stone back to my den. If yeh can catch me before I burrow down there, I’ll say it’s yer victory. If yeh win, I’ll letcha take the stone without payin’ me. Sound good?”*

It was a highly suspicious proposition. Keiko had an uncanny feeling that if she didn’t succeed, she would lose more than just the necklace. “And what if I can’t catch you?”

“Then yeh’ll just have to give up on the stone.” The tanuki shrugged.

She had honestly expected more. “I’d be allowed to go home without the stone?” She narrowed her eyes, waiting for his confirmation.

“Exactly. Yeh got it.”

If that was true, then at worst, she’d leave with no pendant...right? Keiko’s conviction wavered. It sounded as though there was no harm in trying.

If she gave up on the stone and went back to the hotel, she would have to confess everything to Kouichi, and their trip would be over: even if he was understanding, she would still have to contact Miyazawa for help right in front of him.

And the thing was, despite how generous and sweet Kouichi was to Keiko, one name made him freeze up whenever she mentioned it: Miyazawa. Because she’d never revealed the basis for their friendship, he’d likely picked up on the fact that she was attempting to keep their past a secret. Kouichi may have been levelheaded and a true gentleman, but even he couldn’t quite conceal the distaste—or perhaps unease?—that he harbored for Miyazawa.

If I can just catch this tanuki, I can avoid that whole mess.

Her desire to deal with the issue as quickly as possible frayed her sense of reason. She wanted to shut down anything that could make Kouichi resent her later on.

“...Fine. I’ll accept your challenge,” she blustered, her knuckles paling as she clenched her fists in fright. *“If I can’t catch you before you get to your den, I’ll*

give up on the stone and leave. Do we have a deal?"

"Wahoooo! That's the spirit!" the tanuki shouted in joy. "But don't give up too quickly, yeh get me? I'm real slow, y'see. I don't get to play games with people all too often, so let's make a good go of it, aye? Righto. Are yeh ready? Get set... Go!"

With that, the tanuki gripped the pendant between his teeth, coiled his limbs, and leaped forward. He raced toward the cobblestoned road at the foot of the mountain that led to the city. Keiko kicked forward and started to sprint in the same direction, but...

Flap flap flap flap flap!

"Eeeek!" A bird suddenly swooped down on her from behind, and she couldn't help but scream. She shielded her head and ducked as the pigeon's talons snatched at her hair. Naturally, she lost sight of the tanuki in those few seconds of panic. "What the hell?! That's not fair!"

At once, a booming, thunderous voice rang out from behind her as she cried out in confusion. *"Halt, young lady."*

Keiko peered over her shoulder. There was nobody there. In fact, all that faced her was the Nio gate, its serene silhouette standing out in the early morning light.

"Yeh mustn't give chase with all your heart. Instead, try to buy yehself as much time as possible." The low rumble of distant thunder or a moaning wind was somehow forming discernible words. Obviously, it also did not belong to anyone human. The stentorian tone seemed to be coming through the huge straw sandals that obscured the pillars of the Nio gate.

"What...?" Keiko uttered in bewilderment. The source could only be the pair of Nio statues that stood guard outside the temple.

"That tanuki's only thinkin' of eating part of yer body somehow. Don'tcha think he's tryna lure yeh into his den? If yeh go runnin' in there, I reckon there'll be no escape."

Keiko continued to blink in consternation. Was it a good idea to approach the gate and check whether a Nio statue was really talking to her? Hesitantly, she

wandered over to the threshold on unsteady legs, her brain struggling to keep up. Until that day, her life had revolved around running away from spirits and specters. She'd never conversed with one before. She had no point of reference for what was safe and what wasn't. Should she listen to the spirit? Should she believe a word they said to begin with?

But Nios are supposed to be guardians, right? They're basically temple staff, in a way. They're supposed to help people...I think.

"Then should I just give up and leave already...?" she questioned nervously. If she conceded, all she would lose was the stone; she'd managed to establish that condition with the tanuki. But would she suffer some sort of penalty for forfeiting the game without even *pretending* to go after him?

"Let's have a little think... If yeh're scared o' that tanuki, yeh sure shouldn't play his game. The more yeh fear him, the stronger he becomes, y'see. But if yeh're prepared to fight tooth and nail for that stone, feel free to go after him at a leisurely pace," the openmouthed Nio statue replied in a kind voice. Despite its low, stormy timbre, Keiko could sense the affectionate generosity the statue emanated. *"That tanuki wants yeh, so if yeh go after him slowly, he's sure to turn around and show his face again to guide yeh right to his den. All yeh gotta do is buy as much time as yeh can. Slow right down 'til yeh think it's not physically possible to go any slower. Someone will come and save yeh."*

"Got it! Thank you!" Keiko nodded in determination. Even if it wasn't quite worth a limb or an eye, the pendant was incredibly precious to her. It granted her a life in which she didn't have to be constantly on the run. It gave her the courage to love and be loved.

"Ah, in that case, yeh should leave that thingamabob here. That, uh... telephonic device," The closemouthed Nio said in a quiet voice.

"Do you mean my phone?"

"Aye, that's the one. It won't get any signal once he lures yeh where he wants yeh," he explained. *"Just ditch it here. That way, yeh can at least leave a trail."*

"Ah, come to think of it, did yeh let yer companion know yeh were headin' out? If not, yeh should leave him a message," the openmouthed Nio supplemented. Apparently he was the more talkative of the two; they reminded

Keiko of neighborly old men. A sense of relief abruptly washed over her.

All right. I think I can trust them.

Keiko nodded again and reached into her pocket for her phone. At some point, the hour had passed seven o'clock. Seven was when Kouichi's phone was set to exit silent mode, but if she was lucky, the day was still early enough that he would sleep right through the audible notification.

"I'm out looking for something I dropped last night. I'll be back soon." She typed out a message to Kouichi and pressed "Send" with a resolute dip of her head. She bent and placed the phone at the base of one of the gate's pillars.

"All right. Wish me luck!"

"Slow and steady wins the race, yeh got that?"

"Yup!"

Under the Nios' watchful eyes, Keiko descended the temple road at a quick trot nonetheless.

WHEN Kouichi Kasahara awoke, he found himself alone in the clutches of the huge double bed.

The sun was bright and birds twittered outside—a fresh, tranquil morning. The nomadic experience of waking in a foreign bed was novel and satisfying, but he soon realized how strangely quiet it was. His beloved partner, who had been sleeping right next to him, was replaced by an absent space in the bed. He couldn't hear her elsewhere in the room either.

At first he assumed that she was in the bathroom or had started getting ready before he rose, yet after tossing and turning a few times, he grew uncomfortable with the interminable silence. Finally, he got up. He swiped his phone from the bedside table and squinted at the screen. It was just past seven in the morning, and an unread notification blinked at him in the middle of the display. It was a text from Keiko. He rushed to unlock his phone.

The message was short and concise. She was evidently looking for something she had dropped. She volunteered no more information than that.

This early in the morning, though? All alone? Without even a word to me?

He felt his chest begin to cloud with anxiety. And he couldn't seem to shake the fatigue that weighed heavily on his head. Kouichi prided himself on his physical health, and he'd never experienced trouble accessing deep sleep before... He wondered if perhaps the unfamiliar environment had caused his low-quality slumber.

Kouichi had no sixth sense, nor was his intuition particularly sharp. He had no memory of ever panicking in response to a gut feeling before, yet in that moment, his insides were roiling with some sort of uneasy premonition.

He leaped out of bed and started to change in an attempt to oust his tarrying weariness. He made himself just about presentable, then headed downstairs with no more than his wallet and phone jammed in his pocket. He greeted the owner's wife—in other words, his cousin's wife—as she prepared the restaurant for breakfast. In passing, he asked whether his cousin had seen Keiko or not.

"Oh, yeah. She was looking for, uh...what did she say? A black magatama pendant, I think. She thought she might've dropped it at reception or in here, but we couldn't find anything. She said she was gonna search outside again, but...hmm...it has to have been about thirty minutes since then," the owner recalled with a hint of concern.

Kouichi bowed his head in thanks and dashed out of the hotel.

A black magatama pendant...

Kouichi remembered it. Keiko kept it close at all times; she appeared to treasure it a lot. When he asked about it once, she fleetingly explained that the necklace was a charm to ward off evil.

Many people across the world carried spiritual items with them. Kouichi trained in karate as a child, so he was aware of the superstitious beliefs and rituals athletes upheld when a match or tournament was approaching. He'd known other friends and acquaintances who wore bracelets of natural rock at all times, so he didn't think anything of it at first.

Yet as their relationship deepened, he came to realize that the pendant

meant much more to her than he initially guessed. It seemed really important to her.

Yeah... I bet he gave it to her.

The yard in front of the hotel was small. After confirming that no one was around, Kouichi barreled down the sheer stone steps. The drop between each was severe, and the stair twisted and turned, so one swooping glance down the whole flight was impossible. No paths branched from the stair; it was a direct link from the inn to the plaza with the Nio gate. There was nowhere to hide along it either: although it passed several unoccupied houses, their gates were firmly locked, and the buildings looked like they hadn't been touched in years. It was difficult to imagine that Keiko would have been able to get inside.

Thus, Kouichi arrived at the Nio gate in what must've been seconds. The plaza was empty, and the only way out was a wide, gently sloping road with good visibility at the bottom of the hill. Unfortunately, he couldn't spot any trace of her there either.

"She's gone..." Accosted once more by that squirming sense of foreboding, Kouichi frowned and glared at the ground.

When people asked what drew him to her, he always answered that she was the sort of woman who seemed as though she might someday suddenly scatter into atoms and let the wind carry her away. They laughed at him, naturally; the communities Kouichi belonged to had never regarded him as part of their majority. They usually chuckled that he was too much of a dreamer or a romantic—or worse, a "sissy," as the nastier characters pronounced him. No matter their irrational judgments, that was his honest impression of Keiko.

Her mystique had captivated him the very first time they met—hopelessly so. At times, her gaze wandered, and Kouichi was convinced she could see something that didn't exist in the world as he knew it. He never asked what she was looking at; he got the sense that she'd shrink away if he pried. Instead, he chose to believe that she would truly open her heart to him and tell him herself one day.

What should I—...? Oh, right! I can call her! He'd been in such a panic that he'd completely forgotten.

He stood at the edge of the plaza and fished his phone out of his pocket. Navigating his contacts list with imprecise fingers, he quietly berated his state of disorganized confusion as he tapped on her name.

He was promptly struck hard in the face by a complication: a melody abruptly started to play nearby—one that he easily recognized as Keiko’s ringtone.

“What the heck?!”

He spied an extremely familiar smartphone propped up against one of the pillars of the Nio gate. At that instant, his apprehensive feeling morphed into conviction that something terrible had happened. Keiko was not safe.

He pressed the “End call” button and ran to the gate. There was no other sign of the phone’s owner; Kouichi intuited that she wasn’t nearby anymore. He crouched down in front of the pillar and picked up the phone. The remaining thread that bound him to her had been cut.

Should I call the police? Should I go back to the hotel first? I dunno... It feels like I’m wasting time either way.

They’d told each other their phone passwords in case of emergency, so Kouichi punched in the numbers and unlocked the device. A home screen crowded with applications stared back at him.

All of a sudden, a tone low like the wind resounded in his ears.

He glanced upward in shock. He discovered only a mild springtime sky without a single cloud in its expanse. In fact, the air was so still that not even the leaves on the bushes stirred, motionless in the morning calm. For a moment, he wondered if he was hearing things as he scanned his decidedly empty surrounds.

He discerned it again—the noise more like a rumble from deep underground or perhaps distant thunder. He felt it vibrate in his very core. He looked around again, perturbed, yet the landscape’s serenity persisted.

Coo coo coo. A bird flapped in front of him, its head bobbing back and forth. It was a pigeon as typical as any Kouichi had seen before, though he noticed its irises were a deep crimson.

"Have you seen a young woman around here?" he found himself asking without thinking.

The pigeon didn't reply—obviously—and simply flew away. He followed it with his eyes, craning his neck as it soared upward. He scrunched his eyes shut and pinched his brow in exasperation. It was still a little early for tourists to descend on the temple, yet the atmosphere around him was livening as the local residents woke, a few leaving their homes to go on a morning walk or jog.

"You need to contact him."

The words floated into his empty mind. Kouichi blinked, his eyes shooting open—contact whom? His gaze landed on Keiko's phone in front of him.

"You know who."

He could think of but one man he could rely on in such circumstances. That said, the man was basically a stranger to him; they'd exchanged short greetings only once, more than a year prior.

"Oh, this is Miyazawa!" Keiko had introduced him at their graduation ceremony. "We met about a year ago when we were in the same club. Miyazawa, this is my...my boyfriend," she'd stated with a bashful grin.

Kouichi had only just started dating her, and he well recalled the way his chest went fuzzy when she said the "b" word. The man—Miyazawa—had glanced at Kouichi with a look of surprise before smiling gently.

While Kouichi was dressed in a job-hunting suit, Miyazawa wore formal hakama. He also sported long black hair in a neat ponytail that reached his waist—and Kouichi was pretty sure it wasn't a wig. With his pale, typically Japanese facial features; beautiful, silky hair; and traditional Japanese clothing, he was so refined that Kouichi would have believed he was a time traveler from the past.

Next to him, Keiko was wearing hakama, too. At the time, Kouichi had very carefully observed them to ensure that the words and glances they shared were no warmer than those between regular friends. He knew it was rude and disrespectful to question Keiko's claim—but could anyone blame him for such insecurity, when Miyazawa was good-looking to the extent that someone would

have to be blind not to notice? There was no way he wasn't popular with women his age.

In contrast, Kouichi had been told he looked sweaty, bulky, and even dirty due to his sports-attuned physique. They also said his sensitive, effeminate personality didn't suit his exterior. Yet Keiko had happily agreed to date him. She praised both his exterior and his interior, as well as the discrepancy between the two. She thought it was charming.

Nevertheless, Kouichi couldn't help but feel inferior in the face of Miyazawa's beauty and clean demeanor—and another trait that made him feel so much worse: Miyazawa had the same mysterious air and wandering gaze as Keiko. Both of their eyes lingered on things that weren't there.

Really, the encounter was just a fleeting, one-time meeting—and Keiko barely ever mentioned him after that. The only explanation he'd ever received was that they were "sort of friends." As more time passed, however, the more certain Kouichi became that their relationship was not as insignificant as Keiko made it out to be. He knew she was hiding something from him. She may have never dated Miyazawa, but Kouichi sensed that he knew her secret, whatever it was.

While he longed to hear the truth directly from her lips, he feared the possible mention of Miyazawa's name just as much.

It's not like I suspect her. I just... I'm not confident enough in myself.

Whenever Kouichi asked her how much she loved him, whenever he told her how happy he was to be with her, whenever he complimented her charms—Keiko gently smiled as if she were beholding the very first spring flower after a long, arduous winter. He liked to think of his love as warm rain pattering across snow, melting the ice that encased her heart. He wasn't going to doubt Keiko when she said that he was her first, and he was very happy to be the one she had lowered her walls far enough to accept.

"All right," Kouichi announced with a sense of resolve. "Now isn't the time to get in my own head."

Repeating that sentiment to himself, he unlocked Keiko's phone again; it had gone to sleep. He opened the messaging app they always used and scrolled

through her contacts. He found Misato Miyazawa's name and selected it. Not daring to peek at their message history, he immediately pushed the call button. He didn't want to be rude by intruding on their conversation, and the situation was too time-sensitive to wait for Miyazawa to see a text anyway.

The call screen filled his vision. It rang only two, three times before someone picked up.

"Um, hello? This is Miyazawa," said the voice on the other end. He was evidently surprised to have been called out of the blue. Muffled speech and distortion wobbled in the background—probably a radio. It sounded like he was in a car. "Is that you, Hisaka...?"

"No, I'm just borrowing it," Kouichi clarified. "My name's Kouichi Kasahara. Can you talk right now?" It would be bad if Miyazawa was driving.

"Yes, that's fine," Miyazawa assured him, although judging by the befuddled way he repeated Kouichi's name in a vague whisper, he'd wholly forgotten Kouichi even existed.

"Thank you. I'm, uh...Keiko's boyfriend." He hesitated for a moment, unsure how best to introduce himself.

"Ohhh, right!" came a bright, friendly exclamation of realization.

He had acted the same when they met in person, too; Miyazawa didn't seem at all bothered by Kouichi's presence. That alone filled Kouichi with a mix of relief and embarrassment that he'd been so hung up on the guy.

"But...wait. If you're calling me, then..." Miyazawa paused, his tone turning serious. "Has something happened to Hisaka?!"

"Yeah... This is going to sound really weird, but for some reason, I feel like you're the only person who can help us." It sounded even more bizarre when he said it out loud. He could hardly believe what was happening himself, never mind getting someone he barely knew to believe him. Even so, he found himself latching onto Miyazawa for help, almost as though something was urging him to.

Speaking of which, that strange, groaning wind was rumbling much louder than before.

“Okay. I can definitely try, so...where exactly are you right now?”

“Onomichi. In front of a place called Saikokuji Temple—” He cut himself off. *Crap. Even if he’s willing to help, he could be on the other side of the country—*

He hadn’t even finished the thought before a surprised yelp on the other end of the line interrupted him. “Onomichi?!”

“Whoa, bullseye! Ain’t that weird?!” Another, slightly more distant voice piped up at the same time, seemingly a young man’s.

“Okay, right. Got it. Saikokuji Temple, did you say? Give me a second...” resumed Miyazawa, his tone businesslike. “We were already on our way there, so give us thirty minutes. Oh, and sorry, but could you fill me in on everything that’s happened so far? Also, I have a colleague with me, so do you mind if I put you on speaker?”

Kouichi’s brow creased in confusion. He had basically no connection to Miyazawa whatsoever—and yet the man happened to already be en route to Onomichi. Another emotion began to crawl up his spine: utter fear. He felt as if he was being encircled by energy that he could neither sense nor understand.

“Y-Yes. That’s fine,” he replied, somehow managing to stifle his terror.

If he was going to protect Keiko, he had to conquer that fear. He had to beat it, then take total command of it.

THAT morning, Misato had woken slightly earlier than he would on a workday and headed out to the pond to do some cold-water ablutions before breakfast. With the spiritual energy he gathered, he was fortunately able to divine Shirota’s whereabouts.

Growing up, Misato had studied divination alongside exorcism. Though he was by no means a professional astrologer, he had learned the foundations of how to trace lost objects or missing persons. Thus, after ascertaining the approximate direction, distance, and terrain of the snake’s location, he concluded that Onomichi best fit the bill.

As for the exact spot, Misato had no choice but to visit the city in person and

carry out some rituals. After drawing up a plan, Misato and Ryouji filled their bellies as quickly as possible, then set out in Ryouji's car—the obvious choice given that the sedan was faster and more comfortable than Misato's lightweight, secondhand heap. In fact, they took Ryouji's car the vast majority of the times they went out together.

Misato was glancing at the fuel gauge and thinking about how he'd have to contribute to the gas bill and highway tolls when an unfamiliar ringtone began to trill from his pocket. He peered at his phone curiously to see an incoming call via a social media app he only ever used for messaging. Most surprising of all was that the name on the screen was Keiko Hisaka—the woman Ryouji had interrogated him about just the other day.

He answered with a raised eyebrow, and so unfolded a whirlwind of a conversation with a man called Kouichi Kasahara.

He'd had a hunch something was amiss the moment he saw Hisaka's name appear on the display—a hunch that solidified into certainty as soon as Kasahara revealed his location. Plus, Misato could hear another, fainter voice on Kasahara's end. It sounded like a man...probably.

"Aye, you there. Come get yehself here. Yeh're connected to that big, white serpent, no? Please come quickly." The voice was low and turbulent and reminded him of distant thunder. He didn't think Kasahara couldn't hear it, judging by his lack of a reaction. That meant it belonged to something indiscernible to a normal human; the voice was that of a spirit.

It doesn't sound malevolent though...and Kasahara did say he's at a temple.

Under that assumption, Misato decided to ignore the beseeching voice for a moment and instead asked Kasahara for more details over the phone. The man had no sixth sense or any experience with spirits, and Hisaka did not seem to have told him about her ghostly affliction. As such, Misato was rather surprised that Kasahara possessed the initiative to contact him specifically, although he suspected that the thundering voices in the background were able to influence Kasahara's mind somehow, despite his inability to hear them.

They were bearing south on the Onomichi Expressway out of Tomoe. Fortunately, the traffic flowed freely, and it was just past 8:30 a.m. when

Ryouji's sedan cruised up the cobblestoned slope to their destination: Saikokuji Temple.

"So...if he's in front of the Nio gate..." pondered Ryouji. "Y'know those voices we heard—the old fellas? Were they the Nio statues? What a pair of freakin' loudmouths..."

"Oh, come on, Ryouji. You could at least phrase it more politely," Misato sighed. "We'll get some more info from Kasahara when we get there, of course, but I think those two have a lot to tell us. We should be grateful."

After the call, Misato had searched online for folklore and myths surrounding Saikokuji Temple and discovered several legends about its Nio statues. They sounded like strong entities. They strolled—no, patrolled—the city night after night, ensuring that its inhabitants were safe. Allegedly, they had reduced the height of the mountain by walking across its summit so often. They blessed people with good physical fitness and scolded children when they refused to sleep at bedtime. They appeared to be guardian deities of Onomichi—revered, respected, and adored by the citizens as they honed their powers living alongside humans.

"I have to say, I think that's the first time I've heard a Nio speak over the phone though," chuckled Misato.

"They got those real thick Hiroshima accents, huh? Makes sense, I guess," Ryouji mused.

"Yeah... They didn't exactly *sound* majestic and godly."

All they'd learned from Kasahara was that Hisaka had lost her protective pendant, then gone missing while looking for it. Based on what the Nio statues said, however, Shirota's disappearance and Hisaka's search were linked. If they wanted to know exactly what had happened, they needed as much information as they could get.

"Aight, we're here." Ryouji pulled into the small parking lot at the end of the road, grinning as he stopped the engine. "Let's get this outta the way so we can do some hard-earned sightseeing."

Misato speculated that touring a city so rich in history and culture with

Shirota in tow would be a little rough, yet he *was* partly responsible for the snake's flight in the first place. The least he could do was allow him a bit of sightseeing as well.

"Well said. Let's go," he agreed with a nod.

They slammed the car doors shut and looked up at the Nio gate. Under it stood the man they were hoping to see, large and burly with an anxious stare.

IT had been just over thirty minutes since Kouichi Kasahara contacted Miyazawa when a car crawled up the cobblestones that led to the temple. He recognized the hum of the engine from their phone conversation as it pulled into the parking lot. After a few seconds, two figures emerged from either side of the vehicle.

One was a slender man wearing a shirt buttoned all the way up, while the other was of broader build, sporting bleached-blond hair, sunglasses, and a loudly patterned T-shirt. The slim man with a long ponytail was Miyazawa, which made the blond, beefy man his "colleague." Miyazawa had mentioned his presence, so Kouichi wasn't exactly surprised, but he looked like the sort of person who worshipped strength and esteemed masculinity—the exact sort of person Kouichi tended to avoid.

It's weird to see someone like him teaming up with Miyazawa...

Miyazawa, on the other hand, seemed like the type of guy who was even more mild-mannered and shy than Kouichi. At a glance, the men were polar opposites, and not a pair one would expect to get along—yet they approached Kouichi while engaged in warm, familiar conversation.

Noticing Kouichi, Miyazawa politely bowed in greeting, and the blond man waved a casual hand. For a moment, Kouichi hesitated over which salutation to mimic and ended up performing an awkward half-bow. The pair quickened their pace, jogging over to Kouichi.

"Hi. It's been a while, hasn't it?" Miyazawa smiled. "You must be Kasahara, right? I'm Miyazawa, and this is my colleague, Karino. Though, um...we don't actually work together, so...he's more like my landlord-slash-friend."

"Hey, what happened to callin' me your partner?! You'll hurt a guy's feelings!" Karino complained. "Anyway, nice to meetcha. I'm Karino, Miyazawa's colleague or landlord or whatever. I ain't workin' on your case or nothin'—"

"Wait, you're not?" interjected Miyazawa with sad surprise.

—but I'll probably help out where I can." Karino finished his sentence before whipping around to face Miyazawa with a frustrated snarl. "Well, duh?! I came to collect Shirota! Ya really think you can employ the Great Exorcist Ryou at no cost?! You should know by now I don't take on anythin' without paperwork. Quote, contract, payment! That's how I work."

"Oh, I see. You're just putting it on 'cause you wanna make a good first impression."

"The hell?! What's so bad about bein' professional?!"

Kouichi felt as if he'd wandered into a comedy show. Miyazawa acted rather informal around Karino; his character actually seemed a little different from how Kouichi had initially judged it. They continued to bicker and rib each other for a while as Kouichi waited in irrelevance, unsure of how to proceed.

Eventually, the two straightened and turned back to him. Miyazawa loosed a curt sigh, glancing up at something behind Kouichi for a second before meeting his eyes with a gentle smile. "Don't worry, Kasahara. Hisaka's abi.... Oh." Miyazawa abruptly paused, cutting himself off too early for Kouichi to work out what he'd been about to say. "Umm...how much do you know about her... situation?" he asked instead.

"Nothing," Kouichi replied, shaking his head. She'd disclosed nothing.

"Ah," said Miyazawa with a slightly pained smile. He scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably as his eyes flicked behind Kouichi again. "I feel it'd be inconsiderate if I mention any personal details without her permission, so, um... that makes explaining things a little difficult." The hand at the back of his head slid around to his chin, forming a fist as he deliberated.

Karino, who had been listening to their conversation from a few steps back, suddenly spoke up. "But y'know what?" he began, jamming his hands into his pockets as his brow wrinkled in bemusement. "You decided to call this guy. You

barely even know him, and you chose him outta everyone. You even had to use your girl's phone to call him. Why d'ya think you did that?"

His tone wasn't intrusive or interrogative—and more as if he was simply prompting Kouichi to verbalize whatever was going on within. Karino wanted him to articulate that *something* he could sort of sense, that *something* he genuinely feared, that *something* he wouldn't be able to deny if he ever admitted to believing in its existence.

"You wanna know why? Well..." He cleared his throat. "I...I don't know how else to describe it. It really just felt like...it was the only choice I had, for some reason. Like...a hunch or something. I dunno."

"That *something* you can't quite put your finger on might not be acknowledged by the majority of society, and it's difficult to perceive or control, but lemme tell ya this: it exists. Some local governments even have Abnormal Disaster Units to deal with all that crap. Right, Misato?"

Miyazawa had stepped aside when Karino started to speak, evidently giving him the floor. He nodded.

Karino acknowledged the nod with a quick glance in Miyazawa's direction. "Spirits possess knowledge and power, but they ain't observable by scientific means. The human body can't physically see or hear 'em—or sniff 'em, for that matter. That's why we need special techniques and equipment to perceive 'em. Don't get me wrong, most people can go about their daily lives without havin' to think about it whatsoever...so long as they don't get caught up in any trouble," he added with a menacing grin. "Did I get everything?" Karino actually turned to Miyazawa that time, appearing to seek his approval.

Miyazawa nodded once more and supplemented, "That's, um...how we explain these things at my job. I work for Tomoe Town Hall."

It sounded as though there was some sort of manual that employees were required to follow when explaining the unexplainable. Kouichi could barely believe a town hall would deal with paranormal occurrences in an official capacity to begin with; the notion was like something out of a manga or novel. But as Karino suggested, he could hardly disavow the occult when he himself had sensed *something* at work in his beloved partner's life.

Even so, he genuinely felt that to believe too readily was dangerous. If he were to accept the existence of powerful beings that he could neither perceive nor combat, his only option would be to blindly place his trust in people who *claimed* to know what they were doing—and what if they didn’t?

One thing was clear however: a digestible rationale for the current situation was not presenting itself. And the two men at least seemed trustworthy. He had no choice.

Plus...I think I might just believe in supernatural powers or energy or whatever.

Invisible forces were at work, and at times, it was better to follow instinct over reason. Through karate, Kouichi had learned that in certain circumstances, the body could be influenced by the mind in a manner that transcended science or medical knowledge. The superstitions that people adhered to before a match weren’t a simple case of make-believe; even if the practice was often merely a mental aid in centering oneself, it still had an effect on that person.

“Um, anyway... I think you should hear the full story from Hisaka when you’re both ready, so let’s just focus on finding her for now,” Miyazawa concluded. “Ryouji and I are experts at dealing with the sort of situation your girlfriend is in. First, we have to gather some information and determine which search method will work best. So...sorry, but you’ll have to excuse us for a second. There’s someone we need to talk to over there.” Miyazawa smiled sheepishly, gesturing toward the Nio gate towering behind Kouichi. “They were talking to us the whole time we were on the phone, but...it was kind of hard to hear, as you might understand. Apparently, Hisaka was here for a while and left her phone on purpose. Those two claim they saw the whole thing, so hopefully we’ll get some answers.” With a polite nod, Miyazawa slipped past Kouichi and stopped directly under the gate before inclining his head again.

All of a sudden, a low, rumbling sound shook the pit of his stomach. Instinctively, he turned to look for its source. Thunder, an earthquake, the wind—none of them quite fitted what resounded in his ears. All he knew was that it deeply unsettled him. As gooseflesh raised across his skin, he rubbed at his upper arms with a shiver.

“Oh, even *you* can feel that, huh? I said those old guys were loudmouths,”

cackled Karino as he eyed Kouichi.

Old guys? Kouichi stared back at him in bafflement.

Karino gestured with a finger to the Nio gate. “I’m talkin’ about the Nio statues Misato’s interrogating right now. D’ya do martial arts or somethin’? Your skin seems more sensitive to this stuff than your eyes or ears. Since they’re so freakin’ loud, I betcha could pick up some of it if you concentrate real hard.”

Considering Karino’s suggestion, Kouichi studied the Nio gate again, focusing on Miyazawa’s back as he stood under it. Miyazawa straightened, raised his head, then politely called out to thin air. Kouichi goggled; Miyazawa really was talking to something invisible. As if in reply to Miyazawa’s question, a strange boom rattled Kouichi’s gut.

“They got a point—there ain’t no one around. I woulda thought tourists would be flocking here by now,” Karino commented, scanning from side to side with narrowed eyes. He probably heard that unnerving shudder as distinguishable words.

Sure enough, the plaza was empty. Kouichi’s eyes widened when he checked the hour; it was far past time for people to be awake. Even the quiet buzz and distant footsteps of the local residents from earlier that morning had fallen victim to silence.

“Guess they’ve been shooin’ people away cuz a bunch of randos would make things harder for us. I’m actually startin’ to like these fellas,” Karino relayed with a heedless laugh.

From Kouichi’s point of view, the “fellas” mere existence sent a chill down his spine—no matter how likable they were. Wave after wave of goosebumps rushed across his skin amid the unnaturally quiet temple grounds. Yet both Karino and Miyazawa stood there without a care in the world—like it was normal.

And Keiko would have done the same.

After a few more minutes, Miyazawa folded into another deep bow under the Nio gate, then turned back to Karino and Kouichi.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Apparently, Hisaka is, um...chasing after a tanuki to get her pendant back." At the word "tanuki," he shot Kouichi a somewhat apologetic smile.

Karino, who had been looking something up on his phone while they were waiting, released a deflated sigh. "That ass of a tanuki who shapeshifted into a mooring post, huh?" He presented the screen of his phone to Kouichi with an outstretched arm. The web browser was opened to a page about folk tales in Onomichi. "This dude."

"Wh—... Keiko got abducted by...a tanuki?" The words felt uncomfortable in his mouth when he finally managed to speak. He could barely process the story presented to him. Both Miyazawa and Karino exhaled long breaths, their timbre somewhere between a laugh and a sigh.

"Right. If we want to know whether that tanuki has taken someone else's form—or even shapeshifted into Hisaka herself—we need to find her first. The tanuki's plan is to lure her into his den, using the pendant as bait, then attack her and eat her," Miyazawa explained with a grimace.

The implications of what Miyazawa was saying dawned on Kouichi a beat too late. A shiver suddenly coursed through him from head to toe. If it had been any other day, Kouichi would've easily laughed off something that absurd. Logically, he knew that tanuki didn't trap and eat people—how ridiculous. But in that moment, he was stuck in a world that did not operate with the logic he'd lived by thus far.

"So...how should we go after her? Think we can use your usual search method?" asked Ryouji.

"Yeah, probably. I was thinking we could ask Kasahara to lend us one of Hisaka's belongings or find some strands of her hair, but..." Miyazawa looked up and stretched out his right arm, at which point a pigeon swooped down from the eaves of the Nio gate and perched on his wrist. He carefully reached for the bird's talons, where they clung to his sleeve. "She says it's a clue. Looks like someone else had the same idea as me." Miyazawa smiled.

Sure enough, carefully pinched between Miyazawa's thumb and forefinger were some relatively long strands of hair.

"Are they...?" Kouichi wavered.

"Yes. They belong to Hisaka."

A low groan tore from Kouichi's throat. *Now even a woman's hair is an occultist's implement?* "What're you going to do with it?"

"I'll make one of my *shikigami* with it. That's, um, a kind of spiritual servant that I can use to track her aura," Miyazawa added, albeit his clarification was so ludicrous to Kouichi that he decided to give up trying to comprehend it.

Kouichi wasn't unfamiliar with the terms Miyazawa was using—but in his mind, they were concepts that existed only in fiction, and the principles behind them no more than fantasy. No fully grown adult would readily believe someone who claimed to enact the unreal without batting an eyelid.

Given his position, however, there was but one sentence Kouichi could reasonably squeeze out: "Please find her."

He had no one but the eccentric exorcists to turn to. By extension, he was also putting his faith in Keiko. She had relied on Miyazawa in the past—and Kouichi trusted her judgment.

Exactly. I gotta trust in Keiko, and...that means I gotta trust myself, too. She fell for me, after all.

Kouichi would believe in the mystique that first bewitched and captivated him. He would believe in the time he had spent with Keiko, his gaze always chasing hers as it floated through vacant air.

Chapter 3: Shirota's Great Escape

MISATO quickly got to work on the shikigami, fastening the strands of Hisaka's hair to some paper cord twisted into two loops.

"Exorcise, purify, protect and bless. O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind —*kyuu kyuu nyō ritsu ryou!*"

He set the bow in the palm of his hand, then clapped his other palm atop it with a resounding *thwap*. As he carefully opened his hands like a book, a white butterfly danced into the air, its papery wings fluttering. It was twice the size of a normal cabbage butterfly and slightly smaller than a swallowtail—in other words, the pure-white insect was not of the natural realm.

"Don't lose sight of it," Misato advised with a serious expression, gesturing for Kasahara to follow. Misato's gaze fixated on the bobbing shikigami, and he began to pursue it as well. Ryouji led the party two steps ahead, double-checking the butterfly's trajectory on quick feet.

Kasahara had said that Hisaka told him nothing about her past. He seemed to be a wholly ordinary man with the same level of spiritual sensitivity as most humans, so naturally, he found it difficult to take Misato and Ryouji's claims at face value. Misato's mind wandered back to when he came clean about his own past to his old classmate, Hirose. He realized anew just how unusual it was that Hirose had immediately understood and accepted him. He absentmindedly mused on how lucky he was; despite being unable to perceive them, Hirose had easily welcomed the world of spirits that Misato spoke of.

Fortunately, Kasahara was calm and well-mannered. Although he'd wrinkled his nose at Misato and Ryouji's questionable presentation, he wasn't denying the situation nor refusing to listen to their unfathomable explanations—which was commendable for the average person. Thankfully, he also did not appear to view Misato as competition, thus avoiding any "Stay away from my girlfriend!" posturing.

I would like to get to know him a little better before we reunite with Hisaka.

Kasahara was clearly an honest sort of person. Judging by his background and mannerisms, Misato could imagine he was a well-regarded man with a lot of skills that endeared him to many different subsections of society. That was why Misato was adamant about not revealing Hisaka's secret himself: he knew it would hurt her deeply if her experiences were rejected by someone so genuine and perfect.

Hisaka had suffered much intolerance in her life, especially from the people around her. With someone like Kasahara as her boyfriend, and with their relationship developing to the point where she was dining with his parents, Misato could understand her apprehension. If Kasahara expressed even the tiniest sign of doubt, dismissal, or denial, Hisaka's pain could possibly lead the present dilemma down a yet darker path.

The butterfly slipped onto a narrow byway that wound away from the cobblestoned road. In fact, it was narrower than narrow; there wasn't even the space to allow someone to pass from the other direction. Brick paving showed the way forward, and stone pillars and information boards dotted along its length. Either side was lined almost entirely by the walls or fences of houses. It was on a rather steep incline, with some homes erected on the high ground facing the sea and others built below the pathway, the neighborhood spilling down the mountain with time.

They climbed the hill in silence for a few minutes, Ryouji in front and Kasahara at the back. The shikigami wouldn't leave Misato behind, but it was vital that they find Hisaka as fast as possible. Although the early summer morning was a pleasant temperature, their quick pace soon had Misato huffing and puffing.

Both Ryouji and Kasahara are actually physically active. Meanwhile, I'm wheezing like crazy. How much lamer can I get?

Misato was overcome by a sudden determination to work out more.

"Hey, look. We got a nawame." Ryouji slowed to a stop and took off his sunglasses, using his tengu eyes to scan up and down the path. It seemed to be rounding the back of a shrine, and branches stretched above their heads from the trees that had been planted about fifty feet below them on the shrine's

grounds.

“Hmm... Doesn’t look like there’s a way down there.”

Misato stood beside Ryouji and examined the perimeter. A guard rail separated the trail from the sheer drop, and there were no steps nearby that descended to the shrine. The shikigami was flitting back and forth above the site as if slightly hesitant. Most likely it detected multiple openings in the nawame, all of which emitted traces of Hisaka’s aura.

If the tanuki was luring Hisaka to his den, the butterfly lingering at a nawame meant that she had already entered the Other Side.

“It’s a damn small rift, and I don’t think we could reach it unless we climbed onto a branch and jumped. Maybe we should check a different nawame, or...” Ryouji trailed off, and Misato followed his gaze. Sure enough, he could sense a gushing stream of spiritual energy before them. Misato and Kasahara would have no choice but to stay behind, though in Ryouji’s case, he might be able to swing from limb to limb to reach it.

“Ryouji. Do you think *you* could get to it?”

“Huh? Easily.”

“Then could you go ahead? I’ll stay with Kasahara and find a different route we can take.”

Entrusting the search for Hisaka to Ryouji would enable Misato to have a longer, calmer conversation with Kasahara. He wasn’t sure whether Ryouji picked up on the sidelong glance he flicked toward Kasahara in an attempt to communicate that idea nonverbally, but the good-natured hooligan replied with a firm nod nevertheless.

“Right. That’ll make things faster,” he said with a pleased smirk.

“Thank y—... Why’re you grinning at me like that?” Misato narrowed his eyes.

“Nah, I was just thinkin’...it’s nice that a prodigy like you actually heeds criticism.” Ryouji beamed.

Misato furrowed his brow. He had no idea what Ryouji was talking about. “What criticis—...” No sooner than he asked the question, however, he realized.

Ryouji was referring to how badly Misato had messed up by storming off on his own to look for Katsuki the previous winter. “Oh, *please!* Leave the teasing for later and just go, okay? I’m counting on you.”

As embarrassment crept over his initial impatience, Misato was surprised by the volume of his own voice as he tried to remain professional. His cheeks reddening, he shooed Ryouji over to the shrine grove with rude, flailing hands.

“Gotcha,” the thuggish monk cackled, raising his own in salute and effortlessly dodging Misato’s batting fingers.

Misato finally turned back to Kasahara, who had been watching their chaotic exchange with bewildered eyes. Misato cleared his throat. “I’m sure Ryouji will find Hisaka in no time,” he assured Kasahara with a smile. “As for us... Let’s take it slow and talk while we walk.”

Tanuki spirits were ancient beings with a lot of history, but the one goading Hisaka would have to expend a lot of effort to actually harm her. That was the Nio statues’ opinion, and after analyzing the tanuki’s behavior, Misato concurred. First and foremost, if the tanuki *did* possess mighty spiritual power, he would have no need to consume Hisaka’s limbs to regain his shapeshifting abilities—let alone a need to devise a convoluted scheme of wagers and footraces.

The reason he struck a deal with her was to leverage the power of a pact. When a weaker spirit sought to steal from humans, it attempted to bind them by exploiting the minimal spiritual energy they possessed. Commitment to a promise, such as in a bet or game, forced humans to comply with the settlement’s rules. Once a human engaged in such a pact, they could not easily extricate themselves from it. The terms they agreed to with whatever strange entity shackled their subconscious regardless of intention.

But if a human understood the nature of the game and was willing to reinterpret its rules, there was nothing a specter as small as a tanuki could do to stop them. The Nios said they had instructed Hisaka to pursue the tanuki as slowly as possible, and Misato had counseled her similarly in the past. She had probably understood the Nios’ strategy as a result.

Keiko Hisaka was smart and thus very quick to absorb what Misato taught her.

Before his mentorship, she had tried to keep her mind completely closed to anything supernatural in order to protect her sanity, but she soon learned how to clearly perceive spirits and do an excellent job of avoiding them. There existed many people in the world who remained careless and unobservant regardless of how much advice Misato gave them—but Hisaka was most definitely not one of them. That she had operated for so long without Kasahara noticing her connection to paranormal activity indicated that her pendant was not the only factor in her success. She had her own diligence and watchful eyes to thank.

Hisaka had been very vigilant about staying out of trouble. In a way, she was the total opposite of Misato, seeing as he lived his life sticking his nose into every hint of spiritual unrest that came his way.

Misato reached up and caught the dancing butterfly, then released it again once they were a good distance from the nawame Ryouji had dove into. The butterfly darted back and forth for a few moments in uncertainty, then began to guide them elsewhere. Mirroring Misato's desire to proceed slowly, it flew with large, swirling motions, stalling for time as the pair trailed leisurely behind it.

Encouraging Kasahara to draw alongside him, Misato paced in silence for a few minutes, deliberating where to start. At last, he opened his mouth. "I know I said I wouldn't disclose Hisaka's private information, but...there's something I want you to know before she tells you," he said after a deep breath.

The path wasn't really wide enough for the two men to walk side by side; Misato had to crane his neck to speak to Kasahara as they plodded on. And although the path was paved, the combination of brick slabs and a steep incline made it very easy to trip. He struggled to survey each of Kasahara's microexpressions but made an effort to at least maintain eye contact.

"Okay," Kasahara said, his tone wavering nervously as their gazes met.

"Hisaka has attracted this sort of spiritual attention ever since she was born," Misato began. "I get the impression she's always seen it as a bad thing, and... Oh, right. Yeah, I guess that's normal—from your point of view, that *would* be the normal response, wouldn't it?" He uttered an awkward laugh. "But...for

people like me and Ryouji—people who make a living by communicating with spirits—we might consider her talented or say that she's gifted with strong spiritual energy." Cycling his attention between the butterfly's trajectory, his step, and Kasahara's face behind him, Misato spoke his perspective. No matter how Hisaka perceived herself, exorcists would describe her condition as nothing other than raw ability.

Misato and Kasahara lived in completely different worlds. He toed the boundary of darkness. Kasahara, in contrast, lived amid the very center of light, society, and life. Their outlooks were as disparate as the worlds they inhabited.

"But looking at the things you see as everyday—the world that you and your colleagues see—Hisaka decided to seize that life for herself. That's why I mostly taught her how to avoid spiritual trouble. I taught her how to escape, how not to encounter any spirits in the first place...but not how to fight them or use them or communicate with them. That pendant was part of our approach: it wards off spirits so she can live in *your* world more easily."

Hisaka never tarried in Misato and Ryouji's world. Unlike Misato, who had concluded that he belonged in the realm between light and dark, Hisaka craved a normal life and was once again relying on his help to achieve it. Misato agreed that was the best place for her and genuinely supported her decision with all he had.

"I practically live my life confronting troublesome spirits. I see things that you can't, I talk to them, and I even work with them. But when Hisaka sees them, she's working to avoid them—all so she can be with her friends and colleagues. So she can be as normal as everyone else." Misato smiled. "From my position on the boundary, I can give her the push she needs to stay in *your* world. But what I cannot do is keep her there. She can only continue living in the normal world if she has someone to anchor her and keep her from drifting away."

If Kasahara—the person Hisaka most trusted—took her hand and tethered her to the realm of the living, her existence in it would likely become much easier for her to bear. On the other hand, if he rejected her or distanced himself from her in any way, her hope for a normal life would be threatened. At the very least, her self-confidence would be damaged enough that she'd doubt her ability to persist.

So Misato wanted Kasahara to truly, fully accept Hisaka. He wanted Kasahara to be ready and resolute before they reunited with her.

Eventually, Misato halted and turned to face Kasahara head-on. "As her friend, I truly want Hisaka to belong wherever she wants...and I believe only you can create that place for her. That's why you..." He faltered. In the end, Hisaka and Misato were more strangers than friends; he wasn't sure how appropriate it was for him to intercede further. Stymied by uncertainty, he couldn't quite bring himself to voice his request to Kasahara.

When Kasahara met Misato's gaze, however, his eyes brimmed with determination.

"Yeah, I understand. Don't worry—it was actually that side of her that was so attractive to me. I want to protect her," Kasahara admitted with a strained smile. "Thanks, Miyazawa. Y'know...I always had this sort of inferiority complex about you. I wondered if you were closer to her than I am."

True enough, there was a large gap between those who could and couldn't see spirits. But, importantly, she had chosen which world she wished to live in and which path she wished to take—and that path did not cross with Misato's.

Misato slowly shook his head in denial, and Kasahara responded with a self-assured nod. "Well, if she wants to be with me, and she needs me to live a normal life, then...I'll do everything I can to make that happen. So, um..." He hesitated. "When we find her, how can I show I accept her? What can I say to protect her?"

The bright, vigorous rays of the early summer sun shone directly on Kasahara with a brilliant radiance. Thick layers of greenery surrounded them with an equally warm, verdure gleam as the light glanced off the freshly sprouting leaves at the tips of evergreen branches. The man in front of Misato almost seemed to glow himself as he walked under the sunlight with his strong, kind features and serious eyes.

Misato replied with a lighthearted smile, overcome with relief, "As soon as we see her, you can tell her exactly what you just told me! You'll be completely fine!"

If Kasahara was willing to accept her with an open heart and open arms,

Misato had nothing to worry about.

CHASING after the tanuki, Keiko leaped into a disused alleyway shadowed with thick, towering trees. Concrete paved the way in a gentle slope. The winding path comprised many turns, gradually weaving its way down the steep incline of the mountain. The switchback was currently flanked on the right by a moss-blanketed stone wall, while the left side offered a view of dilapidated roofs and overgrown garden shrubs at the base of the bluff.

There appeared to be several buildings on the far side of the stone wall, although nature was likely reclaiming those structures, too. The trees of the dense mountain forest stretched higher than the buildings, their broad limbs growing long enough that they enclosed the alley almost completely. The mesh of branches tipped with new leaves overhead made the path seem far darker than it should have been given the daytime hour, and there was absolutely no sign of other people in the area.

Maybe this is the spirit world...? I don't remember there being a path like this at the foot of the temple.

After the Nio statues stopped her, she did her best to lose sight of the tanuki right from the very beginning. If she had given up there, however, the tanuki's plan would have fallen through. Thus, as she wandered down the cobblestoned temple road, a tail had materialized oh-so conveniently from an alleyway branching off the main thoroughfare, its bushy fur sticking out like a beacon.

She'd scurried into the side street. If she had maintained that clip, she would have run right into the tanuki's den—game over for Keiko. So as soon as she entered the alley, she feigned hesitation, glancing around and slowing as though she'd lost the trail again. In truth, she had seen him disappear around the corner in front of her, but he didn't know that.

At times like this, the worst thing to do is match your opponent's pace. Even if you have to force it a little, you can manipulate the situation in your favor if you bend the rules to suit you...

That was what Miyazawa had taught her in case of a real emergency. His words had a profound effect on her at the time, so she remembered them well.

"Umm, let me think... When you were a kid, did you ever play 'the ground is lava' with the white lines on the road on the way home from school?" Miyazawa had asked her. "The main rule was that if you stepped off the line, you died, right? But sometimes, the lines are worn away by passing cars, and you get to a point where no line is close enough that you can safely jump to it. When that happened, do you remember bending the rules a little? Like... 'there used to be one here, so we can still step on it,' or 'it's almost gone, but you can still see the paint, so it's fine.' Think of it like that. It's difficult to change the rules once you've already agreed to them, but you *can* interpret them in your own way. Please remember that if nothing else."

"Can I really approach this stuff like I'm in elementary school?" Keiko had replied with a hint of surprise.

Miyazawa had laughed and nodded reassuringly. "Many spirits interfere with humans by exhausting their mental state. That's why bad jokes or wordplay or witty comments or choplogic are great ways to break through their influence. Just don't allow fear to overwhelm you—that's the most important thing."

I did glimpse his back, but I've lost sight of him now, so I'm completely clueless. Yup, I totally lost sight of him! So long as I can't see him, I have no idea where to go next!

She declared her interpretation of the rules to herself after conveniently crafting it to suit her survival. She tried to look only at her closest surroundings, searching for the tanuki in spots that were just a few yards in front of her. Fortunately, a small set of steps lay adjacent to the mossy stone wall at the corner the tanuki had vanished around, so she could likely buy quite a lot of time "searching" near them. She climbed to the top and found a vacant plaza entirely overrun with weeds.

"Wooow, that sure is a lot of grass! The tanuki has *got* to be hiding here somewhere!" She realized she probably sounded a little stupid; nevertheless, she purposefully advertised her intention as she wandered across the grassy expanse, traversing it in a zigzag. The tanuki had run further down the path below, so his den presumably wasn't in the plaza.

But what if it is...? No, wait—I can't let myself overthink! Nope, no

overthinking here! The tanuki's den definitely isn't here! I'm buying a lot of time, easy peasy!

"Hmm, maybe he's over here...? Ooh, or over here!" she said to herself cheerily as she prowled through the weed-infested lot, slowly pushing aside the tall vegetation with her hands. The place looked like it might have been some sort of event venue or communal space originally.

The long grass almost seemed to twine around her legs as she walked. The blades stood rather high for the time of year and tickled and scratched at the gap of skin between her socks and her cropped pants. Handmade signboards of rotten wood dangled at odd angles along the perimeter, all but engulfed by the branches of small trees. The paint was peeling and so discolored that the words were almost too obscure to make out.

"Ta...nuki...Gallery?" She tilted her head at the sign, puzzled. "And Tanuki... Shrine? And...a café?" She noted the small art gallery, open-air café, and shrine at the edge of the plaza. She had a feeling she'd seen them listed among spots to visit in Onomichi when she was doing pre-vacation research.

But I could've sworn that it wasn't "tanuki" anything. It was cats, I'm pretty sure. Onomichi was famous for its cats. As for the themed gallery and café, Keiko remembered them being on the mountain where Senkoji Temple was located—not near Saikokuji Temple.

I know spiritual energy gathers in the forests around temples and shrines...so that's probably what happened here.

She wondered if the tanuki was using the spiritual pocket realm that had naturally formed to fashion his own little environment. Either way, Keiko faced the ruins with a renewed determination to waste as much time there as possible.

Now, what was I doing? Right—pretend to search for the tanuki without actually looking for him.

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, a small shadow flashed in the corner of her vision. The swift rustling of parting grass sounded nearby.

Without actually looking for him, she reminded herself as she averted her

eyes.

The spirit's voice called out gravely from behind her hurriedly turned back. "Hey, it's pretty dangerous 'round there. Yeh don't wanna be disappearin' before yeh can even give me yer arm, do yeh?"

Why? What's here? Something more dangerous than a tanuki? Her brow knitted. I can't sense anything, though...

Then she felt it: deep within the ruins, something stirred in the dark.

Should I run away? But the tanuki's right behind me. Isn't that bad? What should I do? Agh...

She had to calm down. Scolding her racing heart, Keiko took a deep breath and steeled herself. She could twist the rules in her favor. *Right! I'm not supposed to be running from the tanuki—it was my side of the bargain to catch him!*

Balling her fists at her chest, she whipped around to face the tanuki. "Thank you for the warning! While you're at it, could you give me my pendant back?" she announced breezily, lunging at the tanuki with both of her arms outstretched in a flash.

The tanuki sprung into the air in a cartoonlike fashion, then dashed out of the plaza with skittering claws via the stone steps.

"Heeey, wait up!" Keiko called after him, leisurely jogging in his direction with floppy arms.

A shiver ran up her spine. The true peril of the area was starting to spread its roots further into her heart. *I don't really want to linger here any longer, but...if I go back to that alleyway, I won't have much time left until we reach his den.*

Hesitating, Keiko eventually returned to the edge of the abandoned plaza, standing at the top of the steps that descended back to the alley. She honestly wasn't sure how many minutes or hours she'd spent meandering after the tanuki.

I'm screwed if this carries on either way. Those Nios said someone would come to save me, but...I don't even know who could.

For a moment, she contemplated giving up and retracing her steps. That was when she realized she didn't know how to leave the ghostly realm in the first place.

Have I failed...? No, I can still fight. The instant I fall into despair, that's when I fail. Get a grip, Keiko Hisaka. She psyched herself up with a sharp huff and a shake of her arms. She could still play the game her way.

The basic rules are that if I catch the tanuki, I win—and if he lures me into his den, he wins. Basically, as long as I stall enough that I don't enter his den, it doesn't matter if I don't try to look for him or catch him.

Step by sluggish step down the stone wall, Keiko pondered her next move. She peered toward the end of the switchback—and sure enough, a fluffy tail extended from around the corner. In other words, she was definitely safe within the fifteen or so yards approaching that turn. A crumbling building obscured what lay beyond the bend, so she had no idea where it led. The end of the straightaway was punctuated by another stone wall covered in thick clusters of ivy. Unsurprisingly, she discerned no other movement in the vicinity other than herself and the tanuki.

Taking a closer look at the end of the alley, Keiko noticed it was a junction that split in two directions. The tanuki's tail marked the left-hand path that continued down the hill, while the right seemed to labor up some steep steps toward the summit.

How can I buy more time here? Count a minute for each step I take? Or...

"Hey there. Yeh can see me, can't yeh? Why ain't yeh comin' after me?" the tanuki yapped. He was clearly losing his patience as he stuck his snout out from around the corner.

"Well, if your den's right there, I need to be careful," Keiko said, hardening her tone and assuming a defiant stance. She was safe so long as she avoided the den—and there were no rules against questions: "So, how about you tell me why you need your shapeshifting back so badly?"

She could easily squander a few minutes talking to the tanuki, right? Realizing that, she decided to feign a thirst for more information. If he latched onto her query and subsequently regaled her with his tales of mischief, she wouldn't

have to think of new ways to waste time.

Her ruse was a huge success. The tanuki revealed himself fully, popping out from behind the wall. His chest puffed out as he started to speak. *“I’m a bake-danuki! What sorta bake-danuki am I if I can’t shapeshift?!”* he complained. *“A tanuki that can’t transform ain’t any different from a normal, boring old tanuki. It’s so embarrassing; I don’t even deserve to call myself a bake-danuki! And those bastards took it from me...!”*

He launched into an impassioned tirade about how the young citizens of Onomichi had tricked him, snatched his disguise away, and treated him with merciless cruelty.

Yet if the tanuki had never caused trouble for the villagers in the first place, they likely never would have schemed to strip him of his shapeshifting powers. Keiko knew angering him was a bad idea, but the question in her mind was already at her lips.

“But why did you use your powers to make life difficult for people to begin with?” She couldn’t imagine that such behavior was in any way necessary for the tanuki to survive.

The tanuki’s thin fur stood on end, his hackles rising as he snarled, *“Cause that’s what bake-danuki do! We shapeshift, trick humans, and make ‘em look stupid! Any bake-danuki that can’t do that ain’t worth their salt! Even y’all nasty humans would laugh at ‘em for bein’ so useless! Disguises and deception are what make a bake-danuki! This is how I gotta be!”*

Uh, I don’t think that’s strictly true was Keiko’s honest reaction.

Shapeshifting was a pretty impressive ability no matter what the creature in question used it for, and a tanuki who could speak the human tongue was already plenty mystical enough to warrant designation as a yokai. Nor had she ever even considered mocking a tanuki for being unable to transform. Nevertheless, she had a feeling he’d grow yet more frustrated if she said something like “That’s not true! You’re a wonderful tanuki even without your powers!”

So instead, she drew on her past studies in the field of education and concurred with the tanuki’s lamentations. “Wow. So even after becoming a

bake-danuki, the others don't accept you unless you can shapeshift? And they make fun of you? That's not very nice of them."

"Exactly! Ever since them young'uns got me, I've been feelin' all embarrassed and pathetic..." recounted the tanuki tearfully. He gave a miserable, wretched sigh.

Unexpectedly, Keiko began to feel bad for him. Her compassion didn't exactly stretch to the extent of offering him a limb, but as she sifted through her thoughts for a reply, a parallel occurred to her.

"Y'know, your powers might mean the same to you as my pendant means to me," she murmured.

The tanuki raised his drooping head to look at Keiko. Although she didn't know how he'd done so, the black magatama pendant was tied fast around his neck. She strained her eyes to examine it from afar.

"This thing?" The tanuki tilted his head curiously, reaching up to touch the charm with his front paw.

"Right. Just like how you need your powers to be a proper bake-danuki, I need that pendant to turn back into a normal woman," she explained with a dry smile. That was true, after all: she was able to masquerade as a normal woman only by relying on the stone's power.

"Are yeh really gonna live in disguise forever 'n' ever...? That's gotta be tough," the tanuki said, his tone colored by both confusion and sympathy. As if recognizing their comradeship, he pattered over to Keiko on all fours.

Taken aback by his suddenly obliging temperament, Keiko couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Yeah. Definitely." She smiled again, thinking carefully about her next words. "The thing is, if I don't have that stone, I can't fit in with everyone else. I can't see the world they see or enjoy the same things as them. Just like how others don't acknowledge you as a proper bake-danuki, people probably wouldn't accept me as a normal, decent woman. And if that happens...I'll be all alone." With a deep breath, she kneeled in front of the tanuki and said sincerely, "That's why I'd like you to give the stone back. Please."

The surprisingly softhearted tanuki seemed to waver, eyeing Keiko reluctantly.

"I fell in love, you know. And I really want to spend the rest of my life with him," she confessed. "I've decided to stop deceiving the people around me—but even if he accepts the truth, it will be impossible for me to stay with him if I don't have that stone."

People always said, "It's okay to be different." It was a nice phrase that made outcasts feel good, but frankly, it did not apply to Keiko. She had not chosen an existence in which her version of "normal" was different from other people's; she had chosen the hard road of fitting in. At times, she regretted her decision. She wondered whether wearing a constant mask meant she was effectively rejecting her true self.

"But no matter how hard it is, I want to be with him. So badly." She had to squeeze the words out, her throat constricting. Really, she shouldn't have been admitting her love to a tanuki; the person who needed to hear it was waiting for her back in the living realm.

The tanuki faltered, his mouth half-open as his front paw stilled in midair. Then it deftly caught the cord of the pendant hanging around his neck.

Clack. The small stone dropped to the concrete at his feet.

"I... Eh, but I... Mmm..." mumbled the tanuki, poking at the stone with his paw.

A delighted laugh escaped Keiko. "Thank you." She smiled. "You're actually pretty nice, aren't you, Mr. Tanuki? I definitely can't give up an arm or a leg, but...if you'd like some hair, I could easily cut some off for you. Oh—but I guess it's pretty short right now. Maybe there's not enough." She fiddled with the ends of her hair where it brushed the tops of her shoulders. It probably would have been worth far more if it were long and thick like Miyazawa's.

"Aye!! Hair! Hair works for me! Lemme get some of that!" the tanuki exclaimed with wide eyes. He lunged forward eagerly.

I guess we can make a different deal, huh?

Then, just as Keiko was beginning to relax...

"Sorry, guys, but I'm gonna have to stop ya there. Just when you were boutta strike a deal too, huh?"

A young man's voice sounded from above, and a figure came flying down from the sky to land right between Keiko and the tanuki. Keiko blinked at the man's back. She could see bleached-blond hair that spiked from the back of his head and a flashy T-shirt printed in bright colors. Additionally clad in baggy, worn denim pants, the guy looked like trouble even from behind.

SHIROTA dozed in and out of sleep, swaying in exhaustion.

He could grasp an indistinct sensation of confinement. Via some vague instinct, he felt that he'd been waved about, dropped, and picked up again. He could've sworn he sensed a snack nearby, too. Then there was a voice—a woman's voice—that he had a distant recollection of hearing a long time past. But none of these things were enough to rouse the snake from his slumber.

Want home. Want sleep. Wanna stretch. Love home. Love their voices.

All of a sudden, Shirota's consciousness stirred.

WHEN Ryouji dove through the nawame in the shrine garden, he emerged above a small alleyway shaded by thick, overgrown trees—and just as he had swung into the rift between branches, so he came out: in midair. He nimbly grabbed onto a wide bough as he fell, halting his momentum to hang there.

The branches rustled noisily against each other, the sound rippling outward, yet the small silhouettes of tanuki and person beneath him didn't seem to notice. For better or worse, he was quite far from the ground below. Although the figures did not appear to have sighted him, the drawback was that he would need to jump from branch to branch to drop from a safe height.

He uttered an incantation to conceal his presence and began his descent. Meanwhile, the tanuki and the person—eventually discernible as a young woman—started to talk. It was likely no more than an attempt to stall for time, but Ryouji was nevertheless surprised by Keiko Hisaka's courage to converse with a yokai. He had presumed that she would be fearful and avoidant of spirits

since she had rejected their existence in her life, yet she was remarkably calm as she confronted the tanuki.

Ryouji paused on a limb when the tanuki began to relent. *Guess I'll see how this goes first.* He positioned himself directly above the two creatures, surveying their exchange with watchful eyes just in case it turned sour and he needed to intervene immediately.

“...If you’d like some hair, I could easily cut some off for you. Oh—but I guess it’s pretty short right now. Maybe there’s not enough.”

As soon as Ryouji heard Hisaka’s suggestion, he poised to drop from the branch. He watched as the tanuki vehemently nodded its head. From the pair’s point of view, it probably seemed like a pretty good compromise, but...

I don’t want that old tanuki getting any more powerful while we still gotta deal with him. Plus...we got no idea what this Keiko Hisaka’s background is. I don’t believe for a second she ain’t got a powerful psychic in the family.

Perhaps her spiritual sensitivity was a random genetic mutation or a result of a recessive gene from generations long past. Ryouji was equally clueless about his own occult origins; he had no memory of his biological family and was, naturally, thus uninformed about any mediums among his ancestors. Hisaka’s case was even more curious due to the sheer strength and intensity of the spiritual energy coursing through her veins. If that power were consumed—via her hair or nails, for example—it would do neither Hisaka *nor* the tanuki any good.

“Sorry, guys, but I’m gonna have to stop ya there. Just when you were boutta strike a deal too, huh?” said Ryouji as he plunged directly between the two. Two yelps of surprise sounded from either side of him.

The tanuki was the first to speak. “*Wh-Wh-Who the hell are yeh?!*”

“Great question, buddy!” Ryouji grinned. “I’m Ryouji Karino, an exorcist from Tomoe. I came all the way to Onomichi to retrieve the li’l guy sleepin’ in that stone at your feet!”

“*Inside the stone...?*” The tanuki prodded at the black magatama with his front paw.

Looking over the top of his sunglasses, Ryouji could indeed see a great power lurking inside the pendant. The inky black of the obsidian stone cast a brilliant shine, and across its surface, he could just glimpse the rippling of pearly pale gray scales—Shirota’s scales.

“Aight, now for you,” he said, turning to the woman. “You’re Keiko Hisaka, ain’tcha? Your boyfriend’s lookin’ for ya. You’d better get back to him.”

A mixture of surprise and caution—mostly caution—tugged at her expression as she regarded Ryouji. She slowly unfolded from the crouch she’d assumed while bargaining with the tanuki, straightening her spine to meet Ryouji’s eyes. She was plainly more wary of him than she was of the tanuki.

“You...you know Kouichi? How, exactly?” Her voice was tense, and her shoulders squared defensively as she balled her hands into fists. The grave stare she shot at Ryouji was rather unwelcoming, and he commended her caution. In her eyes, Ryouji was far more dangerous than the spirit.

“Uh, well, I don’t exactly know him. I’m a friend of the guy who made that magatama. D’ya remember Misato Miyazawa? I’m his housemate.” Despite Ryouji’s own teasing complaints that Misato hadn’t introduced Ryouji as his partner, he sensed then just how embarrassing it would be to assert such a thing to someone he was meeting for the first time.

She blinked, relaxing her guard somewhat. “Miyazawa?”

“Yup.” Ryouji nodded. “I became that poor pretty boy’s landlord when the apartment he planned to move into in Tomoe after graduation was double-booked and he almost ended up homeless. He’s got this pet called Shirota, y’see, who happened to wander off and get lost inside that magatama. I just gotta get him outta there before I give the pendant back to you, so I hope ya don’t mind waitin’ a bit.” Ryouji was trying his best to prove his trustworthiness, but he knew all too well what impressions upstanding citizens formed when they laid eyes on him.

Hisaka listened to Ryouji’s explanation with narrowed eyes. Evidently, Misato’s name alone wasn’t enough to reassure her.

What else can I say to make her believe me?

Just as Ryouji faltered, Hisaka said, “So, about this pet Miyazawa owns...” Her face wavered between suspicion and curiosity. “Do you know Shirota well?”

“...Yeah. At this point, the critter’s basically my housemate, too. He sleeps in the outbuilding with Misato. I guess he’s kinda my pet as well, seein’ as we’re all in the same house,” Ryouji mused.

Ryouji met the snake roaming the main house or garden more and more often of late. Obviously, although Misato was the one ultimately responsible for his behavior and wellbeing, Shirota had also grown rather attached to Ryouji thanks to the tasty treats Ryouji brought him.

“And he talks to you about Shirota? Shows him to you like it’s nothing?” probed Hisaka, the most fleeting of smiles passing across her lips despite her pursed brow.

Ryouji couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious under her scrutiny. She seemed hesitant to ask, somehow. “Y-Yeah, sure. What’s the big deal with Shirota? Do you know ‘bout him, too?”

Misato had claimed that Ryouji was the first person he ever revealed that lazy-as-hell name to. Hisaka shouldn’t have known about the snake spirit’s existence—and yet, when she heard the name Misato had long kept hidden, she gasped and lowered her guard.

“No, no...” she denied. “Sorry for being so surprised. So, uh...are you in the same line of work as Miyazawa? He told me he was an...exorcist.” She tilted her head in thought as she studied Ryouji once more.

“Yup. He’s a town hall employee, and I’m a freelancer. We deal with pretty much the same clients,” he replied with a light chuckle.

“Thought so.” Hisaka gazed at the ground. The sternness in her eyes softened as another smile darted across her lips. “That’s good though. Because Miyazawa never told me about Shirota, despite everything.”

A realization slotted into place in Ryouji’s brain. If Hisaka had been learning the basics of occultism and how to perceive spirits, it was no wonder that she noticed that something was amiss with her teacher. Misato had mentioned that they drifted after her mentorship concluded, and Ryouji suddenly recognized

that perhaps Misato was the one who'd maintained his distance, to the point that he ended up pushing her away. Hirose likely wasn't the only person once discouraged by Misato's ever-archaic smile and the steel walls he built around himself.

"Ya think?" Ryouji smiled for a moment before facing the tanuki, who was glaring at Ryouji with his paw firmly placed on the pendant's cord. "Anyway, li'l buddy...I gotta get that stone. Could ya move your paw?" He stepped toward the animal.

"*Wha—...?!*" The tanuki hunched in defense, yelling, "*What the hell's yer problem, showin' up outta nowhere and demandin' what's not yers! I picked this thing up, and I'm makin' a deal with this young lady. I gotta get my powers back and—*"

"About that..." said Ryouji, holding his right hand in front of the tanuki's face. He crouched down to meet the spirit's eye. "Even if you use that woman's hair as a powerup, you won't get your shapeshifting ability back."

"*Wha—!*" the tanuki squawked, dumbfounded.

Ryouji pressed on before the creature could recover from the shock and refute his hypothesis. "I was listenin' to your li'l story back there, Lord Tanuki. Have you ever actually thought about whether a bake-danuki *really* gotta trick people? Like, in all seriousness?"

The tanuki's eyes bored into Ryouji, his mouth gaping open in disbelief. Ryouji was actually pretty impressed that a tanuki could possibly have so much control over its facial muscles.

"*Whatcha sayin'?*" The tanuki cocked his head in bemusement.

"Logically, a bake-danuki never stops being a bake-danuki. It absorbs the energy of the mountains the longer it lives, and its lifespan goes way beyond any of the normal animals'—you're definitely more like a spirit than a beast," Ryouji began. "So, the longer a tanuki or fox lives, it gains the power to shapeshift. But then they act like there's some sorta ultimatum: they think they'll lose their identity if they don't use that power to play tricks on people. But you guys ain't thinkin' it cuz it's true; you're thinkin' it cuz *people* believe that tanuki and foxes are tricksters."

The tanuki's stare remained blank.

Ryouji's theory was reasonable. Tanuki first started approaching civilization around the early modern period, before science separated observable and occult phenomena. Back then, the existence of spirits and monsters was a given—a fact that required no further speculation or proof.

"You spirits are born when natural energy and human civilization collide, y'see," Ryouji expounded. "Though...you probably have no idea what I'm talkin' about. To cut a long story short, you think you gotta trick people cuz that's what people used to believe back when you were born. But times change, y'know? I dunno how long you were hidin' away in the mountains, but most people don't believe tanuki and foxes *actually* shapeshift anymore. They ain't believed nothin' like that for about a hundred years or so."

When the energy inherent in the world touched people's hearts and gave rise to a seed of fear, from that existential dread sprang the entities humans called spirits or specters or monsters. As such, spirits were a product of their time and environment. And as humans' perceptions and knowledge of spirits changed, so did they.

"You've been in the mountains for more than a hundred years, yeah? There's no way your powers wouldn't return in all that time. But they never did, right?" Ryouji quirked an eyebrow. "Same thing happened for those loud-ass Nio statues. Don'tcha think they're way weaker than you remember them? Well, that's why. It's not cuz you guys are weak by nature—it's cuz people don't believe in you anymore. So no matter how many people you capture and consume, your powers ain't ever comin' back."

The spirits of Japan had declined over the previous one hundred and fifty years for the same reason, compelled to change their forms. That reality was likely a sad one for beings such as the Nios and the tanuki, but as far as humans were concerned, nothing had been taken from them.

"*I...I don't really get it, but...*" The tanuki paused. "*Basically, I can't ever shapeshift again...?*"

"Yup." Ryouji nodded. "Even if you get ahold of that woman's arm, her leg, her hair, whatever—you ain't gonna change. It ain't a matter of strength, so

your powers are gone no matter how strong ya get.”

“No way...” the tanuki lamented, his head sagging.

Ryouji had wondered if the creature would refuse to believe him, thus leaving him no choice but to retrieve the magatama by force, but in that moment, the tanuki seemed to lose his will to fight entirely. The spirit had sought to regain his shapeshifting ability for nearly a century, and Ryouji’s revelation must have felt like losing his reason to live.

Ryouji scratched at the back of his head awkwardly, unsure of how to handle the crestfallen animal. “So, yeah...” He cleared his throat. “No one’s gonna make fun of ya for bein’ a bake-danuki that can’t shapeshift. In fact, it’s kind of a miracle that there’s still a bake-danuki with as much energy as you out there. You’ve been runnin’ around, talkin’, schemin’... I’d say that’s pretty impressive. Like I said, ’bout a hundred years have passed in the world of the living. You don’t gotta shapeshift or threaten anyone—there are loads of people out there who’d go crazy just to hear tales of your youth.”

As he rambled, Ryouji started to question whether he was doing a good job of describing the state of affairs or whether he was just rubbing it in. As he deliberated over his next move, another voice chimed in from behind, surprising him.

“He’s right, Mr. Tanuki!” said Hisaka. “Right now, we’re in an age where people would freak out just hearing you speak! Plus...you can tell people all about when this place was still a village. It would be a huge deal!”

Apparently, even if a tanuki, no elderly man was immune to a young woman’s flattery. His drooping, round ears pricked upward again. A tentative chuckle spilled from the bashful spirit. “Y-Yeh *really* think so? In that case...”

“Yeah, what she said,” Ryouji confirmed. “I mean, I think you should go talk to those old Nios. They’ve even lost their ability to walk around, y’know? You guys can reminisce ’bout the old days, and you can tell ’em what the world’s like now, too. I bet they’d be super happy. An’ I bet you could have a real good chat with any humans who have a strong sixth sense who come to the temple, too. You’ll be famous before ya know it.”

Perhaps the tanuki’s advent would trigger a spiritual resurgence so significant

that Onomichi would eventually establish its own Abnormal Disaster Unit—but they could cross that bridge once they reached it. The Nios would probably put a stop to the chaos should the tanuki go too far anyway. So, allowing himself to be a little irresponsible, Ryouji had opted to inspire the tanuki with his possible future.

“I bet our friends will be here any second now,” remarked Ryouji, sidling up to the spirit. With a new goal in mind, the tanuki made no protest as Ryouji gently pried the pendant out from under his paw. “You can come with us, yeah, li’l bud? If ya try skedaddlin’ on us now, the huge serpent in this thing will come out and make you his dinner.” He jumped to his feet and held up the successfully repossessed pendant, letting it swing from side to side.

“Serpent...?” The tanuki angled his head in confusion.

“Yup,” said Ryouji with a firm nod. “That giant loooves li’l mountain spirits like you. He’d have you in his belly in one gulp for sure.” The Nios had sounded rather concerned about the tanuki’s antics, so he employed classic intimidation to ensure he could return the spirit to them safely.

The tanuki cowered in fear, squealing anxiously. A quiet chuckle sounded from behind Ryouji, and he soon joined in as he glanced at the junction at the end of the alley. He could hear two sets of fast-paced footsteps echoing from around the right-hand corner, where a steep stair led down the mountainside.

THE man in gaudy clothing who had suddenly appeared in front of Keiko looked pointedly at the end of the alleyway. After a moment, he glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Sooo...” he said. “I can hear two sets of footsteps, which means your boyfriend’s almost here. I think it’s ‘bout time you gave up the act, too, huh? At this point, there’s no goin’ back. Are you ready?”

Though his eyes were barely visible beyond those darkened lenses, his smile, at least, seemed to bear no ill will.

“Yes. I’m ready.” Keiko clutched the pendant as she nodded with determination. Just as the man said, there was no worming her way out of the

truth. If Kouichi had ventured to the Other Side for her despite everything, then she was prepared to answer any questions he had.

Her gaze shifted to the man with bleached-blond hair and sunglasses in front of her. He alleged that he was Miyazawa's landlord, yet she felt that he referred to Miyazawa far too familiarly for that to be the full extent of their relationship. The man called Miyazawa by his first name and seemed to be very close with his "pet," too.

Shirota, huh...? I never knew it was a snake. She'd heard Miyazawa utter that name once. At the time, Keiko had no idea what he was talking about, nor did he ever explain it to her. She'd asked what he meant, and he'd gently refused to elaborate. The feeling of realizing all over again that he did not see her as equal was still fresh in her memory.

But this guy really does live in the same world as him.

Karino was the total opposite of Miyazawa, whom Keiko remembered to be reserved, gentle, and overly serious. Contrary to expectation, their difference might work well in their relationship, she thought. Despite his appearance, Karino's words and actions exuded no arrogance. She could infer that the self-proclaimed exorcist was close friends with Miyazawa, who sounded like a very skilled medium with a stable job. They lived under the same sky and experienced the world around them in the exact same way.

"Oh, right, uhhh..." Karino stalled. "This is gonna sound like a weird question, but..." He averted his gaze, staring off into the distance as he gestured vaguely with his right hand. He opened and closed his mouth uncertainly.

"Go ahead," she prompted lightheartedly.

"Back in college, uh...didn'tcha ever just think, like... 'I've got Misato now! I don't need to learn about spirits!' ...Or anything like that?" He was asking in a roundabout way, but Keiko understood his gist.

She shook her head decisively. "Nope. If I started relying on him like that, I knew it'd be my undoing—his, too." She thought back. "I was very careful not to humor myself by thinking I could use him whenever I got into trouble."

Keiko never saw Miyazawa as a potential romantic interest, and he didn't

seem to view her that way either. But others had been very quick to make that assumption since they were adults of the opposite sex in the prime of their youth. Many treated their friendship as though Miyazawa were taking care of Keiko and protecting her—a concept which had, admittedly, been rather tempting. The thought of simply relying on Miyazawa to deal with her problems had certainly crossed her mind.

But Keiko longed to live in the mundane world, so she didn't dare push Miyazawa to reveal what exactly "Shirota" was. Keiko had not selected a path in life that entailed supporting the burden of whatever Miyazawa shouldered alone.

When she realized that, she felt like she was finally seeing herself for who she was. If she had let herself depend on Miyazawa, the ever-generous man might have relented and taken her under his wing. Yet if Keiko wanted to prioritize her own goals of a normal life, she couldn't very well borrow his powers whenever the situation called for it. If she stuck fast to his hip and relied on him alone, they would never be equals. Miyazawa might have been very sympathetic to Keiko's struggles, but she could not commit to helping him shoulder *his* struggles.

"Yeah? That's pretty impressive," Karino commented smoothly after an interval of open-mouthed staring, his right hand still awkwardly lingering in the air. "You're a real one!" He raised both hands in the air and stretched, then returned them to the top of his blond head, where he roughly rubbed at his gelled spikes of hair. "Anyway, I'm real sorry for askin' weird crap. Misato mentioned ya recently, so I just happened to hear 'bout a bit of what happened. So, uh..." He paused for a moment. "In a way, if you hadn't been so determined, I wouldn't be alive right now, y'know! Hahaha, that's pretty cool. You're literally my savior, and I never even metcha!" He abruptly whooped as if indulging in a private joke.

Keiko, on the other hand, had no idea how to react. "I'm...your savior? How?" she finally managed to reply after a bout of confused staring.

"You sure are!" He grinned. "Well, Misato saved my life. But if he never came to Tomoe, I'd be so freakin' dead right now. If you and him had gotten close, I doubt he ever woulda come to a new town by himself in the middle of the

countryside. And if he were with you, he never woulda moved in with some random, shady-ass medium no matter how many double-booked apartments y'all showed up at! Hahaha!" He laughed as he recollected his and Miyazawa's meeting, seemingly very amused by the whole sequence.

It certainly sounded like the two had been brought together by chance. Keiko couldn't tell how serious he was about her saving his life, although she did appear to have factored in that long string of coincidences that put Miyazawa in the right place at the right time.

"It's a good thing I made that decision, then." Keiko smiled. "And...I really am glad I met Miyazawa, too. Thanks for hearing me out. I feel a lot better now that I've spoken about it."

Everything about her experience with Miyazawa had remained private since it happened, as had her choices up to that point in her life. Despite having only just met Karino—or perhaps *because* she'd only just met him—she felt able to share her feelings with him. They would likely never be more than distant acquaintances, and to talk about her resolution with someone who welcomed it with open arms lifted a weight off her heart.

After a wait that simultaneously felt too short and too long, the pair of footsteps loudened into distinct gaits. Behind Karino, the tanuki faced the junction, bracing himself.

Flap. Flap. Flap. A large white butterfly passed over the tanuki's head. Karino reached up with one hand to catch it as it fluttered over to Keiko.

"Ryouji! What's happening?!" A smooth, clear voice followed it. A ponytail of long, black hair billowed out behind the slender man who came hurrying around the right-hand corner.

"Hey. The case is already closed, actually. The tanuki's over here," Karino said, pointing down at the creature.

Miyazawa came to a stop and looked around, making a noise of acknowledgment when his gaze landed on the alert tanuki. "So, if the case is closed, then..."

"Yeah. The tanuki gave up, I've got Shirota here in my hands, and Hisaka's

right there," Karino said as he held up the pendant and turned to Keiko.

Due to how narrow and confined the alley was, Karino had been blocking her from Miyazawa's view.

Miyazawa craned his neck to the side, his eyes widening when he sighted her. "Hisaka! Thank goodness you're safe!" His expression broke into a broad grin.

Taken aback by his bright smile, Keiko automatically turned around to check that there wasn't someone behind her.

Wow. I don't know what it is, but...he seems different now. Keiko had observed Miyazawa so intently in the past that one smile was enough for her to recognize the shift in his aura. His grin was radiant, wholly unshadowed by concern or gloom. She realized then that he'd most likely found what he'd been looking for: somewhere to belong. A world where he could live out the rest of his days in peace.

"Kasahara!" bellowed Miyazawa over his shoulder.

Keiko's heart leaped. She instinctively clutched her right hand to her chest. A set of heavier footsteps rushed toward them. Over the heads of Karino and Miyazawa, she could just make out the figure of a man taller and sturdier than them.

"Kouichi—"

She faltered. She had no idea how to put what she wanted to say in words. Should she thank him? Apologize? She was scared even to check his expression—and equally happy that he was there.

Kouichi beelined for Keiko where she stood frozen. He appeared relieved as he approached her in large, quick strides. The tanuki, Miyazawa, and Karino all stepped aside for him one by one, huddling together as they watched on from behind.

Ughhh... I'm so glad I didn't make the wrong choice.

She was privileged to experience the overwhelming love that seized her in that moment. All she wanted was to be with him. Just to look at him made her happy. She could only hope from the bottom of her heart that he was just as

overjoyed and would smile as much. Fortunately, the sudden flood of positive emotion gave her courage.

She straightened, lifting her head to meet Kouichi's eyes. His facial features were as chiseled as his strong build, and they returned Keiko's gaze with a firm, earnest look.

"Keiko..." he said seriously.

"Yes?" She never thought she could be so happy just hearing her own name.

"Tell me all there is to know about you. I want to know everything...!" A sincere gravity colored his tone.

A small "Whew!" sounded in the distance, and Keiko responded with a full-faced grin. "Of course! I *want* you to know everything about me!"

Kouichi broke into a smile and loosely slung open his long arms. She threw herself into his welcoming embrace without a single doubt.

"Haaaaah..." Misato sighed dopily, unconsciously squatting. Hisaka and Kasahara's footfalls faded into the distance up ahead.

"What're you gettin' all flustered for? How old are you again?" cackled Ryouji.

Misato had clearly heard him "ooh"ing and "ahh"ing at Hisaka and Kasahara's exchange a few moments prior. "But don't you feel so awkward when couples have happy moments like that? Like you're intruding on something private." Misato would not refute for a second that he was inexperienced and juvenile when it came to romance. Even so, they had witnessed a rather impassioned scene that surely would have discomfited anyone.

Misato raised his head to seek Ryouji's agreement and found the man igniting a cigarette.

"...I knew it," Misato smirked. "You're blushing too, aren't you?"

Ryouji usually tried to avoid smoking in front of Misato out of consideration for Shirota's dislike of the fumes. For him to be so intent on flicking his lighter, he had to be rattled as well. Misato had noticed that tobacco was somewhat of an anxiolytic for Ryouji.

“Shut up!” Ryouji snapped, a lungful of smoke accompanying his words.

“Both of yeh are too easily embarrassed— Kh! Keh!” The tanuki started his sentence in a smug tone, only to fall into a coughing fit when he inhaled the miasma.

Ryouji lifted his arm higher with an apologetic grimace—and the world around them shifted.

Misato sighed. “Hey, we slipped out because of your stupid cigarette.”

“Ain’t that what we wanted?” retorted Ryouji.

The abandoned alleyway overgrown with greenery transformed into a brick-paved path that weaved between neighborhood houses. The sun reappeared in the sky, bringing with it a sudden influx of warmth from directly overhead, and cicada cries filled the air around them. It was Golden Week at a tourist destination in early summer. The bustle of people and the scent of food overwhelmed their senses within seconds.

“Whatever, I guess.” Misato shrugged. “This is close to where you entered the nawame, right, Ryouji? I think Hisaka and Kasahara used the rift I located after you left. It was at the foot of Senkoji Park, so it might be a while before we meet up again. Let’s take the tanuki to the Nio gate first.”

Misato had found another nawame in the lower part of Senkoji Park after seeing Ryouji through the first. He’d used a shikigami to keep the rift open and stable, then cast an incantation to prevent anyone else from wandering into it and getting lost.

“Oh, yeah. Here ya go.” Ryouji offered the protective pendant to Misato, crushing his cigarette into his portable ashtray after only one drag. “Shirota’s inside. How can we get him out?”

Misato laid his palm flat to receive the stone, then gently traced the surface of the familiar magatama with his fingertips. He had made the charm to protect Hisaka from paranormal disturbance. He’d sealed her spiritual energy within—the same energy that attracted specters to her—and made it difficult for both Hisaka and spirits to access that power.

Hisaka’s energy might settle down over time if her relationship with Kasahara

endured. The longer she persisted in the mortal realm among the living, the more likely that it would morph into an aura that didn't attract the attention of spirits quite so much. However, if she had children one day, she could possibly pass down her condition. She and Kasahara seemed to be in a serious relationship with a high chance of spending their lives together, so the day's events were a perfect opportunity to broach those issues with him.

"Ah, he's sleeping," Misato realized. "Heeey, Shirota. It's time to wake up now!"

The stone employed a presence-concealing enchantment effective specifically against spirits. Not only did it absorb and weaken the pull of Hisaka's energy, but it also created a smokescreen with the siphoned power. Spiritual energy was its battery, in a way, and the colorful hemp cord that formed the pendant's chain was the battery casing. Between the stone absorbing spiritual energy and Misato imbuing it with his own when forming the mechanism, it had reacted like a magnet when Shirota—the embodiment of Misato's energy—happened to near the stone.

"Hmm, he's still not coming out... I feel like he's slithering around in there, though..."

Through the touch of his fingertips, Misato could catch some vague thoughts spilling out of the rock as if the creature were talking in its sleep. He could hear some of the usual demands: "snack," "go home," "sleep"... The snake was rather like an unsettled child crying out for its simplest needs.

"Hmm..." Misato lifted his empty hand in the air and placed the stone on his right palm. "Hyagh!" He slapped his other palm against the stone, swinging it down as fast as he could.

"Yo, what?!" exclaimed Ryouji.

"Eep?!" At the same time, what looked like a slimy thread slid out from between Misato's fingers. As it fell to the ground, it expanded into a huge, white serpent.

"Eeeeeek! It's a s-s-snake!" the tanuki screamed, leaping vertically in shock.

“A snack?!” Shirota’s head reared in interest.

“Hey, no! Shirota, don’t!” Misato stopped the snake from lunging at the tanuki by crouching down and throwing his arms around Shirota’s scaly body.

Pinned against the ground, Shirota naturally protested. “*Stop it!*” he hissed.

But after noting the Nio statues’ worry for the tanuki, Misato was determined not to let Shirota eat him. “Shirota, wait! I’m sorry about yesterday!” Despite his apologies, Misato’s grip did not loosen.

“Tanuki, run that way!” he whispered to the smaller spirit, quickly pointing in the direction of Saikokuji Temple. He was very aware of how the heat radiating off the sun-scorched paving had to be slowly burning Shirota’s belly. Luckily, the tanuki fled immediately.

“*Hate you, Misato!*”

Perhaps he should have expected as much, because evidently, Shirota’s grudge over what happened the day before had yet to fade. His tail thumped against the ground, deliberate and heavy, clearly conveying his anger. Misato wasn’t sure how best to calm him. They were in real danger of being spotted; they were in the human realm, and a tourist could easily spy a massive snake in the middle of the path. Out of ideas, Misato finally released him.

Simultaneously, Ryouji squatted in front of the creature, gently touching his scaly neck. He seemed to have some sort of plan. “Are ya doin’ alright, Shirota? You gave us a real fright, y’know. Let’s go home, yeah?”

“*Ryouji!*” squealed Shirota, wiggling in joy. The next instant, he shrank to the size of a normal Japanese rat snake and flew onto Ryouji’s shoulders.

“Shirota?!” Misato yelped. He had not expected that.

Meanwhile, Ryouji was entirely unfazed by the white snake flinging itself at him and curling affectionately around his neck. “There ya go. You’re alright,” Ryouji soothed, his eyes softening as he wrapped Shirota’s tail around his shoulders like a scarf.

“*Don’t want Misato!*”

“Aww, I getcha. Your master’s pretty strict with you, ain’t he? Poor li’l

Shirota," Ryouji cooed. "You don't wanna go back to him? Hmm... What're we gonna do?"

Ryouji stood upright again with Shirota still wound around his neck, an amused smile playing on his lips. He shot a glance at Misato that indicated he might start humming a tune at any second.

What's he gonna do? wondered Misato, watching the pair curiously. He couldn't deny that he'd upset Shirota by being too harsh. He also knew that Ryouji was his savior; he was probably the only one who could cheer snake up.

"Hey, Shirota," Ryouji said a singsong tone. "If ya don't wanna go back to Misato, how 'bout you escape the outbuilding and come live with me in the main house instead? You can eat as many treats as you want! Unlimited!"

"Yeah! Shirota escape!" The snake nodded cheerily, pleased with Ryouji's suggestion.

"Hey—!" Misato protested. He couldn't let that promise of unlimited treats slide.

But Ryouji turned his back when Misato reached out to stop him, then carried on walking, still wearing a twisting Shirota. "Aight, we've got a deal. C'mon, let's getcha home," he continued to croon. "Can you shrink small enough to get in my pocket? That's it. You're a real clever snake, huh? Good job!"

Ryouji was an expert snake charmer by that point. Shirota obediently shrank, then slithered into Ryouji's oversized denim jeans. He popped his tiny head out over the lip and flitted his tongue at Misato.

"Wh...?!"

Shirota belonged to Misato—never had he thought there would come a day when he would have to assert that fact to someone else. All he could do was stare in silent disbelief as his thuggish landlord waltzed away with the snake spirit tucked snugly in his pocket.

"Hey, what're you spacin' out for? C'mon, we gotta go wrap this all up," the snake-napper urged Misato when he turned to see him frozen.

Regrettably, he had to admit that Ryouji was right. They had to escort the

tanuki back to the Nios and discuss Keiko's future with her. Plus, the tanuki's fur was unseasonably thin; despite the pleasant climate of the Setouchi region, he had to be cold. Perhaps having his powers stripped away had also robbed him of his winter coat.

"Let's get this finished so we can do a li'l sightseeing," Ryouji added.

"What, you were planning on sightseeing?"

"How can we not? No way I'm comin' all the way to Onomichi and missin' out on being a tourist!" He grinned. "We gotta at least take a nice stroll and eat somethin' tasty before we go home. Oh—and *you're* drivin' on the way back, cuz I'm having a drink! Then we can eat Onomichi ramen...buy some *hassaku* orange *daifuku*...some lemon cake... It's gonna be awesome!"

Ryouji was positively overflowing with excitement. And over his enthusiasm, Misato could hear Shirota chanting "snacks!" whenever there was a millisecond of silence. Misato slumped, heaving a deep sigh. Then, with a sharp inhale to psych himself up, he rose.

"All right, all right. Come back to me once you're ready, okay, Shirota?" Misato conceded. The thought of Shirota roaming the streets filled him with anxiety, but he had no choice but to entrust the snake to Ryouji until Shirota was done sulking. He hoped the serpent would return before Golden Week was over at least.

Thus, Misato gave Shirota's great escape his seal of approval.

Intermission: Katsuki's Visit

IT was the afternoon of May 5—the last day of a three-day holiday break—and Ryouji was waiting in the parking lot outside Tomoe Station, reclining leisurely in the driver's seat. The person he awaited was supposed to arrive at 2:24 p.m.. Ryouji glanced at his watch, then returned his seat to the upright position and killed the engine. The JR Geibi Line was operating as usual, so the train would reach the station in four minutes.

The fresh blue sky and warm sunshine that radiated from above was the epitome of May weather. A tranquil silence formed as the engine, air conditioning, and radio all cut to nothing. Tomoe Station was managed by West Japan Railway Company and comprised just two tracks and three platforms—a classic countryside waypoint that saw no more than two diesel-fueled trains an hour.

While trains were the main mode of transport in larger cities, rural areas of Japan tended to rely much more on cars. Consequently, few people used the rail service during holidays. Ryouji hadn't spotted a single other person there—not in the parking lot, nor in the depot in front of him, nor on the platforms. It had taken him a while to adjust to the sight of a station without overhead power lines cluttering the sky. The depot was relatively new with a modern, monochrome design, but the platforms behind it were fashioned in an overwhelmingly antiquated aesthetic of times past.

"Pretty sure no one's expectin' me to go meet him at the ticket gate anyway, but..." Ryouji grumbled to himself as he locked the car and walked toward the building.

Misato's half brother—a boisterous, yappy toy dog who was heir to the Narukami clan—was on his way to Tomoe. He'd relinquished his car and driver's license for the duration of his studies at a national university in Higashihiroshima and so was traveling there by train.

Originally, Misato intended to pick Katsuki up, but he'd received an

emergency call from work that afternoon. Katsuki was planning to stay the night in Misato's room, hence Misato's request that Ryouji fetch Katsuki in his stead. At least Misato had expended some of his paid vacation to extend his break until the weekend, so he would most likely be able to drive Katsuki back to the station the next day.

Incidentally, Shirota's "escape" was thwarted within twenty-four hours of his initial flight from Misato. And due to an unfortunate accident that occurred the previous morning, the snake spirit arrived back at a house that reeked of smoke. The moment they returned from Onomichi, Shirota had only one word for Ryouji:

"Stinky!"

Thus, he broke free from Ryouji's hands and slithered off to the outbuilding as usual.

The following day, Ryouji had tidied his room and done some other cleaning, then headed out to buy some seeds in the afternoon for their summer vegetable patch. He'd planted the seeds the morning after, before leaving to pick up Katsuki. Golden Week had been a busy holiday; he'd gone somewhere every single day.

The tanuki's fur loss was psychogenic, it's only a matter of time until Hisaka and Kasahara get married, Shirota returned to his master... All's right with the world.

The tanuki's obsession with the loss of his shapeshifting had hindered his ability to shed old fur and grow a new coat, apparently. The good-natured Nio statues had assailed the tanuki with all sorts of suggestions and advice, so he probably wasn't a concern anymore. That said, if any particularly keen-eared residents or tourists had been in the area, perhaps a little disturbance was to be expected in the future.

The station parking lot was free of charge for a maximum of twenty minutes. Ryouji crossed the road, briefly acknowledging two taxis positioned along its edge before entering the depot. The building was even more compact on the inside than its quaint exterior suggested.

An information display signaled the next arrival, and the bells of a railroad

crossing tolled in the distance. After a few moments, Ryouji heard the low, rhythmic pulsing of wheels clattering over the track, the roar of a diesel engine, and finally, the squeak of breaks accompanied by a merry jingle over the station speakers as the train pulled up to the platform. It was an alarming cacophony of sound given how empty the building was. Ryouji peered at the two-carriage train to see barely any silhouettes through the window. Tomoe was the final stop, and as the doors opened, a negligible number of passengers spilled out onto the platform.

The ticket barrier wasn't exactly a barrier as such—rather than an automatic turnstile, a lone station employee popped their head out through the booth window to physically check each person's ticket. After two or three people presented their tickets and passed through, the final passenger appeared: a young man with a nervous expression and a huge amount of luggage that screamed "I'm on vacation." Ryouji himself might have hesitated due to years of using automated ticket gates, yet Katsuki's apprehension seemed to stem from a severe lack of experience. Ryouji wouldn't have been surprised if the occasion was his first time ever taking a train somewhere, considering his wealthy upbringing.

He was noticeably taller than when Ryouji had seen him the previous winter. At the time, his stature and mannerisms were juvenile enough that he was a boy in Ryouji's mind, but the version of Katsuki that stood before him exuded the air of a young man who'd just entered college. Every time Misato returned from a day out with Katsuki, Ryouji had been subjected to a doting brother gushing about how tall he'd grown or how mature he was becoming—which, evidently, was not actually the result of Misato's Katsuki-tinted glasses as Ryouji had assumed.

His deep-brown, curly hair had lengthened somewhat but didn't yet look long enough to tie back into a ponytail. The strands twisted upward in a wild, fluffy cloud, reminding Ryouji of a lion's mane. Plus, the mismatch between the headband holding his bangs at bay and the unbuttoned, beautifully tailored shirt he wore gave Ryouji a good chuckle.

"Yo. Hope the journey went okay," Ryouji said, waving casually as he walked up to a frozen, wide-eyed Katsuki Narukami.

A national highway ran from where Katsuki lived to Tomoe, but no public transport, such as direct buses or trains, was available. His only option was to first travel to Hiroshima City, then take a connection to Tomoe. As a result, it could take two to five times longer to reach Tomoe via public transport than by car.

Katsuki immediately recognized Ryouji, his expression pulled in multiple directions by a mixture of relief and displeasure. He had expected to be greeted by his beloved older brother, so he was understandably disappointed to see the shady, uncouth exorcist that hung around Misato instead of the man himself. Despite the unease clouding his charming features—features of a different sort of beauty than his brother's—Katsuki obediently approached Ryouji with his suitcase in one hand and several paper bags in the other.

"...Thanks for picking me up," he said before promptly shutting his mouth again. His nose wrinkled in an exemplary performance of a sour pout, yet even so, he seemed to be genuinely grateful. Considering how badly their first meeting had gone, Ryouji could see then just how thoroughly good manners had been drilled into the boy. Ryouji had whacked him in the shin with a *khakkhara* and pinned him to the ground, after all. He'd expected more hostility.

"Sure." Ryouji brushed off his thanks, then turned back to the car. After a glance to ensure that Katsuki was following, Ryouji ambled across the road and unlocked his sedan.

"You wanna go to Yasaka Shrine first, right?" Ryouji asked, looking over his shoulder as he opened the driver's door.

"Yeah," Katsuki replied. For some reason, he was waiting next to the rear door expectantly.

Does he wanna put his luggage in the back? So...why's he just standing there?

"The hell are ya doin'?" demanded Ryouji with a *tch*. "I'm sure even a li'l upper-class kid like you knows how to open a door." Katsuki didn't expect Ryouji to open the door *for* him, did he?

"Of course I do," Katsuki retorted with a look of confusion. "But I wouldn't get in someone else's car without their permission. Are you saying I can just open it

without asking?"

Ryouji had to admit there was some logic in that, although he doubted that he could simply respond with a "sure" and be done with it. Sighing, he opened the rear door for Katsuki.

"Thanks. These are for my brother, by the way," Katsuki said, handing Ryouji one paper bag from a national chain of rice cracker stores and another from a famous sake brewery in Higashihiroshima called Saijo. Both were very large and very heavy and clearly contained more than one person's worth of gifts; it appeared he wasn't being exactly honest.

"So...I can put my case inside?" Katsuki asked.

Ryouji's imagination whirled at full speed. *What, do fancy kids like him usually get the chauffeur to take their luggage at the gate and heave it into the trunk for them?* He realized then that perhaps he should be commending Katsuki for stepping out of his comfort zone. The boy had retaliated against his family's intentions and started to live alone entirely of his own volition. There had to be a lot of everyday, normal things that he was still adjusting to.

"Right. Lay it down on the seat. You'll get the upholstery dirty if ya put the wheels on it."

"Okay." Katsuki nodded, hauled his case onto the back seat, then proceeded to climb into the car alongside it.

Ohhhh, I get it now! He was gonna sit in the back! He really is used to bein' chauffeured around! Ryouji was confronted with yet another reminder of their different standing in society; he'd presumed they would sit side by side in the front. Misato might have a sophisticated air to him, but he at least operated with the same common sense as Ryouji.

"Aight, let's go."

It was around a ten-minute drive from Tomoe Station to Yasaka Shrine. Once the shrine's true history came to light, it was repurposed as a place to pray for all the villagers of Nagaso who'd died from famine or plague, including the young girl Kirino. One of Katsuki's main reasons for coming to Tomoe was to pay his respects at the shrine—that was the pretext he provided, anyway.

They managed to depart before the twenty minutes of free parking were up, the gate to the lot automatically rising to allow Ryouji into the rotary. He glanced up at the rearview mirror and found Katsuki staring listlessly out the window.

“Soooo...” Ryouji began. “What excuses did ya tell your family liaison guy to get down here by yourself?”

Apparently, Katsuki’s point of contact with the Narukami clan had accompanied him to Higashihiroshima. The man was essentially Wakatake’s replacement and should have, by all rights, tagged along with Katsuki to Tomoe; he could have driven Katsuki rather than make him go to the trouble of using public transportation. But one big factor precluded that possibility: Katsuki didn’t want the Narukami family to know that Misato Miyazawa was in Tomoe.

“I didn’t have to make any excuses.” Katsuki pouted again. “I just said I’m going to Tomoe alone. Then I left.”

“Huh? Does that really work on them?” Ryouji raised an eyebrow.

“Well, if it didn’t, I wouldn’t be here. I did tell them that I’m staying at your...that I’m staying with the exorcist from Tomoe who looked after me last time. It’s not like I lied.” He shrugged. “They even provided that sake as a gift. I’m not old enough to buy alcohol, remember?”

Ryouji glimpsed the bottles of sake lying on the passenger seat. True enough, Katsuki was nineteen—one year too young to be purchasing booze.

“Dude, are you sure you got ‘em off your tail with just that...?” Ryouji wondered, doubtful.

Ryouji had indeed relayed his contact information to the Narukamis and informed them that he was the exorcist who’d worked with Wakatake to find Katsuki in Tomoe. Keeping Misato’s presence a secret, Ryouji had located Katsuki, persuaded him to come back to the living realm, and returned him to the clan along with Wakatake, who had lost his mind while confronting the real demon of the mountain. Subsequently, Katsuki gained the courage to reconsider the trajectory of his continuing education. From the clan’s perspective, it might have seemed as though Katsuki greatly trusted and admired Ryouji.

“Didn’t Tsukishiro call you himself anyway?”

Tsukishiro was the new liaison. Although Ryouji had never met him, he’d heard that the guy was around the same age as Wakatake. And sure enough, Ryouji had received a call in which Tsukishiro thanked him for letting Katsuki stay in his home.

“Well, yeah, I made sure I was tellin’ the same story as you, but...didn’t they ever ask why you were so desperate to go alone?” He’d simply assumed that Katsuki had utilized an innocuous excuse like “I want to see what it’s like to travel alone,” or something along those lines. He had worried whether the clan would buy even that, so the concept of Katsuki being allowed to journey by himself without a reason whatsoever seemed impossible.

“Nope,” answered Katsuki bluntly.

“Bro...” Ryouji loosed a gruff sigh. “Either they really trust ya, or they’ve already investigated and know exactly what’s goin’ on.”

“Maybe. But...I kinda wonder if they’re testing me.”

A test, huh?

They cruised past Tomoe Town Hall, then straight through the intersection, crossing Tomoe Bridge from the west. Beautiful metal arches stretched up on either side of the bridge, the beams painted red and engraved with the town’s logo. Tomoe District awaited them on the far bank of the Basen River, and they passed the yokai museum as they continued down the central road. Heading ever straight, they encountered Dasai Shrine, famous for its involvement in the Inou Mononoke legends. Just a little farther and they would reach their destination.

“Whaddya mean by that? Ya think Tsukishiro’s testing you? Or your old man?”

“Probably my father,” Katsuki replied, his detached tone formal and clipped.

Ryouji wasn’t a fan of Misato’s constant obligatory smile, yet he couldn’t help but think that Katsuki could afford to be a little friendlier. Surely life was easier that way.

Come to think of it, Misato was laughing like crazy the other day cuz of how

much Katsuki takes after their dad. If he remembered correctly, it was the day after Misato visited Katsuki to congratulate him on starting college. The comparison had surfaced when they were eating dinner and enjoying a few drinks in the living room.

Reportedly, Misato's father was not the sort of person who let any significant emotion show on his face. He spoke in a stiff, standoffish manner—and only when he absolutely had to. Misato had noticed that Katsuki's speech pattern had come to bear a striking resemblance to their father's—and not in the juvenile, awed way he used to mimic him when they were little.

"Honestly, I think their personalities are identical," Misato had said. "They both can't stand injustice, and neither of them expresses their emotions even though they actually feel quite intensely. They're both so straightforward; they'd never try to manipulate someone or try to talk their way out of something. Both of them studied a science at college. Like... How should I put this? They can easily keep confidential information quiet but would never tell a lie to cover it up. That sort of thing."

Contrary to what one might expect of someone who'd experienced what Misato had, he greatly trusted and respected the head of the Narukami family. His positive impression was borne both from what his mother, Akemi, told him as a child, as well as the several years he lived on the Narukami estate. From what Misato had described of the clan's leader, the man didn't seem like the type to test his own child to see if he would willingly confess to hiding something. Besides, if both his personality and way of speaking were as forthright as Katsuki's, he probably wouldn't employ such a roundabout approach to gather information.

I guess it ain't too weird if they're checking up on him behind the scenes. To be honest, his old man might just be making sure he's safe.

"I feel like I'm being tested on all sorts of stuff, like...whether I can keep a secret on my own, whether I can make sure it won't put me or the clan in danger, whether it's worth keeping in the first place, how strong my resolve is..." Katsuki's profile was expressionless as Ryouji studied him in the rearview mirror.

The kid's an idiot. They're just lookin' out for him for sure.

Aware that Katsuki would only refute it if Ryouji stated that fact aloud, he swallowed his words and flicked his turn signal as he slid the car into the right-hand lane.

YASAKA Shrine looked exactly the same as it had in December. Katsuki headed toward the main building clutching a small paper bag from a Japanese-style confectionery, while Ryouji languidly trailed behind. He'd parked the car on a tiny, narrow side street that was more akin to a convenient gap between houses before they climbed up the steep stair that emerged onto the plaza in front of Nagaso Community Center. The building had served as a base for the Abnormal Disaster Unit while battling the demon of Mount Kagura the previous year.

Katsuki scaled the steps at the far end of the open space and halted before Nagaso Yasaka Shrine where its eaves jutted over the incline, looming over the plaza. There was no outer deck for worshippers to pray on—rather, the modest shrine building stood immediately at the top of the stone steps. Katsuki leaned forward to carefully align the contents of his paper bag on the wooden stairs that led to the inner sanctuary.

He laid out rows of *kashiwa mochi* and *sasamaki*. He'd bought the sweets at an old confectionery in Higashihiroshima, so the mochi were wrapped in kashiwa oak leaves instead of the chinaroot that the people of northern Hiroshima Prefecture tended to use. Sasamaki—sweet rice dumplings folded into a cylinder with bamboo grass and secured with common rush, then boiled—was a seasonal treat consumed on the fifth day of the fifth month of the old Japanese calendar in times past. In the modern age, many stores sell it as a festive dessert for Children's Day.

Ryouji could guess why Katsuki had come to offer the candies on Children's Day: they were for the little girl he'd met and then farewelled on Mount Kagura the previous winter. Ryouji noticed that he lined the confections up in pairs, too—one for her and one for her little sister, most likely.

Katsuki clapped his hands together, the sound echoing through the plaza. He

bowed twice, clapped twice, then bowed once more. His bows were deep, and he struck his hands together with fierce intent, addressing a specific spirit that was no longer a lonely demon, nor a human sacrifice, but a mountain deity that watched over Nagaso. Ryouji cautiously lowered his sunglasses to check their surroundings but glimpsed nothing untoward. All he discerned was a slight rustling from the towering forest of alpine trees in the distance.

Although both Yasaka Shrine and the temples of Onomichi were places of local worship and regarded by most as similar venues, their atmospheres were completely distinct. The number of citizens attached to a site, its wealth, history, and popularity all had an effect. Such variations also attracted different types of spirits to dwell within the grounds.

Not many people prayed at Yasaka Shrine or worshipped Mount Kagura as a deity. Even though a new god was enshrined at its heart, the shrine would probably fall into total disuse in subsequent generations. And no matter how much Ryouji lamented that reality, there was nothing a single exorcist or monk alone could do.

After a while, Katsuki raised his head and slipped the seasonal treats back into the paper bag. Then he turned around, paced down the steps, and proffered it to Ryouji. “There’s no point in me taking them back home again. You can eat them.”

True enough, to leave perishable offerings at a tiny shrine with no priest to take care of such things would not go down well with the villagers.

“Gotcha.” Ryouji nodded, accepting the bag.

For a long few moments, Katsuki remained rooted in front of Ryouji, his gaze fixed single-mindedly on the paper sack in Ryouji’s arms.

“What’s up?” Ryouji questioned.

They’d finished Katsuki’s errand. All that was left was to take him back to the house and wait for Misato. If Misato were already with them, they probably could have poked around central Tomoe and grabbed a bite to eat before returning home. But he was not, and Ryouji could not envisage any sort of fun sightseeing occurring with just the two of them.

"I...I guess Misato really can't eat sweets anymore, can he?" A shadow fell over Katsuki's expression.

The Misato Miyazawa that Ryouji knew always took his coffee black and refused to eat anything sugary. Japanese desserts were utterly out of the question for him—especially any that contained red bean paste. In Katsuki's memory, however, the brother he grew up with was particularly fond of Japanese confectionery.

"Yeah... He can't stomach 'em at all. By his own account, he got poisoned so bad he almost died, so..." Ryouji recalled the story of how someone had exploited Misato's love of sweets and concealed the devouring snake spirit inside red-bean *manju*.

Hold up a sec. If he fell into their trap cuz the curse was stuffed inside one of his favorite treats, that's gotta mean he used to be a big eater, right?

The impression Ryouji had formed of Misato's appetite was that it was small and nonchalant about the world of flavor. Maybe, Ryouji realized, he consumed so little because he simply had no spare energy in his daily life to procure a good amount of food. It was true that whenever Ryouji treated him or shared his own grub, Misato ate it with a big smile. Not to mention the creature that composed part of his identity was openly obsessed with snacking.

Though connected by a spiritual bond, Shirota and Misato were separated into human body and phantom apparition, making their entire existence somewhat of a chimera: they shared the same torso, but one controlled the head and the other the tail. Shirota's intentions, likes, and dislikes were a representation of Misato's true feelings, and his actions also reflected Misato's subconscious. In a way, Shirota embodied his innermost wants and instincts. Therefore, when Shirota boycotted Misato's long shift at work and fled a few days prior, he was merely expressing how badly Misato himself wanted to go home. Similarly, if Shirota loved food, deep down, Misato felt the same way.

While Ryouji was delightedly musing on the intricacies of Misato's subconscious, however, Katsuki's face was grave.

"...Have ya heard 'bout what happened before he left home?" Ryouji broached the subject awkwardly, scratching at the back of his head with his free

hand. He was already too involved in both Misato and Katsuki's lives to feign ignorance about their family affairs. Still, he wasn't wholly certain which topics might be triggering, and he didn't want to sour the mood.

"Yeah. He told me everything when we left the shrine last time." Katsuki's voice was tight, and his hands balled into fists at his sides.

"Mm-hm, okay. Welp—"

"It was all my fault."

Ryouji had been about to assure him that Misato was living a pretty happy life nevertheless before that self-deprecating comment interrupted him.

"It's all because I tried to make him stay a Narukami." Katsuki frowned. "He told me that's not true, but the facts don't change. I robbed him of a better life."

"Katsuki..." Ryouji sighed. He wasn't really sure how to respond. Katsuki didn't seem to be seeking comfort.

The boy's shoulders trembled slightly as he bore the brunt of his regret. When he lifted his drooping head, eyes brighter than his brother's pierced Ryouji. "Karino, I need you to tell me something. Is Misato happy now? No—" Katsuki cut himself off. "Is his life peaceful now? Can he relax?" He stared at Ryouji with the resolve of a man prepared to be sliced in half by a huge blade.

Ryouji didn't know whether the blade he anticipated was the revelation that Misato was happier in a world without Katsuki and the Narukamis, or the news that Misato was suffering all the more as a result of losing them.

Either way, all Ryouji could tell the boy was his own version of the truth. "Hmm... To be honest, he worries 'bout stuff just the same as the average person. He might go through a little more rough spots than a regular guy, but, in his own way, he's just livin' a normal working life like anyone else, y'know?" Ryouji shrugged casually, looping the handle of the bag around his wrist and stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Misato had to deal with a number of problems that weren't exactly common—like summer heat fatigue that practically wiped him out or the risk of half his body running away if he pushed himself too hard—but otherwise, his

complaints were much the same as anyone else's. Almost everyone griped about friction with a colleague at some point. And in Misato's case, he had very understanding bosses and earned a living doing exactly what he wanted to with skills he had worked purposefully to acquire. His old friend from high school, Hirose, had even transferred to his department at the start of his second year at Town Hall. As far as workplaces went, Misato was undoubtedly blessed.

"And as for his living situation, I'd say it couldn't get any better!" Ryouji added with a smirk and a proud swell of his chest.

Even if Ryouji had never called out to Misato as he sadly wandered the park that day, he likely would have found peace in Tomoe regardless. His will to survive was so strong that he'd consumed a flesh-eating snake spirit, for crying out loud—and he'd bagged a position working for the local government all on his own. Ryouji knew Misato as an incredibly bold, unyielding man. In view of those traits, combined with the kindness and sincerity he showed people, others were sure to be charmed by his brazen approach to existence.

Still, I'm probably the only one who'd let his pet snake spirit roam wherever the hell it wants! I don't think any other landlord would be feedin' it snacks, either!

Shirota was very attached to Ryouji. Part of that was probably related to the fact that he tantalized the serpent with promises of tasty food, but he liked to think he was at least a little bit special in the creature's eyes.

"Yeah? Mm...okay."

Ryouji had half expected some sort of snarky comeback, but Katsuki quietly cast his gaze downward. Dark shadows fell under his long eyelashes as the sun beamed from high overhead.

Ryouji's shoulders deflated in disappointment. He scrutinized Katsuki's expression, then said, "Does that make ya feel any better?" His tone resonated far more gently than he intended.

Katsuki responded with a slight shake of his head. "No," he said, "it never could. It would be unfair to say there's nothing I could've done and just forgot about it. What he lost... He can never get it back."

The young man in front of Ryouji must have ceaselessly tormented himself in the few months since learning the full truth. Evidence of that torture was apparent in the heavy words that dropped, subdued, from his lips.

"It's the truth that my selfish demands gave Misato a scar that will never, ever fade. If I just let go and stopped worrying about it...I'd never forgive myself. For the rest of my life."

Nobody blamed Katsuki. No one, including his beloved older brother, would ever condemn a small child for fearfully clinging to the one person who understood him. Ryouji didn't blame him either. It wasn't Katsuki's fault. Yet, precisely because no one faulted him, Katsuki had no choice but to find a way to make peace with the culpability he shouldered on his own.

Katsuki thus refused to avert his eyes from or avoid or gloss over the situation and allowed no one—not even Misato—to baby him or say he'd done nothing wrong. Ryouji's first impression of Katsuki was that of a spoiled brat, but perhaps the boy had more of a backbone than he thought.

"But if his life here is peaceful, I'll accept that. I don't even have the right to say it isn't. If he smiles, then I'll smile with him. If Shirota's being all cute and wholesome, I'll happily give him the love he wants."

Clenched, white-knuckled fists. A pained, contorted expression. Strained, oath-like declarations.

Maybe it was a coincidence that Ryouji was the witness to his vow. Or maybe he was promising Kirino—the shrine at his back. Perhaps it was the vow of a boy who forced his brother's sacrifice uttered to a girl who'd become one for her sister.

Ryouji nodded. "All right," he said simply.

Katsuki had determined his own method of atonement: to lock his torturous guilt inside and support the life his brother had chosen with a smile. Ryouji thought it was a pretty monumental decision, albeit not one to necessarily celebrate, given the underlying cause.

"I think that works out perfectly. Shirota could take you pamperin' him and callin' him cute pretty much all day, y'know." In the end, with an unaffected dip

of his shoulders, Ryouji figured that was praise enough.

“Good,” Katsuki replied with a sigh of relief.

After confirming that Katsuki’s creased brow had relaxed and his youthful, beautiful features were smooth once more, Ryouji turned back toward the car. “Let’s get goin’, then,” he announced. “You should keep checkin’ in with us and showin’ your face ’round here every now and again. With both Misato and this place, I mean. A lot of things can be forgiven just by lettin’ someone know you haven’t forgotten about them and that you care, after all.” He cleared his throat. “I was gonna just take you back to our place, but is there anywhere else you wanna go first? I can’t be bothered cookin’ a meal for three, so Misato agreed to grab some takeout on his way home. Hope y’ain’t hungry yet.”

Ryouji flicked his arm out to check his watch as he spoke. The time was only half past three. Misato was out on an emergency job, and although he didn’t need to stay until the workday was over, they’d already ordered food for a specific time, meaning another two and a half hours remained until Misato returned with something to fill their bellies.

“Hmm...” Katsuki thought in silence. “I know. Didn’t we go past a yokai museum on the way here?”

“Oh, that place. Yeah, but I bet Misato would wanna come along. We should probably do that tomorrow.”

“Hmph... In that case, there’s nothing,” Katsuki concluded flatly.

“Gotcha.” With another nod, Ryouji resumed his trek to the car.

Behind him, Katsuki’s voice caught the wind in a fleeting whisper. “I’ll come again soon, Kirino.”

The mountain responded with an assenting rustle.

The Call of the Roaring Waves

Chapter 1: The Divine Isle

YAEKA Kamiki's usual journey home from school involved bicycling, boarding a ferry, then more bicycling. Including the time she spent waiting for the ferry to arrive, the commute took her around one hour and twenty minutes. The ferryboat traveled between the island and mainland a mere eight times a day—understandably, given that less than a hundred residents lived on the island.

Kamiki Island was the sole inhabited isle off the coast of Takehara City in Hiroshima Prefecture, and Yaeka its only high school student.

In fact, only seven children resided on the island in total. Yaeka was the oldest at sixteen, and the rest were all more than four grades below her. The mixed-age school on the island consisted of two middle and four elementary schoolers. With the elderly accounting for more than seventy percent of the island's population, Kamiki was a textbook example of rural life in a rapidly aging Japan.

Yaeka stepped off of the ferry, rolling her bicycle alongside her. She nodded in greeting to the boat staff she'd come to know so well (affectionately called "the ferryman"), then vaulted a leg over her bike. Two cars and several elderly people followed behind her. There was no one waiting to take the ferry in the other direction.

Yaeka's low, frizzy ponytail and the white sailor collar of her summer school uniform fluttered in the wind as she pedaled down the narrow road along the seafront, her backpack jolting in the front basket. Heat stifled the air with a humidity unusual for mid-September, yet luckily, a refreshing sea breeze cut through its haze as Yaeka sped forward.

Aside from the pier built for the ferry, the harbor comprised the only store on the isle, a small post office, a municipal medical clinic, and a school. It was the heart of the island, so to speak. And, in the opposite direction of Yaeka's house, was a tiny marine park that had closed around ten years prior.

After three minutes, the road stretched away from the coast and up a steep incline. Yaeka managed to get about halfway up the slope with the momentum

she'd built up on flat ground, then heaved herself to the summit by rising up off the seat and vigorously pumping the pedals. As she climbed higher, the houses below disappeared and an orchard materialized along the banked terrain at the side of the road, until eventually, she was flanked by a forest of dense trees. Cicadas sang their final laments of the summer as Yaeka zipped over the zenith of the hill and accelerated into a descent.

The farther down she traveled, the more gnarled, abandoned orchards flocked into view along with weed-ridden vacant properties. Riding past them, she approached a different beach. The sea blustered quietly in the distance. A reddish-brown precipice towered on the other side of a craggy islet topped by lush trees—a desert island.

Before she reached the red-tinged beach, however, a plot of land with carefully tended gardens and trees expanded before Yaeka, the weeds clearly warded away by human intervention. It was her home: the Kamiki estate. Small huts and sheds of sea-rusted corrugated iron dotted the water's edge and the fields.

The unmarked asphalt below her was the width of a single car and led to a large Japanese-style house of stucco and burnt timber siding. Her father was immensely proud of the ash-brown wooden cladding and the gray, smoked clay tiles that made up the roof, but Yaeka couldn't see the appeal. The building radiated gloom and was in desperate need of a touch of color.

Beyond the main house peaked another, taller roof, that of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine—the largest shrine on Kamiki Island. It was served by Yaeka's family; the land of their estate linked directly with its grounds.

Yaeka parked her bike in the garage next to the main house. It was already occupied by her father's minitruck and her mother's scooter, though because her father was a fisherman, farmer, and shrine priest, the likelihood of him being home already was low. Her mother worked part-time at a retail store on the mainland. If her scooter was in the garage, she was probably off that day.

"I'm home!" Yaeka called out, hooking her backpack over her right shoulder as she opened the front door. She stepped from the concrete entranceway onto the warm flooring of the corridor, its interior decorated with gaudy, old-

fashioned ornaments. Again, Yaeka could not understand the appeal. She progressed down the hall to the kitchen and popped her head around the door. A woman with short hair was leaning into the refrigerator, a thin, summery apron tied around her slim figure over a sleeveless top—her mother.

“Hi, Yaeka! You’re just in time; Mrs. Hamahira gave us some nice figs. You should eat some,” said Yaeka’s mother, Akie, as she glanced over her shoulder. She held out the bag of figs that she had evidently been about to put in the crisper.

Figs and citrus fruits grew all over the isle. In effect, they were the local specialty; Yaeka was thoroughly used to them as a born-and-raised Kamiki Islander. They were a run-of-the-mill snack in her eyes.

“Kay,” she responded simply as she took the plastic bag.

The countless figs were on the smaller side, but their green skin was quickly turning red, and Yaeka could see through a small rift in one that its inside was perfectly ripe and fresh. The dry climate of the Setouchi region and the blazing sun combined perfectly to cultivate the sweetest, juiciest fruit.

“Apparently, Touko commutes an hour and a half to go to her cram school. She wants to go to a university in Tokyo. What a challenge...! I wonder what she wants to go to Tokyo for,” her mother babbled.

It takes me about that long just to get home from school.

But Yaeka didn’t say that out loud and instead responded with a laconic “Oh.”

Touko was the granddaughter of the old lady who’d gifted them the figs and an old childhood friend of Yaeka’s. She had moved away just before they started elementary school because Touko’s parents decided to relocate to the mainland to give their daughter a chance at a better education. The rest of the family gone, Mrs. Hamahira remained in their old house alone.

“Where do you wanna go, Yaeka? You want to go to college, don’t you?”

“Mmm.” She shrugged. She didn’t want to talk about it. With the bag of figs in one hand, she opted for immediate retreat.

“What’re you going to do with all those figs, sweetheart? There are too many

to eat by yourself.” Akie stopped her as she attempted to flee with around eight of the fruits.

“I’ll share them with Chii,” Yaeka insisted.

“Are you going to see her now? What about the tide?”

“It’ll be fine,” Yaeka replied bluntly, quickly leaving the kitchen before her mother could protest. She had a feeling her mother said something as she left, and since she couldn’t discern the words, she pretended not to have noticed at all. It was sure to have been something boring, anyway.

Yaeka placed the bag of figs on the stairs before ascending to her room to change out of her school uniform. She tossed her backpack onto her bed and hung her skirt up before donning some knee-length shorts and a T-shirt. Then, clutching her sweat-soaked sailor shirt, a ten-inch tablet in a waterproof case, and her phone, she rushed back down the stairs.

She tossed her uniform into the laundry basket and flew out of the house with her devices in one hand and the bag of figs in the other. “Bye!” she shouted hastily as she left. Her eyes were set on the beach. No, not exactly the beach—but what loomed beyond it.

She exited through the back door and hurried to the back of the estate, then through the grounds of Shirahige Shrine. She slipped around the back of the shrine to the sandy beach behind it—an area that not just visitors were prohibited from accessing. Even her father did not enter there unless leading a festival or service. Yaeka was the only person who was permitted to cross the barred beach as she liked.

The coast extended into a jagged peninsula. Kamiki Island was oval-shaped and stretched roughly from north to south, and the rocky cape marked its southernmost tip. The beach and cape, deep within the sanctuary of Shirahige Shrine, was private land belonging to the Kamiki family, hence its controlled entry. The tiny desert island was around two hundred yards from shore and also within the boundaries of the forbidden, sacred land of the god Shiotsuchinooji. That was where Yaeka would find Chii, figs and tablet in hand.

So long as the tide was ebbing, it was possible to reach Itsuki Island—the deserted isle—by foot across a sandbank. Yaeka toed her way along the ridge of

sand that rose from the middle of the sea, her sandals kicking up grains as she scurried toward the island at a half run. Soon the sea would be at its lowest point, granting Yaeka an almost full view of the sandbar. The bar functioned as a pathway for only three hours at low tide, and if the water was nearly at its nadir, Yaeka's remaining time on the island was limited to around one and a half hours.

The coast of the small, round island consisted entirely of cliffs and was little more than three hundred yards in circumference. At high tide, there was no hint of any beach whatsoever. When the shoal was visible, however, sand ringed the island, and one could walk all the way around it. Once Yaeka reached the islet, she circled to a section of shore that was not visible from Kamiki Island.

About ten yards off the far side of Itsuki Island stood a lone rocky outcrop. Its steep summit speared toward the sky in a precise point that offered no foot- or handholds. A *shimenawa* rope was tied around it to signify its sacred status. Beyond the spire, the distant, hulking silhouettes of Osakikamijima and Omishima Islands bulwarked the sky, the isles seemingly only a short swim away. The Seto Inland Sea was, of course, a huge body of water, but because Kamiki Island was sandwiched between Honshu and the Geiyo Islands, it was difficult to find any place to view the expansive, unobstructed horizon that the word "sea" conjured in most people's heads. Instead, Yaeka was surrounded by islands both big and small, close and far, all crowned with green-blanketed mountains.

Also on the far side of Itsuki Island, and across the waves from the end of the cape, was a long, gaping hole that breached the bedrock of the island's foundation. It was a sizeable cave, viscously carved by years of waves crashing into cracks in the stone, and Yaeka's destination.

"Chii!" she called. She scrambled over the oblong wall of rock that jutted up from the sand, the barrier appearing almost intentional. A shallow pool of water moistened the cave floor on the other side, unable to escape even at low tide. "Chii, I'm back! I brought some figs for us to eat!" Yaeka avoided the rock pool as she pressed further into the cavern, her voice echoing in the dim grotto.

The cave wasn't very deep, however, and at its farthest reach squatted a

tiered, flat, slippery stone embellished with a single hokora. Yaeka beelined toward it across sand studded with a smattering of rocks large and small. Zigzag paper streamers hung from a pure-white shimenawa looped around the natural altar, and offerings of cloth, sake, and evergreen sakaki leaves lay at its base. It was a pretty little shrine. Yaeka kneeled on the uppermost shelf of rock with cheery familiarity and unpacked the figs in front of the hokora.

“Hey, Yaeka.” A young girl with long limbs emerged from the shadows of the cave, her tone calm and kind. Around the same age as Yaeka, she was dressed in a light flannel shirt and skinny jeans and wore her shoulder-length hair in a half ponytail.

“Hiya!” Yaeka beamed. “Ugh, I finally got a chance to come! But now I can come every day ’til next Monday!”

“Oh, Yaeka...” Chii sighed. “Yeh only just saw me on Sunday.”

Low tide coincided with Yaeka’s free time on weekdays only four or so days out of every two weeks. She’d had to wait until Wednesday to see Chii, and the previous week, she hadn’t been able to visit Itsuki Island until the weekend.

“I know, but still...” Yaeka always came to Itsuki Island on the weekend, and she wished she could see Chii during the week as well. Perched on the rock, she let her feet swing as she pouted.

“I’m glad yeh care about me so much, but don’tcha have other friends? A boyfriend? After school club activities?” asked Chii with a teasing smile, kneeling.

Her appearance was exactly the same as it was when Yaeka first met her a decade before. She was Itsukigami, the god that had drifted to the island on the fall tide the year Yaeka was born—and the god that Yaeka served as a shrine maiden.

Yaeka first met Chii when she was just about to begin elementary school, feeling very lonely after Touko, her only friend, left for the mainland. Chii had been Yaeka’s sole friend ever since, as well as akin to an older sister.

“Nope! If I stayed after school, I’d miss the last ferry to the island. And I’m not interested in having a boyfriend.”

Yaeka's birthday was early in the year, and she was in her second year of high school. Many of her peers either poured their motivation into club activities or, like Touko, attended cram school to prepare for university entrance exams. Meanwhile, Yaeka went straight home after school and had a longer commute than any other student. She might have surface-level friends in her classes, yet none that she felt she could hang out with after school or on the weekend.

"Hehe. Are yeh *sure* yeh're not interested in any boys?" Chii taunted.

"Positive!" replied Yaeka sharply, lifting her chin in the air with a grimace. "Anyway, let's watch the next episode of that drama!" She propped her tablet in front of her. That was why she'd brought it: to watch shows or read manga together with her ageless sister. When Yaeka was little, she used to take picture books and children's stories to the cave for Chii to read to her.

"All right," Chii agreed with a nod. She plopped down beside Yaeka, the next step of the routine they'd maintained for the past ten years.

Yaeka tapped on the streaming app's icon. Meanwhile, they split the figs evenly between them. Yaeka nestled four on her lap and placed the others at the foot of the hokora. She and Chii squeezed in side by side to see the screen, their shoulders huddled together. Every once in a while, one of them commented on the story or characters, then both of them laughed. It was fun.

"I can't wait for the next one!" exclaimed Yaeka as the video ended. She set the tablet down beside her and stretched out her limbs.

They were working through a popular Tokyo Police drama that aired a few years prior. Each episode was about an hour long and therefore difficult to binge on a weekday.

"I wish I could stay with yeh here forever, Chii..." Yaeka sighed, her brow wrinkling as she stared up at the ceiling of the dim, damp cave. "I don't think I'll ever want a boyfriend, and... Well, my dad keeps telling me he'll give me a referral to go to some college for kids who wanna work in shrines. I think my mom wants me to go to college, too. It's just..."

She wasn't totally uninterested in the cityscape she saw in the Tokyo-based drama, yet the school her father wanted to send her to didn't seem to be in an urban area anyway. And her mother wasn't the only one pushing her to choose

a trajectory. Her high school had started to ask for students' future plans as soon as summer vacation finished and had since been providing guidance counseling.

"Like, I can't commute to any university from Kamiki Island. My dad wants me to leave Hiroshima and come back with a man, and my mom says I don't even have to come back in the end if I don't want to, but..." Her jaw stiffened. "I don't wanna leave yeh, Chii."

According to her father, her path to higher education was all but guaranteed: as the only daughter of a family of Shinto priests, she could get into a university in Mie Prefecture that offered a priesthood training course on his recommendation. He wanted her to obtain certification to become a Shinto priest, then find a man who wouldn't mind coming back with her to Kamiki Island and becoming a fisherman. Her mother, who was born on the mainland, was happy for Yaeka to study pretty much anything in any city so long as it resulted in a good job.

Yaeka didn't hate her parents, nor did she think their ideals regarding her future were unreasonable. Yet, despite their difference in opinion, her parents were united in the sense that neither of them had seriously asked Yaeka what she wished for herself.

"Don'tcha wanna go to college?" Chii asked.

"I don't see the point."

As far as Yaeka was concerned, she would be happier attending a vocational school in Hiroshima. Afterward, she could find a job that she could do on Kamiki Island. Perhaps she could go to school to learn how to run a café or guesthouse. Even if the commute from the island to campus was impossible, she could at least live somewhere close enough that she could regularly visit home.

Chii grinned. "It might be fun."

"I don't wanna go, okay?!" Yaeka scowled. In particular, she did not want to undergo the priesthood training her father was so intent on sending her to. She had no interest in Japanese traditions or conventions, which she viewed as nothing more than boring, sad, and annoying. "There are barely any kids on the island, and it's not like I'm inconveniencing anyone by not becoming a priest. I'll

always come to make sure yer house is being properly looked after, but who cares 'bout Shirahige Shrine? By the time I grow up, people will have stopped visiting it anyway!"

Everyone left Kamiki Island eventually. Some, like Yaeka's grandmother, departed due to old age. Others, like Touko's family, moved thinking of their child's wellbeing. Then there were the people slightly older than Yaeka who abandoned the island in pursuit of work or higher education. No one ever came to visit.

In the Edo period, when the salt industry was flourishing around the Seto Inland Sea, Kamiki Shirahige Shrine was established as a dwelling for the guardian deity of the island's salt pan. According to the class on the isle's history that Yaeka had sat through each year in her combined elementary and middle school, the salt pan gradually dissipated, and the island turned to other trades. The islanders still held Shintoist festivals every year, but Yaeka could tell the affairs were dwindling. She couldn't foresee anyone still needing the shrine by the time her father retired.

Either way, there was nothing Yaeka wanted to study so badly that she was willing to leave the island—and her beloved older sister.

"Well, I don't know much 'bout college, but..." Chii hummed. "Yeh should go out and see lots of places and meet all sorts of people—not just me. I think it would be better for yeh to find something yeh genuinely wanna do."

Itsukigami had washed ashore at Itsuki Island on the waves of the September equinox. That much was common knowledge. Neither Yaeka nor Chii herself, however, were sure what sort of existence Chii led before drifting to the islet. Her role as a god was not to look after Yaeka, of course. Originally, she was supposed to bless Kamiki Island with plenty of fish to catch, instigate rain when the islanders needed water, part the clouds when they hoped for good weather, and generally sow prosperity.

Chii couldn't remember her past, although she possessed basic knowledge of school, college, TV shows, anime, and geography. The advice she offered was very much the same as that of an average person, too. For that reason, Yaeka struggled to retort when Chii admonished her in earnest.

“I know, but...” Yaeka wasn’t truly interested in working in hospitality; she merely wanted an excuse to stay.

All she could do in response was pout and hang her head.

IT was mid-September, and red spider lilies bloomed along the edges of harvested rice fields. Around an hour had passed since the chime signaling the end of the workday. Misato Miyazawa ducked off the dim, twilight streets of Tokaichi in Tomoe and through a shop curtain into a bar he had become very familiar with. What greeted him was the sound of *enka* music playing over a cable radio, the sizzling of a *teppan*, and the clamor of drunken customers.

“Hey there, Mimi!” called the manager of the bar, whom Misato had grown a lot more accustomed to. He wore a black bandana tied around his head.

Misato gave him a polite bow before craning his neck to survey the back of the room. He glanced over his shoulder to catch the eye of the colleague who had slipped through the door behind him: Takayuki Hirose, an old friend from his high school class.

Aside from the seats at the bar, only four tables were available. The establishment was long and narrow and had apparently once been an *okonomiyaki* restaurant. The cash register was at the front, and there was a refrigerated showcase in the counter that advertised a variety of foodstuffs and preprepared side dishes. On the other side of the display was a long line of various alcohols. At the very rear of the bar, a *teppan* in the counter remained as a holdover from the building’s days as an *okonomiyaki* shop. Standing watch over it was Ryouji Karino, the thuggish monk with whom Misato had been sharing an old Japanese-style house for over a year and a half.

The barstools in front of the *teppan* had well and truly become a second home to Misato and Hirose. They headed straight to the back, at which point Ryouji raised his head and offered a casual wave.

“Yooo, guys.”

Misato smiled. “Hi.”

“Yup, we’ve come to bother you again.” Hirose grinned. They settled down at

the bar with cheerful words of greeting.

After almost two years of employment at Tomoe Town Hall, Misato's wallet was finally starting to feel the benefit—sort of. He was financially secure enough to visit the bar more often rather than eat in the cafeteria, at least. Hirose had transferred to the same department as Misato at the beginning of the fiscal year, and it had become a weekend tradition to camp out in front of Ryouji together.

Misato opted for an oolong tea since he had to drive home, but Hirose lived close enough to walk, so he ordered a beer. They then turned their attention to the recommendations on the handwritten specials menu. Amid the list, Misato spotted an item he'd never seen before and tilted his head in confusion.

"Dried mackerel? I feel like I've never seen dried fish on the menu here before."

"Oh, right." Ryouji leaned over. "Manager says he got them from a friend who went fishing. I was the one who cut and dried them, actually. They were pretty big with a lot of tasty fat." His chest lifted in pride as he grilled some thickly sliced bacon another customer had ordered. "We had a whole cooler of 'em—huge things, like twelve inches long. I cut 'em all open, marinated 'em, then hung 'em up to dry while tryna give some stray cats the slip. The weather's been great the past few days, so they dried up a treat."

"You really can do anything, huh, Ryouji?" Hirose said with a melancholy sigh, propping his chin on his fist.

"Eh, y'know," replied Ryouji humbly, probably more pleased than he was letting on.

Ryouji really could do anything—that was a fact. He didn't like being around water, perhaps due to a near-death experience when he almost drowned, but otherwise he had no weaknesses. He was physically strong with fast reflexes; good with his hands; knowledgeable about wilderness survival, technology, and home accounting; skilled in legalese and paperwork... He excelled in pretty much any field that came to mind.

I have to say his ability to clean and keep things tidy is a bit lacking though...

As flaws went, that was a rather endearing one, however. In almost all other aspects, he was a top-quality human being—on the condition that he didn't take things too far and give Misato cause for concern, as he had done in earlier days.

"I was raised by a load of old fogies desperate to stuff my brain with all the knowledge I'd need in life, so that's whatcha get," Ryouji said with a shrug.

"What kind of a childhood is that? Shouldn't you know more than us about how to hold down an office job, then?" Hirose snickered.

"Hey, ya can't blame me for not havin' one of those. I dropped outta elementary school!"

"You've gotta be kidding," Hirose said with wide eyes as he reached for the main menu.

Misato first brought Hirose to the bar in December of the previous year. Then, in April, Hirose joined the Abnormal Disaster Unit. Around the same time, Ryouji finalized his subcontracting agreement with Town Hall, so it was normal for them to run into each other at the office. Although they'd both somewhat opened their hearts to each other after a rocky start, Hirose evidently hadn't heard everything about Ryouji's past just yet.

"I got my family register back now, and I managed to get a certificate saying I graduated middle school. I could probably fill up a resume without any trouble, but...the hell would I need a resume for nowadays?" murmured Ryouji, almost talking to himself as he pinched his chin and flicked his gaze upward in thought. "...Oh. The resume I submitted to this place ain't got the right birthday."

Ryouji was born in Tomoe. While on vacation nearly a decade later, however, he and his family disappeared in a river, and he lost all of his memories. He couldn't remember his parents, older sister, or even himself. When Ryouji started at the bar, he hadn't known his own birthday.

A man found the young, memoryless Ryouji and stole him away—a man who claimed to be a tengu. Legally, Ryouji was pronounced dead with no body found. As a result, he'd had to work with Tomoe Town Hall to rectify his family register, which stated that Ryouji Karino had died at nine years old.

Unaware of his “death,” Ryouji was whisked away to Kanto by his adoptive father, where he spent the rest of his childhood. He did not attend school, instead obtaining his education through very unconventional means. He credited the “old fogies” with his instruction in basic academics and the general knowledge required to function in society and had received a much better schooling than his previously blank resume suggested.

“I guess you don’t really need a resume when you’re self-employed. It’s hard to get by in a meritocracy otherwise, right? Not that I’m an expert on this stuff or anything,” Hirose mused.

“You could say that.” Ryouji hummed in assent. “Although some clients wanted to throw me out the window. Y’know—the sorts that got multiple qualifications and live in high-rises. It ain’t like communicatin’ with spirits is somethin’ you learn in school though. There’s loadsa people like me in the business.”

Ryouji was raised amid an underground network of mediums—the kind of crowd in which people used their abilities to evade the law—and it sounded like a very close-knit community. Meanwhile, there were also those like Misato, who was born into a powerful clan that meticulously honed his talents. And there were others, such as Keiko Hisaka, who grew up in an unremarkably average family and gained awareness of her powers only once she was older. Some progressed in a straight line to priesthood from birth, learning incantations as a part of their studies to inherit their family’s temple or shrine like a few of Misato’s colleagues at the Abnormal Disaster Unit. People came to the spiritual industry from all walks of life. Those with similar roots often connected more easily and in turn involved themselves with others in comparable circumstances.

There was no universal school that offered training in spells and rituals, however. No matter an individual exorcist’s origin, none could claim that they had majored in exorcism. In that sense, they were all the same.

“Oh, yeah,” piped up Misato with a note of realization. “Since when did you start calling Ryouji by his first name, Hirose?”

Though they emanated different auras, both Ryouji and Hirose were sociable

people. Misato had always figured they would befriend each other eventually, but even Misato was still “Miyazawa” to Hirose. He was a little shocked by the sudden change given that Hirose had known the thuggish monk for less than a year. He felt rather as if his inability to socialize had been thrown in his face.

“That ain’t new.” Ryouji shrugged, placing his spatula down. He handed them their drinks, which another staff member had prepared. “I’m not really used to bein’ called Karino. I asked him to just call me Ryouji at some point.”

Misato’s brow furrowed as he tried to reason why Ryouji wouldn’t be accustomed to hearing his own last name.

Hirose nodded sagely with his beer in one hand. “So, does that mean people used to call you by your adoptive dad’s surname?”

A lightbulb flashed in Misato’s head. “Wow...” he remarked, contemplative. “I kinda assumed your dad didn’t have a surname.”

Ryouji’s adoptive father was the one who trained him in Shugendo and taught him survival skills. There were several different types of tengu due to varying regional beliefs about yokai, and Ryouji’s father—if he really was a tengu—was possibly a Shugendo god enshrined at one of the mountains across the country.

Mountains have been regarded as sacred by humans since ancient times. People often sensed spirits or gods there, leading them to either worship the presence or dare the summit to seize its spiritual power. Shugendo monks underwent intense, alpine conditioning, and those who wished to obtain a peak’s power had been known to cast away their sense of personhood and become one with the spirit of the mountain itself: alive but no longer quite human. Thus, mountain gods often assumed the guise of those strange-looking Shugendo ascetics—of tengu.

“It was probably a name he just made up on the fly,” Ryouji chuckled dryly, “but we were actin’ like father and son, so I used the same surname. I only started goin’ by Karino when I first came back to Tomoe, but...yeah, I still ain’t used to it. Are ya gonna order that, by the way? My special dried mackerel, I mean.” The encouraging smile on his face expressed what went unsaid: “Eat up, get some energy back, and sing my praises about how delicious it was.”

“Yes, please,” Misato said with a nod.

Hirose shot him a sidelong glance and sighed. “It’s like you’ve got *two* little brothers, huh, Miyazawa?”

Misato spluttered; he wasn’t expecting that. “Pfft! I’ve never heard of anyone with a little brother older than them! And there’s not exactly anything *little* about him, is there?” He laughed.

“Hey! Don’t you dare lump me into the same category as that spoiled brat!” barked Ryouji as he entered the mackerel order, then began to fry some meat.

“You’re right. You cause me a whole lot more trouble.” Misato grinned, latching onto Hirose’s jibe and ignoring Ryouji’s protest.

“Yeah, you’ve got your hands full with him for sure.” Hirose nodded in triumph. Despite his initial wariness due to Ryouji’s showy appearance, he had well and truly warmed up to the guy.

“Your brother’s in Higashihiroshima now, right?” Hirose continued, more serious, as he scanned the menu for anything but mackerel. “He’s gotta be smart... I guess it makes sense, seeing as you’re smart, too.”

“I’m nothing special,” Misato insisted with a wave of his hand. “Katsuki does have some impressive brains in there though.”

“Oh, don’t get him started on his brother,” Ryouji sneered. “He’ll never stop.”

“But you got an A on the entrance exam for that national university closer to your house, right?” recollected Hirose. “And then you decided to go to a private university instead. I get that you wanted to get away from home, but did you really need to apply somewhere else? Didn’t the tuition bleed you dry?”

“I was getting by on my scholarship, basically. My wallet’s tighter now than it was then!” Misato sighed. “Do you remember Mr. Terauchi? He had to jump through a whole bunch of hoops for me to change my college of choice without notifying my parents... He said if I really wanted to go there, he was happy to act as my guardian.”

Until Misato was forced to consume the serpent, he’d been aiming for a national university in Matsue City. He’d intended to continue his spiritual studies at home and commute to campus for other classes.

When he decided to leave the Narukamis, he was able to submit an application to a private university in Mie on Mr. Terauchi's recommendation. The college offered a priesthood training course, and although it wasn't classified as an official field of study, it was a full-fledged course that tutored students in incantation. Mr. Terauchi had connections to the Narukami clan, so he was entirely aware of Misato's power. Kindly, Mr. Terauchi set Misato on a path that allowed him to remain in the world of spirits while estranged from his family. He even helped Misato move into the university dorm and with all the paperwork requisite for a new life.

When Misato fused with the snake three months after starting college, he came to understand from the bottom of his heart how valuable Mr. Terauchi's guidance was.

"I only got into college because my program was something I was already good at." Misato shrugged. "The thing is, Katsuki actually—"

"You weren't kidding when you said Miyazawa worships his brother, huh?" sniggered Hirose.

"Hah! Would I lie?"

Misato reluctantly pursed his lips, aware that the pair would only accuse him of preempting every lull in the conversation with praises of his beloved brother if he finished his sentence.

...But that didn't stop him from muttering it under his breath. "I'm just saying it's pretty amazing to pass the entrance exam with flying colors when he only submitted his application at the end of the year," he grumbled.

"Yeah, yeah, we all know! You've only said that like, five times!" Ryouji snapped.

"I'm pretty jealous you're so close with your brother. Me and my sister fight basically every time we're in the same room, so..." Hirose sighed wistfully. "Ooh, could I get some pickled cabbage and buttered soy squid? Lemme get some of that dried mackerel and some cold sake, too, please." His beer mug was empty, which was evidently his cue to order some proper food. Misato tagged on an order of edamame, then they returned to the subject of Hirose's family.

"Your sister's younger than you, right?"

"Yeah, only just. We're not even a year apart. Her husband moved in with her and my parents, so I can't even really go back home to visit..." Hirose hummed. "I wonder if I would've thought she was cuter if we had a bigger gap like you and your brother."

Hirose had no other siblings, and his family lived in Akitakata, the neighboring town. Even so, Hirose had applied to work at Tomoe Town Hall rather than the municipal office in his hometown and was renting an apartment in Tomoe.

"Siblings fight like crazy when they're a similar age; it's like you've got a lifetime rival. I've heard other people in the same situation say the same thing," Ryouji pointed out. "I don't remember her, but I used to have an older sister, 'parently. She was a good few years older than me."

Ryouji's sister lost her life in the drowning incident. Like Ryouji, her body was never discovered, and she was ultimately declared dead on the family register. But although her body was missing, Misato and Ryouji were able to confirm her passing via the protective dolls that had once watched over her.

"I bet you were sooo clingy with her," Hirose chuckled.

Misato suspected the same.

"Shut your mouth! Do ya want this dried mackerel or not?! We've even got freshly harvested rice! Ya like Hiroshima-produced *Koshihikari* rice, huh? Do ya? Then eat up! It's straight from the manager's paddy!" Ryouji gabbled, clearly flustered as he swiftly swiped the food off of the teppan and shoved two plates of mackerel and two bowls of rice in their direction. He even had Hirose's pickled cabbage ready, and the empty countertop transformed into the backdrop of a magnificent Japanese feast in seconds. Misato found himself thinking the array would look even better with a nice bowl of miso soup on the side.

"Wow, it looks so good! Thank you!" Misato crowed immediately, clapping his hands together in front of the steaming fish and rice. He'd been successfully distracted.

The seared surface of the mackerel readily pulled apart as Misato sectioned a

mouthful off with his chopstick, the tender morsel dripping oil. A sealike aroma wafted into the air with the steam, accompanied by notes of charred soy sauce and sake, and he suddenly felt famished. The moment it touched his tongue, the salty, rich flavor particular to fish swelled throughout his mouth, savory with an aged taste procured through the drying process.

“Mmm, that’s the perfect amount of salt, actually,” applauded Misato as he chewed and swallowed with relish.

Ryouji dropped a slice of butter on the teppan, a satisfying sizzle crackling between them. Then he threw on a cut of squid, and a white cloud of steam whooshed into the air.

“Good. Keep the compliments comin’.” He smirked, puffing his chest out and pushing his sunglasses up his nose.

Misato laughed at him and obediently picked up his bowl of rice. The grains were glossy and fluffy, and Misato scooped some up between his chopsticks to mix with the aftertaste of mackerel on his tongue. A sweetish, mellow flavor filled his mouth, and he noted the slightly chewy, smooth texture that was characteristic of freshly harvested rice.

“The rice is delicious, too.” Misato smiled.

“Koshihikari always tastes so good when it’s fresh,” Hirose concurred.

“I love puttin’ fresh rice in *chazuke*. It tastes sooo good. Oh, but it’s just as good in *onigiri*, too,” Ryouji added. Misato and Hirose nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

Thus, lost in familiar conversation, the night before the autumnal equinox wore on.

IT was nine o’clock in the morning on the day of the September equinox. Bunji Kamiki, the chief priest of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine, was standing on a boat tied to a rocky outcrop whereupon the god Shiotsuchinooji was believed to descend. It was high tide, and the waves lapped at the foundation of Itsuki Island, where a gaping crevice extended into the bedrock.

Bunji placed a *hei-haku*, a staff decorated with hemp and paper streamers, at the base of the shimenawa-adorned monolith. Some sakaki leaves, sacred sake, and newly harvested rice already lay at its forefront in offering.

Another man stood in the boat: Toshihiko, Bunji's younger brother. He held a burning torch in one hand as he assisted Bunji with the ritual. Some parishioner representatives, who were usually forbidden from stepping ashore, were lighting a bonfire in ceremonial dress.

The autumnal equinox was a very special occasion for Kamiki Shirahige Shrine.

It was the day that Shiotsuchinooji, the god that usually dwelled in the inner sanctum of Shirahige Shrine, would visit the home he granted to Itsukigami, check that she was carrying out her duties, and deliver a divine message to the shrine parishioners regarding the fortune of their fishing and farming. It was also believed that if no spirit currently presided in the role of Itsukigami, he would call a deity from across the sea to arrive on the waves of the autumnal equinox.

Bunji recited the ritual prayer. The hem and sleeves of his collared robe fluttered in a harsh wind, yet the tide lapped gently at the stone. A fleeting reflection of torchlight dappled the waves. The boat Bunji occupied barely rocked.

Once the tide rose to a certain level, Shiotsuchinooji's revelation would arrive.

The message was conveyed in the form of a whistling wind as it rushed through the thin crevices embedded in the surface of the outcrop. At high tide, water flowed into the cracks, and the passing gale burst forth with a bellow; in a way, the rocky spire functioned as a huge, sacred flute. The resulting reverberation occurred only once a year on the autumnal equinox, at which point the chief priest interpreted its meaning. It was the most important ritual of the year and had been so ever since Kamiki Shirahige Shrine was first erected.

In the present era, the island was already inhabited by a spirit in the role of Itsukigami, who protected and blessed the area alongside Yaeka, a shrine maiden and Bunji's daughter. Itsukigami was always assigned a single shrine maiden from the Kamiki family, and before Yaeka, it had been Bunji's aunt.

Itsukigami always seemed to drift to the shores of Itsuki Island the same year that the woman who would become her shrine maiden was born. Upon the shrine maiden's death, Itsukigami returned to the sea. Or, more specifically, the head priest performed a ritual to send her back while the shrine maiden's funeral was underway.

"...Hear my word and heed my...plea..." Bunji finished his prayer at the right moment—just as the wind stole away his last, ringing words, the stone finally began to roar.

"Cooooooooooooome."

"Cooooooooooooooooome."

It was a deep, booming sound that made the entire monument quiver. Yet it also possessed a high, trilling note.

Bunji's eyes shot wide open in wonder. He was forbidden to speak any superfluous words during the ritual and only just managed to swallow his shocked gasp.

What on earth...?!

He had heard the noise before—just once, on the equinox of the year Yaeka was born, back when Bunji's father was the head priest and Bunji was merely an assistant.

Itsukigami already dwelled on the island and was served by a perfectly healthy shrine maiden. And no daughters had been born to the Kamiki family in the past year to possibly take Yaeka's place.

Nevertheless, the command that thundered through the fissures in the flute was undoubtedly the same Bunji had heard the year Yaeka was born. It was undoubtedly the same Bunji had heard the year the Itsukigami that Yaeka called "Chii" washed up on the island. Well, more precisely, the corpse of the girl who was to *become* the new Itsukigami.

Bunji signaled to his brother with a grave expression. Upon hearing such a message, they were to cancel the plans for the coming festival. They were required to urgently return to Kamiki Island and tell the parishioner representatives to prepare for the equinoctial high tide immediately.

Chapter 2: Itsukigami

RYOUJI whipped his fishing rod through the air with a resounding *swish*.

The hook splashed into the water a considerable distance away, sending gentle ripples across the lapping waves. A slightly fluorescent orange bobber floated in the middle of the concentric circles.

His reel clicked as he unwound it. He tautened the line, then sucked in a deep breath. The tip of the cigarette between his lips glowed orange, and his lungs filled with smoke. He was at the end of a jetty in a small marine park that overlooked the sea. Once the blinding glare of the low evening sun dipped beyond the horizon, darkness would very quickly envelop the pier. Nobody else was around, aside from...

“We’ve already caught quite a few, Ryouji.”

Misato was sitting beside him, prying a twelve-inch mackerel off a hook and staring into their cooler box.

It was a Saturday and the first high tide before the autumnal equinox. Eager to catch a few fish, Ryouji had brought his penniless lodger along for a short vacation at a fishing spot on an island off the coast of Takehara. The trip there took three hours and involved a ferry, but Ryouji had been set on the destination ever since the bar regular who’d given his manager the mackerel told him about the secret fishing spot.

According to the customer, the small marine park had closed down some years prior when the establishment lost funding yet they still opened the park at certain times of year for people to swim or fish.

“Nah, we ain’t done yet! Still plenty more fish in the ocean, and we got lotsa bait.” Ryouji grinned as he slowly maneuvered the rod, clearly delighted to catch a fish on every cast—just as the customer had promised.

He tipped the rod slightly to release the bait collected in the small basket

acting as a sinker. His strategy was to let the waves disperse the tiny krill he was using as bait and lead the mackerel to swarm in a concentrated area. Then, hopefully, one of the poor creatures would be unlucky enough to accidentally bite his hook.

“But there’s no way we’re gonna eat this much fish.” Misato scowled. “Don’t exploit the equinox to kill unnecessarily, you corrupt monk.”

“Shut it! We ain’t done! We’re gonna make these guys into sashimi! Chop ‘em up! Deep-fry ‘em! Roast ‘em! Dry ‘em!” snapped Ryouji, unwilling to back down. “These are a precious source of protein, Mr. No-Money, so you’d better cast that line out again! Fish ain’t got nothin’ to do with the equinox anyway! Are ya thinkin’ of Obon? Still, you’re forgettin’ I was raised by a tengu. It ain’t like religious morals apply to me.”

“You just wanna cook up a feast? Geez...” Misato heaved an exhausted sigh. “What’re you getting so psyched up for?”

Ryouji’s adoptive father might have claimed to be a tengu, but Ryouji did not have a beak or wings, nor was his nose particularly long. His appearance was that of an entirely normal—if loudly dressed—guy with a shady background.

His father and his father’s acquaintances had dutifully equipped Ryouji with the general knowledge and spiritual foundations he would need to survive in the wild. Then, by the time Ryouji was ready to start working on his own, his father abruptly disappeared without so much as a goodbye. He was the sort of man who’d often entrusted a young Ryouji to his colleagues and left home for lengthy spans of time, and Ryouji had never known what exactly he did while gone, nor what he meant in proclaiming himself a tengu.

The only thing I really know ‘bout him...is that he was one shady-ass Shugendo ascetic.

The people Ryouji’s father left him with varied greatly: some had stable jobs, while others secured their living from gods-know-where. Even so, looking back on that time, Ryouji realized they were all semi-responsible adults with a good sense of the world around them. They and his father were who taught him the basics of fishing, too.

“Whaddya mean? Ya think there’s something more exciting out there than

hunting for your own food? Well, there ain't!" Ryouji harrumphed. "Plus, they're seriously bitin' every single time I cast the line! When am I ever gonna get an opportunity like this again?!"

Dawn and dusk were the best chances for a good catch, and Ryouji refused to let their remaining time go to waste. He plunked down on the other cooler full of snacks and drinks and strained his eyes to watch the bobber in the dim, hazy light. There was a new moon that night, and soon the fish would be unable to see the bait.

"The hunter-gatherer is strong in you, huh?" Misato quipped.

"What's with that tone? You should be praisin' my survival skills!"

"Yeah, yeah. They're very good."

"Tch." Ryouji glowered. "Ugh, and look at that. The tide's comin' in way too fast." He crushed his cigarette in an ashtray. The bobber was gradually drifting away from them, and with the waves surging toward the coast so suddenly, the bait in the basket was sure to wash away.

"Probably because there's going to be a king tide soon," Misato murmured. "The sky's so clear tonight. It's a shame we can't see the moon, but the stars are so pretty."

Misato was very passionate about eating fish, yet as Ryouji had discovered after dragging him to the island, that enthusiasm did not extend to catching them. He was happy enough to simply drink juice, eat his bento, and gaze at the stars. Ryouji was fully aware that Misato preferred to stay indoors, and apparently no showcase of his wilderness capabilities would tempt the guy to participate.

"Get your head outta the clouds and pick up that rod, idiot. You can stargaze at home." Ryouji experimentally tilted his own, eventually deciding to refresh the bait. He reeled the line back in and held it taut against the rod to refill the basket with krill. "Aight. It's gonna be pitch-black soon, so we'd better use this up fast. We've missed the last ferry, so I guess we're spendin' tonight in the car."

"I wish there was at least a small guesthouse on this island," sighed Misato;

his wealthy upbringing evidently had not prepared him for a night outdoors. His long, black ponytail billowed in the breeze.

Had they brought the proper equipment for night fishing, they likely could have fished until morning—although Ryouji knew Misato would never agree to it.

The wind died down. The last couple of weeks of September were underway, the residual heat of summer flaring during the day and a chill hanging in the air come evening. Misato, deceived by the daytime warmth, had not packed a jacket. His slender figure quivered as he rounded his back and hugged himself.

“I got a jacket in the car; go get that. Don’t want you gettin’ sick,” Ryouji said, digging into his pants pocket then thrusting some keys at Misato.

“What about you, though?” countered Misato politely, rubbing his upper arms.

“This thing is basically a jacket. I’m fine,” Ryouji said, puffing out his torso to flaunt his blindingly orange life vest.

“Of course you came prepared,” Misato said in monotone admiration, finally accepting the car keys. “You can’t swim and you hate water, but you’ll still come out here all decked out to go fishing.”

“Well, duh. People who know ‘bout nature know not to underestimate it.”

Many years past, Ryouji was in an accident—an accident in which a river claimed his parents’ and sister’s lives. He himself had struggled in the torrent and lost his memory as a result, including his recollection of those events. Nevertheless, a fear of water remained entrenched within him, and he despised putting his face in it. Fishing, however, was a different matter entirely.

“Well, *excuse me*,” said Mr. Introvert with a laugh as he fled the scene.

His bait basket full once more, Ryouji cast his line. The water swelled at a rapid rate as the full tide drew nearer, the peak height predicted to occur just past ten o’clock that night. The narrow straits between the islands of the Seto Inland Sea contributed to a very fast change in water level. The waves, illuminated only just by the afterglow of dusk, came gushing toward the shore as though part of the deluge of a very large river.

“Aight! I can still fight for thirty more minutes!”

The reel clicked as he unspooled it. He pulled the slack line taut, and the float reappeared on the surface of the water. Moments later, it bobbed under again.

“Gotcha! Nice!” Grunting in effort, Ryouji planted both feet on the wooden planks and heaved.

The line felt extremely heavy—heavy enough that butterflies began to swarm in his stomach in excitement. He’d hooked a very special fish indeed. After a few seconds, however, doubt crept in as well. The line was so weighty that he couldn’t be certain he hadn’t snagged the earth itself. Then the creature on his hook started to wriggle back and forth, so large it seemed to be towing *him* down.

This has gotta be a real big’un.

He swiveled his head to look for Misato. If he’d caught something truly impressive, his flimsy rod didn’t possess the power to lug it ashore. He needed a net that he could haul up with all his strength.

“Misato! Get me a net, would ya?!” he shouted as loud as he could. In the distance, he was pretty sure Misato called back.

Ryouji’s feet clunked noisily over the pier as he struggled to maintain his balance, and he turned his head again, willing Misato to return faster. He saw Misato running toward him with Ryouji’s baseball jacket tossed over one shoulder.

Then it happened.

“Waagh—?!”

An immense force yanked down on the rod, pulling Ryouji with unbelievable strength.

“Ryouji?!” Misato cried.

In a lapse of judgment, Ryouji let go of the rod. He lost his footing. His legs pedaled as he desperately attempted to right himself, but there was no pier beneath them to support him; he was falling forward. Falling into the sea.

“Ryouji!” Misato screamed again.

Ryouji's empty hands shot out in front of him to break his tumble, plunging into the water first. The roar of the waves rushed into his ears as his head submerged, acrid saltiness pouring into his ears, eyes, nose, and mouth.

For an instant, his mind was totally blank. All of his limbs instinctively scrabbled for purchase but found nothing more than the coiling swirl of seawater.

An indescribable fear suffocated him.

"Ryou!"

Just as his life vest allowed him to crest his nose and mouth above water, he could've sworn he heard a woman's voice. No—a girl's voice.

It came from within his head, a flashback. Ryouji stared in an utter daze at the huge, inky-black wave towering higher and higher above him.

"Ryou..."

It was his sister's voice—a voice he had long forgotten. The moment he heard it again, he remembered.

He remembered the last thing his sister said to him before that wave swallowed them both whole.

"It's okay, Ryou. Yer big sis will protect yeh, 'kay?"

The towering wave thundered down on his head.

Ryouji's body was swept away by the tide of the strait as if engulfed by the current of a muddy stream.

BEFORE Misato could react, the white serpent within him flew out of his chest, slithering toward the water in his place.

"Search Ryouji."

"Shirota!" Misato exclaimed, wide-eyed. *"Yes. Yes, thank you!"*

Shirota slipped into the jet-black sea in the blink of an eye. The snake was aligned with water spirits and thrived in environments rife with moisture and gloom, although Misato didn't exactly know why. At any rate, Misato wouldn't

have to trawl the autumnal waters himself and possibly fall ill or drown with Shirota on the case.

In the meantime, he pulled out his phone. The waves that had taken Ryouji were causing the planks of the pier to sway up and down precariously. Misato stumbled, then rooted his feet in an attempt to stay upright.

“But...but who do I call? The police? The fire department? No—the coast guard, right?” He stammered in a panicked, high pitch as he frantically searched online, his fingers shaking. He called the number and explained the situation to the person on the other end.

Afterward, all he could do was wait for help. Misato glared at the spot in the sea where Ryouji had vanished, the shadow of night around him growing only deeper.

Something was tugging on the end of his fishing line, right?

He hadn’t really seen what happened, although he’d witnessed the crucial moment: something had clearly yanked on Ryouji’s fishing rod before he was swallowed by a sea spirit. The speed of the tide had been normal, if alarming, and no wind or unrest in the evening calm was present to otherwise cause a wave that large. And as the swell had loomed above Ryouji, against the darkness it seemed to take on the form of a monk with a shaved head, followed by a quick flash that looked like two huge eyes.

“If Ryouji didn’t feel the ominous energy radiating from that...we’re up against something really bad.”

Ryouji was a professional exorcist. For him not to notice the spirit’s approach, it must have hidden its aura and targeted him specifically. It had acted with purpose, unlike the simpleminded specters that loitered in the mountains behind the Karino estate.

“How long until the rescue team gets here...?” Misato muttered, impatient.

The phone operator had told him they would dispatch the closest available sea rescue volunteers because the island was some distance from the coast guard’s base, and Misato wasn’t sure what sort of time frame that entailed. He’d never called emergency services before, and naturally, he wanted them to

arrive as soon as possible. Until then, he could only stew in dread, worried that they wouldn't make it in time.

But I shouldn't be rash either. That could be bad.

Misato stayed put for a while with that thought in his head, yet as the afterglow of sunset faded, ceding to the total dark of the new moon, Misato began to despair that any help was coming. Before long, the wind picked up and encroaching clouds dimly reflected the lights of the far-off city.

Oh no... Was there a storm forecast for tonight?

Misato palmed his phone to call for aid again, unable to stand his intensifying panic.

Shirota's thoughts entered his mind. *"Ryouji not here. No scent. Shirota can't go."*

"Can't go...?" Misato closed his eyes and focused on synchronizing his senses with the snake's. He detected a rapid current blocking their path, impossible to cross. "Is Ryouji on the other side of this?" he asked.

"Yes. Ryouji over there. Shirota can't go. Ryouji...not here."

Suffused with Shirota's sadness, Misato processed the reality that Ryouji's trail had gone cold. Ryouji had been washed away beyond an impassable current, then disappeared. Misato's fear and panic escalated. If a spirit was responsible, it may have consciously prevented Shirota from following it. Not to mention there was absolutely no sign of the rescue team.

I have a really, really bad feeling about this.

Misato shoved his phone back into his pocket and returned to the car, pausing only to grab the bare essentials from the gear arrayed on the jetty. He started the engine and directed the wheel toward Shirota's aura.

NEXT to Yaeka's house, across the narrow driveway, was a small bungalow. It was originally built for Yaeka's great-aunt, who had served as shrine maiden to the Itsukigami before Chii. Around forty years had passed since the building's completion, and it was since occupied by Yaeka's uncle, Toshihiko Kamiki.

After dark, Yaeka discreetly slipped on a lightweight hoodie and some sandals, then out the back door. She scurried across the driveway and burst into her uncle's house.

Her father had very strictly forbidden her from going outside not long before.

"Do not leave the house this evening. No matter what," he'd said before departing for the god-welcoming ceremony that started at sunset and would last all night. He could not leave the shrine under any circumstances during the ritual and cut off all contact with the outside world.

Yaeka wasn't the only one under house arrest. Every resident of Kamiki Island was a parishioner of Shirahige Shrine, and the shrine had requested that nobody leave their home that night. The instruction was not a legally binding edict, of course, but it *was* an established routine that had repeated for hundreds of years. Because the special ritual only occurred every few decades, everyone dutifully tolerated the inconvenience.

Yaeka, on the other hand, had no intention of following some silly rule; she knew the truth. She knew that on that night, her beloved older sister might be replaced for some unknown reason. She wanted to prevent that from happening no matter the cost.

Despite her role as Itsukigami's shrine maiden, Yaeka was merely a teenager, and the shrine officials were not allowing her to partake in the ritual. Even if she were permitted to attend, she could not witness the moment Itsukigami was replaced, the process of which was orchestrated by the god of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine on moonless waters with no humans present to interrupt the divine.

"Please, Uncle! Let me get the boat out!" Yaeka pleaded.

Framed by the skinny doorway, he gazed down at her with an apologetic frown, silent. She was referring to the small fishing boat he owned.

"Please!" she begged. She stood in the tiny entranceway that was only just big enough to house three pairs of shoes. A large step separated the dirt floor from a wooden hallway, a common feature of old houses.

The petite man studying her from the raised planking hummed, conflicted. "Not tonight, Yaeka."

He was three years younger than Yaeka's father and had been enjoying a free-spirited life since her great-aunt passed away. He was almost fifty years old, single, and an employee in the postal service in addition to the fishing and agriculture work he shared with Yaeka's father, Bunji. He lacked her father's stern fisherman personality and had a gentle demeanor; he was more inclined to listen to other people. Yaeka depended on him for his flexibility concerning ventures that her father would dismiss outright.

For example, on weekdays when Yaeka wanted to visit Itsukigami and the tide was too high, he secretly ferried Yaeka across to the small island—even though it was technically forbidden to anyone but Yaeka.

But it's an emergency...!

"Yer dad won't let any other boats on the water while he's doin' the ritual tonight. Nobody else owns any large boats, and no one will be wantin' to go out to sea tonight. It's just in case somethin' happens, yeh know?"

When someone experienced trouble at sea in the area, the dispatch on the mainland usually contacted her father for help. Apparently, the nearest coast guard was far enough that the local fishermen could act faster. And while her father conducted the ritual, he would not receive their calls for assistance. Plus, with all the other residents reluctant to leave their houses, anyone who found themselves in danger on the water that night would likely not be saved—Yaeka included.

"But Itsuki Island's right close by. Nothing will happen! The wind's real calm and everything!" she protested.

"Aye, but it's already dark out. It's dangerous to go to a pitch-dark island without a proper light. What would yeh be able to do, anyway?"

"I..." Yaeka hesitated. There was no obvious answer; she didn't know how to remedy the situation. But she couldn't bear to just stay at home and not even try. "Well, first, I'd go to where Chii lives. I'd find her and protect her."

She averted her gaze from her uncle and glared at the orange shadows cast by incandescent lamps on the wooden step. How, exactly, Yaeka would protect her—she had no idea. Shiotsuchinooji, the god enshrined at Kamiki Shirahige Shrine, was said to be the one who summoned the new Itsukigami. Yaeka didn't

know if a way to stop him from doing so even existed.

If there's gonna be a new Itsukigami, that means another corpse will wash ashore here... Maybe I could hide it?

She shivered just thinking about someone's poor, drowned body. She'd always had a vague awareness that was what had happened to Chii, but it was still chilling to imagine.

"Yeh know, Yaeka...I didn't really believe in this 'Chii' character 'til now," her uncle murmured quietly.

"Huh?" She blinked in surprise.

He tilted his head slightly as he searched Yaeka's expression. Apology, apprehension, and a hint of fear lined his face.

"I just thought Itsukigami was a way to keep yeh and yer great-aunt before yeh tied to this island's weird customs. Yeh seemed real constrained by the rules," he mused. "Under normal circumstances, I'd say it's impossible that some drowned corpse summoned by a god would become a god itself and appear to a shrine maiden. My aunt loved to spoil me, but she died when she was around my age. She never left the island, never got married...and I felt sorry for her. I thought yeh liked to go to Itsuki Island 'cause you didn't like the pressure of bein' at home and wanted some time to yehself. I didn't think there was any danger to the forbidden area either—just another one of those weird rules we keep here." He sighed bitterly.

Yaeka had figured that out herself. Her grandfather had introduced her to Chii, and after his death, she was the only one on the island who could see the god. That her uncle didn't believe the subject of Shirahige Shrine's strange ritual truly existed was only natural.

"But yeh know...I changed my mind when I heard the god's message. Yer dad says there's gonna be a storm tonight. I don't really remember what happened back when yeh were born, but when I heard that noise tonight...it was real as can be. When I heard it, I were *scared*. If that thing's gonna call somethin' here, I reckon there'll be a real bad storm tonight. So...c'mon, Yaeka. Yeh shouldn't go out."

Unfortunately for her, his skepticism seemed to have reversed completely. The glint of fear and unease in his eyes was the same she'd seen in her father's when he warned her earlier that evening.

"Fine. I give up." She clenched her fists and pushed her voice out through gritted teeth. She turned on her heel and left without another word.

"Get home safe."

She didn't acknowledge his call from behind and simply barreled out through the open door. If her uncle wouldn't help her, she had no choice but to get to Itsuki Island on her own.

Yaeka did not go home. With an unlit flashlight in hand, she walked onto the prohibited beach. A humid wind blew past her with a low *whoosh*, whipping up her low ponytail of shoulder-length hair. It was already dark, and the lights of the shrine were just barely bright enough to see where she was treading—even though it was not yet six thirty in the evening. Normally, around that time, the wind died down and gave way to calm. The weather forecast said it would be cloudy the next day, but perhaps her father's prediction of a storm was more accurate.

...If I ask Chii, maybe I can do something about the tide.

The shrine maiden's duty was to deliver the islanders' prayers to Itsukigami. Only the shrine maiden and the chief priest who first welcomed Itsukigami could witness the god's form. Furthermore, only the shrine maiden could converse with Itsukigami. While the shrine maiden might find her own solace in those visits, she was also a representative for the islanders' wishes. Itsukigami would hear the shrine maiden's prayer, then answer it—whether by calming the wind or waves or perhaps calling more fish to the island.

Yaeka often went to Itsuki Island to talk to Itsukigami directly, but technically, she could also report the islanders' desires by simply standing on the shore of the forbidden beach and praying toward the islet. She had petitioned Itsukigami from a distance a few times with success, although her plea was always to calm the waves enough for her to cross over for a visit.

Yaeka hurried in a straight line toward her destination, then froze to check her surroundings just in case. Like her uncle said, it was unlikely anyone would

dawdle outside after dark—let alone enter the off-limits grounds. But she knew her father and the parishioner representatives would be at the shrine building adjacent to the beach. If someone stepped out on an errand or to smoke a cigarette, she'd be in trouble.

The tide's pretty high, huh...? Low tide was around half past four, so the sandbar will be totally underwater by now...but I think I can still make it by boat!

Yaeka was searching for the inflatable dinghy she'd hidden at the far side of the beach where rocks lined the sand. It was fitted with a very small motor that required no license or inspection to use. Usually, she stowed it on Itsuki Island for the times that she accidentally stayed too long and missed her chance to walk home. She'd fetched it from the islet earlier that day in anticipation of her uncle's potential refusal.

Yaeka glimpsed no figures outside the shrine building. Cautiously, after another moment of hesitation, she turned her flashlight on. The boat was behind a rock that obscured it from view from the shrine. If she didn't hurry, the rising tide would swallow the stone she'd used to moor it.

Yaeka dashed across the beach, her sandals kicking up sand. A fleeting flash of light in the opposite direction pulsed in the corner of her vision. She stopped dead in shock.

Is somebody there?

One couldn't access the beach without passing through the shrine grounds. The semicircle of sand was sandwiched between steep bluffs, so to circumvent the shrine was not only difficult but also dangerous. What was more, the island residents never attempted to enter the sanctuary on a normal day—let alone a night when everyone was expected to stay at home. If someone was on the beach, they had to be either a ritual participant or a person who did not live on the island to begin with.

If they were one of the former, Yaeka had to hide. She quickly switched her flashlight off and crouched, straining her eyes against the darkness.

The aimless, wavering gleam by the rocks at the edge of the beach was a lot weaker than Yaeka's LED flashlight. It swayed frantically from left to right, almost as though its wielder was searching for something or perhaps watching

their step. As she observed how unfamiliarly they navigated the terrain, Yaeka's suspicion swung heavily to the possibility that the trespasser was not an island resident at all.

It's not like anyone from the shrine would need to be this close to the shore anyway... Maybe someone's tryna sneak in. But today of all days...?

She could think of several outsiders who might attempt infiltration out of sheer curiosity. The Occult Research Society from a college in Hiroshima, for example, had come to the island at the height of summer and caused a lot of trouble. The incident in which they barged into the shrine and onto the forbidden beach to film without permission was still fresh in Yaeka's memory—the police were even called. Yaeka's eyes narrowed; perhaps the stranger was one of them.

The small white light began to shake and swirl wildly. Judging by the desperation of its movement, the mysterious person had tripped.

What're they doing walking around when the tide's coming in?! They could hurt themselves!

Although the beach was relatively safe, it was pitch-black with a king tide fast approaching. The tide could suddenly surge and wash the intruder away. And if it did, no one would come to their aid that night.

Wait. If that happens...they might become the next Itsukigami!

Yaeka turned her flashlight back on and ran to confront the intruder. She soon realized that the faint, pathetic light was a phone flashlight. As she got closer, she could make out the trespasser's silhouette, and she aimed the beam of her flashlight right at their face.

"Hey! What're yeh doing on my beach?!" she yelled.

Her light revealed a young, lanky man with long hair tied into a ponytail. He was wearing an obnoxious baseball jacket that looked rather too big for him. He brought his arms up to shield his face from the glare, paralyzed with fright.

THE muddy stream swept his feet out from under him and carried him away.

Ryouji could recall with crystal acuity the feeling of his sister's arms around him as she shielded him from the current.

"It's okay, Ryou. Yer big sis will protect yeh, 'kay?"

Ryouji's older sister had always protected him. She was the type of person who exuded kindness—like a sturdy, green-leaved tree that extended a harboring branch over him whenever he came to her for shelter.

"Ryou!"

Terrified, he clutched her flannel shirt. Her heart hammered against his ear.

"Ryou! Don't give up! *Ryou!*"

Even in her final moments, her strong voice rose to protect him as promised, hauling his consciousness up from the bottom of the riverbed.

RYOUJI came to with a jolt.

He shivered, his body frigid to the core. Well—at least he felt like he needed to shiver. But his body didn't so much as twitch. Numb with cold, his limbs felt like deadweight rather than a part of his body.

Ryouji bobbed amid the waves of the sea, floating atop the water. He was not in the middle of the ocean, he realized, but stuck between some rocks. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious.

...Ha. Hahaha! I knew I was right to get the solid life vest!

The store also sold inflatable life preservers for use around the waist or neck that were fitted with lightweight gas cylinders, but the time required to inflate one after falling in the water frightened Ryouji. Instead, he'd opted for a solid, inherently buoyant vest intended for surf fishing, which had definitely seemed like overkill for a family-oriented fishing spot on the gentle waters of the Inland Sea. Even so, his overcaution had paid off. Ryouji lay there very gratefully. He sensed a dense pack of rock oysters brush against his vest. They probably would have poked a hole in an inflatable preserver and caused Ryouji to sink underwater.

Ryouji writhed, aches and pains searing every part of his body. The sleeves of

his sodden hoodie felt startlingly leaden to his cold, weakened arms. He groped in the darkness, and his hand somehow alighted on a nearby rock.

His body wasn't working like he expected, the vertical motion of a few inches of water throwing him off completely. Improbably, crawling very slowly and gritting his teeth as stone and oysters scraped his hands and cheeks, he reached dry land.

I bet this is what the first amphibian to walk on land felt like, he thought vaguely, his exhausted brain churning out silly ideas.

All he was certain of was that his body felt very, very heavy. The slightest pull of gravity was agony.

"Yep, I...I almost died...for sure..."

He heaved himself up so that his back rested against a steep cliff rising from the sea and caught his breath. The increasingly intense wind was sapping his body heat at a dangerous pace, chilling his soaked skin.

He wasn't sure how far the sea had taken him, although he glimpsed warm light in the distance, likely from houses, on an opposite shore. Dots of illumination at regular intervals seemed to be streetlights weaving through tree foliage. Directly above Ryouji, a thick, luxuriant forest swathed the cliff, the black silhouettes of trees clear against the faintly glowing clouds. At worst, he was probably on one of the small desert islands that had been visible from their fishing spot.

The freezing wind was painful, though Ryouji was glad for the cloudy sky. The dense blanket of haze reflected the light of the surrounding island villages, mainland, and the faraway factories, providing just enough brightness for his eyes to adjust. Speaking of which, the crash of the waves had evidently ripped the sunglasses off his face. Without them, his tengu eyes could see spirits as clearly as he might a living being. While the glasses were hardly cheap to make, they weren't worth losing his life over.

"Oh... My phone..." He reached into his flooded jeans pocket. He struggled to fit his fingers inside since the wet fabric clung to itself, and after some wriggling, he produced a rectangular slab the size of his hand. It was a waterproof model designed for use in the outdoors and worked so long as it had enough battery.

“Aight. Now I’m saved...or not. Hah.”

Ryouji breathed a long, despondent sigh. His phone was functional but without a signal. The span to the opposite shore didn’t look far. Perhaps he sat in some kind of dead zone, or...

“Well, it’s pretty obvious somethin’ dragged me here...so I’ve gotta be right in its pocket.”

The signal was likely being blocked by spiritual power.

But...why me? He was probably an easier seaside target than Misato, considering the water spirit inside the guy, but Ryouji was still a professional exorcist. Whatever the spirit was, it had gotten him good.

Does it know I can’t swim...? Or did it just choose me ’cause I was the closest to the water?

Come to think of it, despite the abundance of fish, he and Misato had been the only ones there. Perhaps he had been so blinded by greed that the spirit easily took advantage of him. While he thought he was there to fish, perhaps he was actually being *baited*.

“Ughh, I’ve really done it this time. I should train more,” he grumbled, though he barely possessed the presence of mind to reflect on his actions. His drenched body was dropping in temperature by the second. He wasn’t going to survive the night at that rate. Worse, the tide apparently wasn’t at its highest; water was lapping over his legs again despite his flight from it not long before. He had to get to somewhere dry as soon as possible.

“Screw this,” Ryouji groused. “Guess I gotta do some night climbing.”

He had a flashlight on his phone, but that was useless while he needed two hands to climb, and obviously, he had no gear to fix it to his head. Besides, the flashlight was so strong that it’d effectively blind him to everything outside its beam. Luckily, without his sunglasses on, Ryouji could see well in the dark. His phone battery would last a little longer without the added drain, too.

And so he began to scale the rock in the dark.

“THIS is our private land. I’ll call the police!” Yaeka threatened as the man turned to look at her.

He appeared around the same age as the college students who were messing around on the beach the previous month. And, judging by his slightly lanky, somewhat pathetic physique, he was almost certainly another member of the occult society up to no good.

“I’m sorry! I’m just looking for a friend, and...I think he’s over here somewhere.” His face paled, his mouth babbling in excuse. She couldn’t tell whether he was being honest or simply trying to get out of trouble.

Either way, presumably more than one intruder was wandering the Kamikis’ private property that night of all nights. That was bad news. The irritation burgeoning inside Yaeka finally burst, and she flung it at the first person in her firing line.

“This is a shrine! It’s *sacred* land! Do yeh think yeh can just waltz in and no one will care?! When yer weirdo occult society trespassed for yer weirdo research last time, the police gave yeh a warning! Yeh really don’t learn yer lesson, do yeh?!”

She had no time to deal with some random college students. And the fact that something bad could happen if she left them be fueled her temper.

“N-No, that’s not what I’m doing! I’m not in an occult society! I came to the island to do some fishing with my friend, and he fell into the sea, and...” the garishly dressed young man explained in a bleat.

At the very least, he wasn’t underestimating her just because she was a girl. With that realization, she decided to consider the man’s claim. If he was telling the truth, she had a highly disturbing situation on her hands.

Her fist clenched around the flashlight as she shone it at the man from head to toe. His pants were wet up to his knees. Thinking back to where he’d been walking, she guessed he’d made it there by following the coastline. The tide was climbing to its highest level of the year, and the night was so dark that to pick out a path was almost impossible. There were plenty of places to trip or lose one’s footing.

“I’m serious,” the man implored her. “This huge wave suddenly swelled up and took him away. I put in a call for help and waited for a good while, but no one came. If your family owns this shrine, could you please ask one of the adults to help me?”

If his story was true, she couldn’t fathom why he would go to so much trouble to sneak onto that particular beach. Yet his eyes were earnest as he pleaded for aid. Yaeka scrambled desperately to marshal her thoughts, confused by so many points of contention.

Did someone really get taken by the sea today...? And...he says there was suddenly a huge wave? But the water’s so calm... And what does he mean nobody came to help? Wait—that was supposed to be Dad, obviously. He’s not taking any calls today...

The pieces slowly began to slot together. A shiver ran down her spine.

It was really happening. Her family was leaving someone to die. Not for any good reason either; it was stupid to kill someone to make some new god that they didn’t even need.

Well, maybe we need one. Chii does have a lot of cool powers...but that’s not the point!

They weren’t so desperate for extra blessings that Shiotsuchinooji needed to pick someone to *die*.

“No one’s gonna help yeh,” Yaeka said stiffly, willing her voice to work. “No one’s allowed to go outside tonight.” Her words fell heavily in the seaside air.

They were possibly the worst she could have uttered to someone who just saw their friend enveloped by a huge wave.

“What?” the man croaked. He froze, his eyes blank as if he couldn’t comprehend what he’d just heard.

An emotion that could not neatly be described as fear, suspicion, or panic crawled down Yaeka’s torso and squirmed in the pit of her gut. Her left hand drifted to her stomach to claw at her shirt.

“Even if yer friend really did fall into the sea, I don’t get why yeh’re tryna

sneak onto our beach. Still, if yeh're telling the truth and no one's coming to help, just know not to put yer faith in the islanders here. Not tonight anyway. Tonight's special."

"Special...?"

"On the first tide of the fall equinox, a god comes to the island. The god rides the wave of the tide to that small island over there. At least, that's what the people here believe," she said, pointing at an islet several hundred yards off the coast. Its towering cliffs were thick with trees whose black silhouettes stood tall over the surf. "So no one will get their boat out for yeh tonight. It might get in the way of the god's arrival."

The deity of Itsuki Island arrived on the ocean current. The so-called Occult Research Society had caught wind of that superstition and come to the island raving about finding the god Ebisu. The being washed ashore by the tide, however, did not wield a fish and rod as Ebisu did, nor was it a god of fortune. It was no more than some poor soul's corpse that met an unfortunate end.

"So, essentially...nobody's coming to help because they want my friend to become the god of the island. Is that right?" His voice turned very quiet, and his jaw tightened underneath his woozy expression.

Yaeka blinked in surprise. Somehow, he'd deduced the truth of the ritual with nothing more than her vague explanation. He couldn't have so readily accepted the concept of a drifting corpse ascending to godhood unless he was an expert in local folk customs or the occult.

She nodded, then narrowed her eyes at the man once again. "Yup. So...yeh are one of those Occult Research Society people, ain't yeh? Yeh came here tonight 'cause yeh knew what was happening, right?"

"No!" The man shook his head vehemently. His waist-length, black hair shimmered in the mounting wind. As the gusts grew stronger, so did the noise of the waves rapidly crashing against the beach.

Almost like the wind's calling out for something... Maybe it really did find the next "god."

With the tide rising so fast, Yaeka would lose her chance to grab the inflatable

dinghy if she wasn't careful. Her gaze darted around in silent panic, and the man suddenly straightened with more confidence as if he'd had an idea.

"So, um... My name's Miyazawa. I'm not in this Occult Research Society—I mean, I'm not even a college student. I'm a working adult with a job at Tomoe Town Hall, and, well...this stuff comes up a lot in my line of work, so—"

"Huh?! *Yeh're* a civil servant?!" she yelped. "Well, whatever. Just tell me the truth: did yer friend really get swept away?"

He certainly didn't *look* like a government employee. Even if she granted him the benefit of the doubt and conceded that he was a working adult, he was probably a blogger or YouTuber at best. His job was irrelevant though, so she decided to keep that comment to herself. She didn't have time to interrogate a stranger's background.

"Really!" Miyazawa insisted. "We had no idea it was a special night. He was wearing a life vest, so I should be able to save him if we act fast. *Please* tell me where that god's supposed to show up!" He bowed his head deeply.

His frantic plea didn't sound fake. Disregarding his identity and reasons for coming to the island in the first place, his need for help at least seemed real.

As Miyazawa lifted his head, he scanned Yaeka's form with a confused look on his face. His eyes trailed from her ankle-length jeans to her light, long-sleeved hoodie, then to the ponytail that lay low on her shoulders. He tilted his head inquisitively. "By the way... What're *you* doing here?" He raised an eyebrow. "I know I'm not exactly in a position to question you, but is it safe for you to be out on your own like this? You seem to understand what's going on with the ritual, so..."

He appeared to have only just registered the contradiction of her presence on the beach with what she'd explained. He seemed genuinely concerned for her wellbeing though, so she relaxed her guard just a little.

"There's, uh...something I need to do. At the same place as *yeh*, actually. Lemme take you there. In return, I need *yeh* to do something for me. *Yeh're* taller than me, so *yeh* can get over easier."

"Get over what?"

“Basically, we’re going to that island over there. I hid a boat on the other side of that rock, but I think the tide’s too high for me to get to it on my own now. I’m gonna need help climbing over the rock,” she said firmly.

When the tide was low, she could simply traverse the sand around the boulder, but the path disappeared during high tide. The only alternative was to clamber over a smooth stone face with no footholds that stretched somewhat taller than Yaeka. Miyazawa didn’t look particularly strong or athletic, but he was still a fully grown man; he was considerably taller than her.

Miyazawa blinked. “Umm... I don’t know...” He hesitated.

“Yeh’re not gonna get any help from the adults on this island,” she scoffed, pressing him. “They all believe in the divine message they heard earlier, so they’re just waiting for the new god to show up.”

She’d escaped the house to stop that from happening. The fact that she’d happened upon someone looking for the very same person had to be a stroke of luck. So she would chance his assistance. She was much more likely to succeed with help.

There’s no way I’m giving up on Chii!

Miyazawa drew himself up again. Ostensibly her assertion had struck a chord with him.

“Your family owns this shrine, right?” he asked, his timid aura dissipating slightly and giving way to a more serious expression.

“Yup. I’m Yaeka Kamiki, Chii’s—... Well, I’m shrine maiden to the current god,” she clarified. “I don’t get why this happened. We’ve already got a god on Itsuki Island. We’ve already got Chii! But...if they want a different one, they might get rid of Chii. That’s what I wanna prevent.”

That was the first time she’d ever introduced herself as a shrine maiden to someone not from the island. Saying it out loud made her realize all over again what a peculiar position she had and how difficult to describe it to an outsider would be. But Miyazawa did not question her or look at her strangely. He simply nodded in acknowledgment.

“I’m Misato Miyazawa.” He reintroduced himself in turn, his first name

neither masculine nor feminine. “So, do you mean to say what’s happening tonight isn’t normal?”

“Exactly!” She nodded emphatically.

“Oh...” Misato’s jaw tensed and his eyes flickered downward. The humid breeze surged, swishing his long, black hair. He blended terrifyingly well with the dark, dismal landscape, his oversized baseball jacket a glaring mismatch to the rest of him.

“All right,” he relented. “I need to save my friend somehow. We share a common goal, so we might as well work together. Thank you, Yaeka.” He bowed his head with a polite smile. For one mystical moment, she could’ve sworn his unremarkable, uncertain, pale face morphed into a refined, majestic mask.

After a few seconds of no response from Yaeka, Miyazawa glanced at her face, obviously a bit uncomfortable. Yaeka returned to reality with a jolt, nodding in a fluster.

“O-Oh, right, aye! Thanks!” she stuttered. “Anyway, it’s over here! C’mon!” She turned away from Miyazawa without checking his reaction. She pointed her flashlight ahead and started forward.

“Right,” came a vague reply, another set of footsteps soon following behind her.

THE girl who’d offered to show Misato the way to Ryouji claimed she wanted to save someone called Chii. Chii was apparently the god currently worshipped by the Kamiki family. She also told him that the spirit in that role changed on a periodic basis according to the island’s tradition, so several different spirits had been referred to as the same deity over the years: Itsukigami. Its name likely derived from “*itsuku*,” meaning “to settle”—the settler god.

“Chii drifted to the shores of Itsuki Island on the first fall equinox after I was born,” Yaeka explained, squaring her shoulders. Her sandals crunched briskly against the sand as she walked. “So, this time, Itsukigami’s a girl. I’ve been hanging out with her as her shrine maiden since I was little.”

Each version of Itsukigami was assigned a shrine maiden to communicate with

them. Under normal circumstances, Itsukigami remained on the island until the shrine maiden passed away, taking the god she served with her to the Other Side. Thus, when the shrine maiden died, Itsukigami was honored at the same funeral and sent back to the sea.

Misato couldn't fathom how the custom was treated on a legal level, considering that Itsukigami was the corpse of a recently deceased person. He supposed there was an organization in Takehara similar to the Abnormal Disaster Unit—perhaps they handled that side of things. He'd heard that many of the villages amid the complex maze of islands in the Inland Sea held onto peculiar, intense practices such as the Itsukigami ritual.

"But for some reason, when we got the divine message earlier, it said a new Itsukigami's coming! Even though both me and Chii are still here!" Yaeka huffed in incredulity, clearly very fond of her Itsukigami. "That means they don't need Chii anymore, right? They're gonna send her back to the sea!"

"Tell me about this divine message. Who does it come from?" called Misato as Yaeka rushed along the shoreline. The swelling wind whipped his voice away.

They were heading for a protruding wall of rock at the far side of the beach. Its tip pointed toward Itsuki Island, where Chii dwelled. According to Yaeka, a sandy path led directly to the island during low tide.

Yaeka came to a sudden halt, then glared past Misato as she spat, "That would be Oji, the god enshrined in the main building over there. Itsukigami is like his guest. He invites 'em here and lets 'em get comfortable. Oji's message decides everything 'round here. We basically just run around doing everything he tells us to."

Yaeka faced forward again with a derisive scoff. The wind viciously whisked into the air the wispy hairs that had fallen from her ponytail like loose feathers on a sparrow's tail. Misato followed close behind, keeping his phone flashlight directed at her back.

Oji... Misato rifled through the information in his brain. "What was the name of your shrine again?"

"Kamiki Shirahige Shrine. So?" she answered without stopping. Misato took longer strides to catch up to her, hurrying to her side to catch her words before

they were stolen by the strong wind and thrown into the roar of the sea.

Okay, Oji... That's gotta be Shiotsuchinooji. He's usually enshrined at Shiogama Shrine, and he's also known as Shiotsuchi or Shiotsutsu—both nautical gods. Though he could also be an iteration of the god Sarutahiko...

As a general rule across Japan, shrines named “Shirahige” housed Sarutahiko, an earth deity and god of direction. He was said to have shown the way to Earth when the grandson of the sun goddess descended. He stood before crossroads and acted as a guide. His very long nose and fearsome facial features were his most notable traits, and many believed he was the origin of the long-nosed depiction of tengu.

Some Shirahige shrines, however, didn’t enshrine Sarutahiko but Shiotsuchinooji, the god of salt making and nautical guidance. If the people of Kamiki Island called him Oji, their shrine likely centered on that particular identity of the deity.

Shrines that were erected seeking a particular god’s favor—like Kamiki Shirahige Shrine—often adhered to an individualized set of principles that ran parallel to preexisting faith in the area. There was also evidence that parishioners occasionally swapped out the name of a local god for one that was more well known. Such shrines might worship Sarutahiko or Shiotsuchinooji on paper, but the gods actually attached to them were different from the “legitimate” versions that populated Japan’s earliest legends and dwelled in large shrines. “Oji” was perhaps more than a simple nickname for the god; rather, it was likely closer to his true identity.

“So...does that make Oji our shared enemy?” Misato prompted.

“Guess so.” Yaeka shrugged with a grimace.

I'm up against a god again, huh...? And this time, we've got some real faith bolstering the natural spirit. He peered over his shoulder to study the brightly lit shrine building. *This could be bad,* he realized, pinching his brow. If the islanders were heeding the warning not to go outside in the wake of Oji’s message, their belief in and awe of the god had to be strong.

There were many names for the inhuman spirits Misato encountered: demons, specters, *ayakashi*, ghosts, monsters, yokai, phantoms... Different

people called the same spirits different things. They also used the same words to categorize various spirits even when the spirits were clearly unlike. Or the term for a spirit was substituted naturally as language evolved.

Overall, spirits often defied a concrete label—but gods were special. That much was obvious to the average person, although deities were similar to other spirits in the sense that they were a concentration of energy in a certain location or object. All spirits lived among people, who frequently built shrines for them, and all spirits' power was dictated by human belief. But there was one trait that only the spirits called gods possessed: they were either worshipped or feared.

"So, about this Oji..." probed Misato. "Could you tell me a little more? The main deity of that shrine is technically Shiotsuchinooji, right? Do you know what its vessel is? Or maybe the origins of the shrine?"

Yaeka glanced back at him disparagingly. Unfortunately, because she hadn't bought his earlier introduction, he had missed the chance to tell her he was a medium. Under Misato's flashlight, her warily raised eyebrows and wrinkled nose were the very picture of "Why should I tell you?"

"Well, aye," she answered vaguely. "If I remember... The vessel's some sorta big rock, I think. And the shrine originated in the Edo period, when the islanders here started making salt. That's when Oji, uh...relocated here. Transferred here. Whatever it is they do."

"Where did the rock come from?"

"I dunno that much." She shrugged again.

"A rock..." Misato mouthed to himself.

That the islanders had been sent some stone from the precinct of the main shrine of Shiotsuchinooji wasn't totally impossible, yet based on other sites' histories, he hypothesized that the vessel was probably a rock that had always been on Kamiki Island.

The Abnormal Disaster Unit had been formed to deal with forces that could not be observed by science: mystical energies and the spirits that comprised them. Their cases could be separated into two main categories.

The first was locations or objects that inherently possessed spiritual power. There was no way of scientifically measuring that power, nor did humans possess any organ that could reliably pick up on it. All that could be used to detect its existence was spiritual sensitivity or a “sixth sense”—a vague hunch that perhaps *something* was there. The masses of power were called spirits or specters, and they were prime snack targets for Shirota when he roamed the garden at the Karino estate.

The second was a force that was generated through an accumulation of people’s cognitions and emotions toward a certain location or object. The previous winter, Misato fought a swarm of adzuki bean weevils that had latched onto a girl who’d been sacrificed—they came under the latter category. When people believed a soul or item to be cursed, or pronounced a certain location to be haunted, spiritual power was much more likely to proliferate and fester. The phenomenon was also what granted undeniably good fortune to shrines and temples. When a large number of people’s thoughts concentrated on fear or faith or dependence—or simply a strong conviction—that mental energy could actualize and embody their emotions. For example, the denizens of Onomichi had once believed that tanuki were yokai that could transform and deceive, which in turn engendered a great deal of societal unease. Their fear granted a certain tanuki the ability to shapeshift, who then behaved exactly as the people expected.

Therefore, a god who was fervently worshipped commanded yet another source of power and was a being stronger than any other. Oji dwelled in a vessel endemic to Kamiki Island and had been amassing reverence from the parishioners ever since his installation in the spiritual locus that was the shrine. At least, so Misato concluded. He could foresee Oji being an even more formidable opponent than the adzuki bean weevils, especially because those had been separate from Kirino—the spirit wielding the power of the mountain—and constituted the (admittedly significant) attendant fear and belief surrounding her canonization. With such a huge amount of power opposing them, to make any sort of attack with a team of just two people was reckless.

The sound of the swiftly burgeoning sea breaking against rock made Misato shiver. The waves themselves seemed hostile.

But why was the divine message different this time, I wonder?

“Are there any other tales of monsters or gods in the area that don’t have anything to do with Oji?” he asked, trying to piece together the truth. “I don’t think a properly enshrined local deity would strike back out of nowhere, especially when the routine has been the same for decades. Hmm...”

Yaeka came to a stop once more. She swiveled to Misato and aimed her flashlight at him, slowly illuminating him from head to toe. Eyeing him with rampant suspicion, she demanded, “Who are yeh? *Really*, I mean.”

Only then did Misato realize how he looked. He had waist-length hair and was additionally wearing the badge-covered, obnoxious baseball jacket Ryouji had lent him—which was way too big to boot. He didn’t exactly look like someone with a stable, respectable occupation. He’d been honest and initially introduced himself as a Town Hall employee in order to gain Yaeka’s trust, but perhaps his story would’ve been more believable if he’d pretended he was a writer for an occult magazine—no offense to actual writers, of course.

If I come out and say I’m an onmyoji...she’s not gonna believe me, is she? Misato was sure he’d only harm his cause by telling the truth; to claim to be anything so grand would smear another coat of dubious paint over his already very dubious image.

“My parents run a shrine, too. Plus, spirits are a personal interest of mine. I’ve studied a lot of this stuff in my free time,” he said with a smile, trying to give the impression he had a lot of incidental knowledge in the field—which was true. Technically, he wasn’t lying at all.

Yaeka’s eyebrows bunched in the middle of her forehead as she scrutinized him. After a moment, they relaxed as though she’d given up. “Hmm... Well, whatever. Other than Oji, I guess there is that haunted shrine on Mount Kamiki.” Her gaze flicked up and to the left, toward the eponymous mountain poking above the island.

The so-called “haunted” shrine immediately piqued his attention. “Tell me everything you know.”

Yaeka recounted what she could, divulging information bit by bit as it occurred to her—evidently, she rarely thought about it in her everyday life. The

shrine was at the utmost summit of the mountain. It had once been frequented by the islanders in a time long past but gradually fell out of use until nobody visited anymore. Rumor said a tengu lived on the shrine's grounds, and parents on the island often warned their children that the tengu would come and snatch them away in punishment for disobedience.

If that's the highest mountain on the island, I imagine it used to be inhabited by a god. It's possible this tengu is around because the people perpetuate its existence, but...if the shrine has been abandoned for a long time, and it wasn't causing any trouble before, why would it start now?

"Ooh, d'ye think that tengu's the mastermind?" Yaeka supplemented with wide eyes, her thoughts along the same line as his.

"No, there's no way of telling just yet!" he said firmly. "But...this is a strange situation, so I was just thinking there could be a possibility."

Misato wasn't yet sure whether he'd rather face a tengu or a full-fledged god.

"Sorry. Thanks for explaining all of this to me, by the way," he added politely. "So...were you planning to cross to that island now? Itsuki Island, was it?"

"Aye. I was gonna stop the new Itsukigami from reaching the island tonight. If the new Itsukigami is yer friend, he's not gonna be able to take over if he's still alive. 'Cause...Itsukigami is born when a corpse washes up on the island."

"Ah." Misato nodded sagely.

In that case, they were definitely striving toward the same goal. First, though, they had to make it to the island safely. The raging wind seemed to intensify as it charged across the beach, the air full of moisture. The weather was possibly also the work of whatever entity had orchestrated their predicament.

Yaeka pressed on, her flashlight soon revealing a large, dark, rocky surface. She'd said she needed Misato to help haul her over it.

"This has been on my mind for a while now, but..." he began, accompanying her as she searched for purchase in the stone.

She threw a glare over her shoulder at him that said, "What now?"

"Are we going to be okay sailing in this sort of wind...?"

The waves were climbing violently as they spoke. Not to mention the new moon; Misato was only just recognizing how dangerous their plan was.

"Yeh're gonna start complaining *now*!?" Yaeka snapped, her eyebrows shooting upward.

"I'm sorry," he squeaked automatically, cowering at her sudden anger.

"Ugh." Yaeka exhaled a short, sharp sigh as she gazed at the black silhouette of Itsuki Island, its form only slightly darker than the moonless sky. "We'll be okay, 'cause I'm Chii's shrine maiden. If I pray to her, she'll give us safe passage."

SHIROTA was in trouble.

"Misato! Misato!" No matter how desperately he tried to call his host, no reply came.

After diving into the sea to locate Ryouji's trail, he was suddenly cut off by a terrifying current and lost his scent. Worse, he had been swept in the completely opposite direction, so to return to the pier was impossible.

The waves launched him onto some unknown, pitch-black beach. He was at an utter loss regarding where to go or what to do. He would've crawled toward Misato but couldn't work out where his host was either.

"Misato! Ryouji!"

The lightless night was no problem for a spirit that lived in the dark. He easily slithered across the beach, its sand littered with all sorts of items that had drifted ashore. He nimbly scaled a small cliff and poked his head over the edge to see a shadowed forest crowded with leafy trees. Again, he considered swimming back to Misato but feared being washed away by another unpredictable current.

But where am I?

He reared his head and tasted the air for any sort of odor he recognized. His tongue flitted in and out restlessly as he soaked up the smells mixed in with the sea breeze.

An unfamiliar aroma caught his attention from overhead.

“A snack?”

The scent was rich with the energy of the mountains. It was far more intense than that of the specters Shirota often smelled in the rear garden back home.

“Hahaha!” A belly laugh echoed in the air, preceding a cheery, sonorous voice. “I ain’t no snack. But you’re a real splendid-lookin’ serpent, ain’tcha? And I think I heard ya callin’ Ryouji’s name a li’l while back.”

Shirota’s head perked up in surprise when he heard the name of the nice landlord who fed him treats. He flicked out his tongue to analyze the man’s aura in more depth.

“Know Ryouji?”

The man smelled slightly different than the snacks he usually preyed on—older and more concentrated. His scent was more akin to the spirits’ he sensed at the places Misato called temples and shrines.

“Oh, I know him very well indeed. We go a long way back.” The man swooped down from above, emerging from a cover of branches and leaves that created an even darker veil than the moonless night.

Shirota could see him more clearly. He was a spirit, although his form seemed as human as Misato’s or Ryouji’s. He was significantly brawnier than Ryouji, and his clothes didn’t look any different from a human’s either—Shirota wasn’t very familiar with the terms for specific items, but if he was correct, the man was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans.

The main distinction was the huge, expansive pair of wings fanning from the man’s back, their plumage resembling a bird of prey’s. There was one other thing he noticed, too—

“You’re searchin’ for Ryouji, ain’tcha? Why?” the spirit asked in a low, thick voice.

Shirota took a long, hard look at his face. The mountain-scented, humanoid spirit was wearing the mask of a yokai Misato had talked about before.

“Tengu...?”

Chapter 3: Stormy Night

THE archipelago of small islands eroded by the ferocious tide of the Inland Sea appeared compact and picturesque from a distance, but they were not easy to visit. Many of them comprised a mountain summit that poked above sea level, meaning that in a lot of cases, the only places to moor were very steep inclines where the waves had hollowed out the rock face.

Somehow, Ryouji reached the forested cliff top and hauled himself over the edge rather as though he were doing a pull-up. He gritted his teeth; he had not struggled so much physically for a long time. His strength was significantly drained.

He was finally on honest-to-goodness dry land, although the terrain was sheer. So little light filtered amid the cloak of gloom worn by the dense trees that his eyes could barely adjust. To wander farther up the pitch-dark, entirely unmaintained mountain would be dangerous. But at the very least, he needed to find somewhere to dry his warmth-sapping clothes. He dragged himself over a tree root that protruded from the slope and stretched diagonally toward the sea.

“Shit...” he groaned. “It’s...been way too long since I’ve had to survive like this. Feels like I’m gonna die. I gotta...gotta reflect on myself and do some more training when I get home. Turn over a new leaf.”

He stripped from head to toe and wrung the water from his clothing. His father and his father’s buddies had instructed him how to act in such a situation —via practical exercises. He had been certain he was going to die on occasion, yet he’d be lying if he said their tutelage hadn’t come in handy.

Ryouji’s father had marooned him in the mountains several times when he was still a young child; in addition to incantations, he had also thoroughly instilled in Ryouji knowledge of how to survive in the wild—for some reason. His educational strategy was the epitome of practice over theory: he gruffly tossed

Ryouji into the jaws of nature to experience all sorts of cruel trials that should not have factored into the life of a modern Japanese teenager. Of course, his father did not employ those methods to abuse him—though they definitely would have been classed as such if discovered by the authorities—but to equip him with know-how and experience. His father or his father’s “friends” were always close by to watch over him and give him advice.

Once Ryouji was in nothing other than his underwear, and his clothes had all been thoroughly squeezed, he draped them over branches in the surrounding thicket before taking another look around. To find footholds, he’d traveled as much horizontally as vertically up the cliff so the light on the opposite shore was no longer visible. He’d noticed that the island was either small enough or the coastline so jagged that he seemed to straddle curved rock at every step up the escarpment.

The dark, murky space below roared with the crashing, white-crested tide. Ryouji wondered whether high tide was still approaching. Gazing into the distance, he could just glimpse the glow from the mainland or a nearby island reflecting off low-hanging clouds.

I guess it'd be best to wait 'til dawn, huh...?

The temperature wasn’t yet quite cold enough to kill him so long as he played his cards right. If he dried his clothes and used the trees to block the wind, he could probably wait for daylight without dying of hypothermia.

“That’s only if I don’t run into any traps, though,” he remarked bitterly to himself.

God, I want a cigarette. Unfortunately, the sea-pickled pack was decidedly unsmokable—though his lighter would probably work once it dried out. Its flame would be useful, so he quickly wiped the lighter on the driest bit of fabric he could find. He was already so itchy and in so much pain on the bare ground in nothing but a pair of underpants that he couldn’t afford to sweat the small stuff. He wouldn’t be surprised if he were running merely on adrenaline.

He did some light stretching and calisthenics to stave off the cold while his clothes dried. Again, he peeked over the tree root where it dangled off the cliff. Around the side of the rocky bluff, in the direction opposite to the seashore

he'd spotted before, he could see glints of illumination on the water. He craned his neck but could discern no land in that direction at all. There was no moonlight either. He squinted—was he seeing things?—and glared at the distant waves.

"I swear there's some sorta light over there."

If that was the case, should he head that way? Under normal circumstances, the better alternative was to stay put.

As he contemplated his options, the undergrowth rustled. He narrowed his eyes and cautiously surveyed the area, grabbing his clothes. They were far from dry, but he had no choice.

If my hunch is right, then—

"Ack!" he yelped.

Something was scuttling across the forest floor. He sucked his teeth and stood, shoving his legs into his pants with great haste before a huge wave of what looked like wharf roaches descended upon him.

Dashing through the onslaught, he exclaimed in indignation, "Who the hell's got it out for me?! Like I keep sayin', I hate these gross critters!" The complaint was to no avail, he knew.

The roaches simply bundled into one swarm and continued scurrying on their way without paying attention to Ryouji. Instead, with a huge *whoosh*, a blast of wind assailed him. He had to clutch his jackets to make sure they weren't blown away, putting himself in a ridiculous position as he clawed at the fabric at his midriff at the same time. Then, as he attempted to rise again, he felt a large droplet slap against his shoulder.

Rain.

"Screw you!" he blared. "No one said there was gonna be rain tonight! *No one!*"

The gale was so severe that he stumbled in place, and the rain so heavy that it penetrated the thick covering of trees. It seemed that everything that could go wrong assaulted Ryouji all at once, culminating with a huge storm overhead

that made him wonder if a freak typhoon had formed.

A distant memory suddenly stirred in his mind.

"Watch out, Ryouji. When the wharf roaches show up, that's when ya know there's a storm comin'." He couldn't remember exactly who fed him that superstition, but he could imagine it was either his father or one of his many friends.

Although he had just wrung them out, his clothes were completely soaked again in seconds. His priority was to get out of the rain, so he searched for shelter—unsuccessfully. The ground was surprisingly smooth and slippery, and to make matters worse, the deluge made it impossible to see anything.

Damn it! Where do I go?!

He wanted to avoid losing his bearings. He decided to at least position himself downwind of the forest rather than remain wholly vulnerable to the storm, and as he shuffled along the edge of the cliff, those glinting waves once more caught his eye. There was no doubt—the surface of the water was reflecting a source of light amid the torrential rain.

"It's comin' from below the cliff, so... Is there a cave down there?"

If he ever one day looked back on that moment, he wasn't sure he would be able to say he did the right thing—or even that he was thinking straight. At the time, however, he was convinced that he had no choice but to climb back down the cliff sans safety rope and locate that light.

DARKNESS loomed in the air around them like a malicious animal, pouncing down to devour Misato whole.

That might sound like a literary exaggeration, but it's the truth!

Clinging white-knuckled to the inflatable raft, he only just managed to hold back a pathetic scream. Foam-crested waves rose high above them, soaking him from overhead.

The Inland Sea was not known for choppy waters, yet the wind was inescapable and the dark of the new moon terrifying. They were crazy to have

piled into a tiny, blow-up boat in such weather—a fact Misato had realized as soon as they set the dinghy rocking on the pummeling waves like a flimsy leaf spinning in the pool beneath a waterfall.

He'd climbed over the stone as instructed, helping Yaeka up once its height became too much for her shorter legs to handle. The jagged silhouette of the rock face created deep shadows over the footholds, and with only a flashlight to illuminate the way, he struggled to find the way up. Luckily, Yaeka was familiar with the uneven surface and told him where to put his feet. By the time they reached the boat, Misato's faith in it was already waning.

"We'll be one hundred percent fine," Yaeka had assured him. "I'm Itsukigami's shrine maiden! Chii will protect us for sure."

Despite her conviction, Misato felt at that moment that his civic duty should have been to persuade her to turn back. As the wind raged, so did the sea—Misato knew that. But what good was that knowledge once he became a gale-battered leaf completely at the mercy of the stormy waves? The very least he could do was make Yaeka wear the single life vest stored aboard the boat, so that was what he did.

"Keep yer center of gravity low! Off we go!" shouted Yaeka as she grasped the motor cord and tugged.

A fierce current coursed through the waves whipped up by the storm. The combination resulted in nauseatingly rough surf that could easily capsize the raft. Yaeka analyzed the lunging, animalistic waves as they set off, maneuvering the dinghy to skillfully cut through them. Meanwhile, all Misato could do was hang on for dear life. He felt rather as if he'd been stuffed inside a cocktail shaker.

Thrill rides weren't Misato's passion, and he'd been on only a couple in his life—never mind one with no safety belt. Never before had he had to grip something until his fingers went numb. The fear that he would die if he let go, in conjunction with the lack of purchase beneath his soaked feet and the waves that repeatedly threw him in the air, was utterly scrambling his head.

"Is that...rain?" Misato wondered aloud, his observation delayed due to how much seawater was already pelting down on him. At some point, the intense

wind had grown into a full-fledged storm. “Yaeka... Can’t we turn back?”

“Absolutely not! We can defy the current, ’kay?! We just need to get to Itsuki Island as quick as possible!”

Confronted with her insistence, Misato could merely nod. She was the only one familiar with those waters and was the captain of the boat, such as it was. Misato was no more than talking cargo.

Waves bared their fangs on all sides and an endless, inky blackness stretched as far as the eye could see. Even the distant lighthouse visible from shore had been totally obscured by the torrential rain.

We could seriously die.

They could see no land to use as a guide. If they exhausted themselves, they would perish. He probably hadn’t felt so afraid since his fight with the serpent. Following that thought, the pearly remnant of that serpent popped into his head.

Oh, Shirota... If only you were here. Misato had lost contact with the snake after he dove into the sea and informed Misato he’d lost Ryouji’s trail.

As a huge serpent, Shirota had no problem swimming for as long as he liked. In an emergency, they could’ve tethered him to the dinghy and asked for his help returning to shore. But Misato got no reply no matter how many times he called out to Shirota.

A sudden light filled his vision.

No—a colossal, imposing wall of water was reflecting their lights back at them.

By the time he understood what was happening, he couldn’t tell which way was up. A surge of seawater sped toward him. Yaeka shouted something.

But Misato could see them. He could see two faintly glowing eyes embedded in the breathtaking swell.

Then the wave swallowed them. The boat flipped.

He forced his eyes open, scanning the dark, hazy water. He could just barely make out the lights of the overturned dinghy.

Yaeka should be okay with that life vest.

Misato was a strong swimmer. In fact, swimming was probably the only physical activity in which he surpassed Ryouji. He could remain remarkably calm in water—calmer than most people anyway.

There! There's the surface! The air bubbles spilling from his lips floated upward, illuminated by the frail beacon of the boat.

He carved through the water, following the bubbles. At last his head crested, and he gasped for air. He turned from side to side, heaving as he surveyed the situation.

Yaeka was clinging to the upside-down dinghy, safe in her life vest. Misato relaxed marginally in relief.

"Why?!" Yaeka cried, her screams penetrating the howl of the wind, rain, and sea. *"Chii! Why won't you protect me?!"*

It seemed that the tide and weather had always cooperated with her before. No longer, however—they had betrayed her, controlled by some unknown force.

That monster was the same one that took Ryouji—I'm sure of it. Crap, I knew things weren't right here.

The sea level was rising before his very eyes. They were no normal waves: the water's height had no discernible cause and towered above them as if targeting them specifically.

Indistinct, bluish-white eyes stared down at them.

"Yaeka!" yelled Misato in warning.

Just as another wave was about to crash down on them and force them back underwater, something white and large hooked around Misato and pulled him away. It was covered in huge, hard scales that were so pale he could glimpse them even in the dark.

"Shirota?!"

And why's he so big?!

The snake was at full size, his torso thick enough that Misato had to tightly hug him to stay on.

“SHIROTA love Ryouji? Shirota love Ryouji!”

The gigantic serpent's pearly body reflected the dim light, sparkling slightly in the darkness of the sea. He was questioning himself, for some reason.

Shirota? What're you talking about? Misato silently asked, puzzled as he clung to Shirota's much-larger-than-usual frame. The effort just to keep his head above water and breathe as Shirota darted through the waves was taking all he had. Water attacked him from all sides of the undulating snake, and both his eyes and ears clogged. His breaths were abnormally ragged, too; that he'd inhaled some seawater when the wave devoured him was highly possible.

“Misato love Ryouji?” Shirota aimed his query at Misato. *“Shirota and Misato...same?”*

Misato had no idea what had gotten into the spirit all of a sudden, but fortunately, he didn't even need to think to answer. *Isn't that obvious?*

Misato and Shirota were the same creature.

Immediately after his mute reply, he sensed joy radiate from the snake, then a warm, fuzzy feeling in the pit of his stomach. His breathing came somewhat easier as well. Finally reigning in his instinctual panic, he calmed down a little and looked around.

The malicious tsunami appeared to have retracted for the moment, although he was still stranded on a stygian sea whose storm-whipped waves yet tormented him with their rough, white crowns. The glow of what was presumably the overturned boat was fading into the distance before Misato's eyes. He had no idea where Yaeka was.

Shirota, look for Yaeka! She needs help!

Hopefully she was still holding onto the raft. While her vest was fitted with reflective strips, they wouldn't be much use in the pitch-black gloom. Misato lightly slapped the scales beneath him, willing Shirota to go back. He could

puzzle out why the snake was so big and what Shirota had been doing until that point once they and Yaeka were on dry land.

You do know where the coast is, right?!

Misato had certainly lost sight of it amid the dark and rain.

“Yeah!” replied Shirota reassuringly. His next words, however, were more concerning: “*Gyoukai call Misato and Yaeka to beach.*”

Misato blinked. *Gyoukai*? He’d never heard that name before.

“*Shirota love Ryouji. Gyoukai help out. Gyoukai huge snack. Loves Ryouji!*” Shirota attempted to explain.

From what Misato could decipher, “*Gyoukai*” sounded like a spirit who lived on one of the islands and had taken a liking to Ryouji—and thus decided to help Shirota save him.

What sort of spirit would make Shirota go into predator mode like that though...?

Ryouji had never visited the islands before. If the spirit had instantly zeroed in on Ryouji, there was a possibility it was posing as Oji in order to kidnap him. Or—no, Oji’s divine message had come a few days prior to their visit. Misato’s thoughts were entirely muddled, conflicting information from multiple sources tangling in his head.

Is this spirit who likes Ryouji on our side...? Or is it the one who took him in the first place...? Ugh. He sighed. I have no clue, but it’s good if Shirota’s taking me to dry land... Okay! Shirota, take me and Yaeka to the beach, please!

Their first priority was to preserve their own lives. Settling on that decision, he braced himself, and Shirota rounded his huge body in a sharp turn and swam in the opposite direction.

“*Yaeka here. Go back to Gyoukai’s beach. Don’t go island.*” His long, long length propelled forward to a location different from where he had picked up Misato, closing in on a vague shadow.

The moonless, rainy sky provided no light whatsoever, though the downpour did seem to subside to more of a drizzle the farther they got from the islet.

Once Misato's eyes adjusted, he was eventually able to discern where the surface of the sea, his hands, and Shirota's body were. And just ahead of him, he spotted something huddled on Shirota's back. It was Yaeka, slumped unconscious over the serpent's scales.

"Yaeka!"

He crawled further up Shirota's spine to check on her. Rhythmic breaths fell from her lips, but her skin was alarmingly cold. He wrapped a feeble arm around her shoulders, propping her up against the left side of his body and gripping Shirota with his right. Right then, the serpentine extension of himself was his only lifeline.

"I've got Yaeka, so get to the shore as quickly as possible! Anywhere's fine!" he instructed Shirota.

"Yeah!"

Shirota slithered through the waves. In fact, the journey was a lot smoother than Misato anticipated, and he swayed only slightly as the snake sliced through the current. The air was cold, yet strangely enough, nowhere near as deadly as a few minutes previous. Normally, someone in his situation would be completely exhausted, but a mysterious energy seemed to reignite within him the farther they traveled.

That's strange... Maybe it's just an adrenaline rush, but I don't know... Also, is the tide flowing with us now? Where are we going? Shirota said "Go back," so... back to Kamiki Island, maybe?

It felt like they were moving much, much faster, although he couldn't really see their surroundings to judge the speed for himself. He kept his eyes trained forward despite the lack of visibility, and abruptly, a glowing, crimson light appeared through the drizzle. He marveled that someone could even start a fire in such a storm, and the closer they came, he realized it was a large bonfire. At the end of a tree-covered cape was a small beach. Next to the bonfire, he could see a single silhouette moving about. As they surged nearer, the firelight illuminated the shore, revealing an unsightly accumulation of litter, such as plastic waste and driftwood.

The water level was gradually receding down Misato's legs, and the figure

noticed their approach before it had grown shallow enough to stand in.

“*Gyoukai!*” called Shirota to the burly man.

So that’s him. As Misato strained his eyes to analyze the spirit, the man replied in a bold, somewhat gruff tone.

“Ahoy! Ya did mighty well!” he shouted. “Come warm yourselves by the fire—and watch your step! There’s a whole loada trash ‘round here!”

He at least seemed like a friendly, warm person. Misato had trouble imagining that he might be their enemy. *He doesn’t even look like a spirit, never mind an opposing one. What is he?*

Misato struggled to make out the man’s features with the bonfire blazing behind him; the spirit had a humanoid, physical form and cast a shadow on the beach like any other material being.

While Misato hesitated, Shirota headed straight for the man. He wormed onto shore, and before long, Misato’s feet hit sand. He let go of Shirota once the water was at chest level, then walked to dry land with Yaeka’s unconscious form in his arms. The man, who wore a plain T-shirt and jeans, waded into the water up to his knees to support Yaeka’s other shoulder.

“Thank you very m—uh?!”

The man’s face finally came into view, and he couldn’t help but yelp. Backlit by the glow of the bonfire, the man sported a black mask that, glinting crimson in the glow of the bonfire, bore the semblance of a tengu—a Shugendo monk with the face of a bird, its nose stretching into a curved beak.

“Hahaha!” A great, huge belly laugh resonated from the man. “Did I give ya a li’l shock? I can see you’re already at home in the yin, but I say get yourself to the fire before we do introductions; we gotta warm this young’un up lickety-split.”

The tengu-masked man gestured to the bonfire, its heart made up of driftwood. The flotsam had been cleared around its circumference, and the nearby sand appeared dry. Next to it was a crudely made, wooden frame that looked useful for drying clothes.

Thankfully, the rain had stopped once they came ashore. The wind still raged, but despite its violent tumult against the mountain rising above them, the bonfire was remarkably still. Perhaps the beach was shielded by the shape of the island.

“Are you the one who helped Shirota?” Misato asked as he set Yaeka down by the fire. Shirota was still in his largest form as if he were physically unable to shrink back down and return to Misato. Misato positioned Yaeka on the side of the fire opposite Shirota so as not to startle her when she woke.

“I am indeed,” the man replied.

“And you know Ryouji?” Misato ventured.

“That’s right; I’m an old friend of his dad. I’d be grateful if we could leave it at that for now, so I hope that’s enough for you to trust me.”

“So, you keep company with tengu?” Misato said, a little suspicious.

“Mm...I guess ya could put it that way,” the masked man said, slowly nodding as he kneeled to help settle Yaeka. His chin lifted into the air as though he were staring into the distance. “Though I wager it’d be more accurate to say I *used* to keep company with him. He ain’t with us no more. Now—we’d better get this young’un’s clothes dry. She’s mighty weak.”

Misato rushed to check her pulse. Her wrist was freezing cold, and he could barely feel her heartbeat. They couldn’t save her just by drying her clothes and warming her up by the fire. Her pulse was so weak that he feared her heart would stop beating at any second.

“This is bad,” he muttered through his teeth, reaching up to rip the hair tie from his heavy, dripping wet locks. Deciding it was an emergency, he quickly pulled out three or four strands of hair.

The tengu-masked man retreated a few steps, standing by Yaeka’s feet and gazing down at them. “Ooh, y’know some real intriguing rituals, don’tcha? They sure left you Narukamis with some old magic.”

Misato’s eyes popped wide. His hands froze in the middle of straightening out the soaked strands. “...I’m surprised you know that,” he murmured in a low voice, angling for more information.

“Hahaha!” The crow-billed tengu laughed heartily, throwing back his head in mirth. “Don’t make such scary faces at me! But I can understand why ya might dislike someone pryin’ into your background. I shouldn’ta said a thing. Forgive me.”

Although he was discomfited by the strange man’s familiarity, Misato kneeled at Yaeka’s side and lifted both of her hands. He slotted her limp fingers together over her solar plexus, then tied her wrists together with his hair.

He was going to perform a requiem ritual. The rite was a way to wake the physical body as it fell into slumber and appease the spirit attempting to leave it. To do so, Misato had to pour his own life force into Yaeka.

I’m not exactly in full health myself though...

The ritual exacted quite a toll on the caster’s stamina. It was risky for Misato to try in his current state, but he couldn’t just let the girl die before his eyes. Steeling himself, he squeezed Yaeka’s bound hands.

“Don’t worry. I’m givin’ you my power through Shirota. Your energy ain’t gonna run out while I’m here,” the masked man said, circling to Misato’s back and touching his shoulder. A sudden flow of warm energy coursed from the point of their contact to the core of his stomach.

“Thank you,” Misato said gently.

“It’s nothin’ at all. Besides, you’re workin’ for my sake as well. I should be thankin’ you.”

Misato could feel the truth in the man’s regretful gratitude. He raised his head, but the crow-billed tengu wasn’t visible from behind him. What he could see was the bonfire and the extent of the sandy beach illuminated by its flames. And further away, among the trees, a stone Shinto gate peeked into the sky.

HER back was wet and cold. Among an indiscernible haze, the cold was the one thing that followed her consciousness at every turn, reminding her of its terrible discomfort. A sea breeze caressed her cheeks, and the roar of the waves echoed nearby. A small fragment of her mind registered that she was lying down outside somewhere, but her thoughts, unable to come to full

awareness, continued to dip in and out of dreams and reality.

"Hey, Yaeka. Yeh know yeh don't have to see me every single day, right? Don'tcha have any friends at school?" her beloved "sister" often asked in concern.

Each time, Yaeka shook her head vehemently and answered, "I wanna be with you, Chii! Who cares about the kids at school? They're boring! Plus, I'm your shrine maiden, right? I can look after your hokora and talk to you for as long as I like!"

Always, Chii's kind expression clouded over, and she uttered the same reply: "I'm happy to hear that, but...even if I can't leave this island, that doesn't mean yeh gotta stay with me forever. Yeh should study lots more, and if yeh go to college, I bet yeh'll find someone yeh get along with. There are all sorts of people from all sorts of places there, y'know? I want yeh to see more of the world and find someone who genuinely understands yeh."

Yaeka was never happy to hear that.

Why can't I just stay with Chii?

She already had someone who understood her. She already had someone she loved. Why couldn't anyone acknowledge that? Not even Chii herself did.

Why, Chii? Why?

Yaeka's wish to protect her sister had been rejected by Chii herself. When all was said and done, that had to be why Yaeka was abandoned to the waves.

Chii... Didn't yeh want me there? Do yeh not wanna be on Itsuki Island anymore? ...Do yeh hate the idea of being stuck with me forever?

A succession of horrifying realizations struck her hard in the chest, sinking into a hollow void at the bottom of her raging heart.

Chii had said it many times before: "I can't leave this island."

Yaeka had always interpreted that to mean Chii wanted her to leave in pursuit of happiness, but maybe that wasn't quite right. Perhaps Chii was the one who wanted to leave.

Who was I kidding? Of course she'd wanna leave. She isn't even from here...

Oji just picked her up outta nowhere and trapped her inside some cave. I bet all she wanted was to go home...

She felt cold to her very core. Freezing. It hurt. She groaned quietly, unable to process where on earth she was or what had happened to her.

She opened her eyes to the tiniest crack. Through a blur, she could see the oppressive night sky, and crimson flames burned in the corner of her vision. Fire crackled in her ears.

“Yaeka? Oh, thank goodness... Don’t move too much, okay? We fell in the water, do you remember?”

A young man’s voice sounded from above. She sensed that he was staring down at her, so she turned her head to him. She tried to lift her arm up to shield her eyes but noticed there was something draped over her. It was a jacket—the one Miyazawa had been wearing earlier.

“Keep your fingers together for a while and don’t let go, okay? Just lay back and relax. You’ll feel a lot warmer soon,” Miyazawa said gently, tapping her hands through the jacket.

His caring tone instinctively moved her to tears. She twisted her head toward the blazing bonfire, gazing into the dancing flames as she wept quietly.

It’s okay... He can’t see me, she told herself, gritting her teeth so as not to make a noise. Lukewarm tears streamed down her frozen cheeks and across her temple.

“It’s okay. You’re not in any danger,” his kind voice soothed her. Its delicacy only rubbed salt in mental wounds as her tense anxiety melted into disappointment. She didn’t even know him, yet not an ounce of blame colored his words in spite of his ensnarement in her problems.

A wrecked sob spilled from her throat, and he squeezed her hands, his lulling pats morphing into a secure hold.

“You’ll be able to move soon. Until then, you don’t need to put on a brave face,” he murmured.

That was the final barrier broken. Tears poured down her face, and she

keened a prolonged cry, breaking down into a mess of howls, whimpers, and hiccups.

Her hands shook, her fingers still laced together. Miyazawa resumed a comforting rhythm against her knuckles, tapping gently.

I'm sorry, Chii... I'm so sorry. I couldn't save yeh. Or—no. Didn't yeh want me to save yeh? Talk to me, Chii...

Everyone told Yaeka to leave the island. They all told her to see the world, meet new people, and forget about her precious sister. They all acted like her relationship with Chii was wrong, outdated, forced on her. That if she were freed from her role as shrine maiden, she would be able to find a “true,” “normal” happiness that was socially acceptable.

It upset her to no end. It hurt to be told that loving and caring about someone was wrong. And, more than anything, she was terrified that if she went to college like everyone demanded she do, she would forget about Chii and prove them all right.

But if Chii didn't want the same thing as me, maybe I was wrong. Maybe everyone else was right.

An indescribable, miserable emptiness swallowed her from the inside out.

“That must've been really scary. But you're okay now, all right?” Miyazawa continued to console her despite having no idea what was going on in her life.

An endless, frustrated sadness that could only have been contained by physically restraining her heart inundated her. Her despair shook into sobs, overtaking her without mercy.

She cried and cried and cried and cried until she could cry no more. All the world was reduced to three things: her own body hot with tears, her ragged breathing, and the gentle rhythm of Miyazawa's hand.

In the midst of those three things, she let go of consciousness once more.

RYOUJI managed to climb back down the cliff solely thanks to his physical endurance and training. The decision was not by any means a wise one, but

fortunately, the section of rock he'd surmised was least treacherous was truly like a flight of steps intended for human use. On a closer look, each level seemed to have been carved at a regular interval, and hammered into the stone were notches designed to be gripped.

Once he somehow navigated the descent in the dark and amid the wrathful storm, he was faced with an opening in the rock face that led to a cave tinged by a faint orange hue from within. He lowered himself onto a thin strip of stone that only just surmounted the ever-rising sea level. The ridge was so precarious that he couldn't exactly claim he was on solid ground. He could see a tide pool within the cavern and a sandy rock floor further inside.

The cave wasn't all too deep. The furthest point was marked by a tiered rock with a tiny hokora atop it. The hazy glow was coming from the naked light bulb hanging from the miniature shrine's eaves. It likely housed a god that had drifted to the island's shore.

Either way, it was the perfect place to wait the storm out. He had to swim across the tide pool to reach the inner cave, but he couldn't get any wetter than he already was. And while Ryouji wasn't a strong swimmer, he still had his trusty life vest.

I bet a load a things drift to this place. I did, anyway.

The pool at his feet gently swirled. The lapping waves refracted the vague orange light in various directions, causing it to squirm like a living creature. The tide appeared to be streaming into the pool from more than one location.

"Hyah!" He steeled himself and jumped into the water. Luckily, his progress to the other side took him far less time than he expected, propelled as he was by the tide. The bulb was dim and its illumination didn't reach far, though the reflection off the damp walls of the grotto was surprisingly bright. Even so, the pool resembled a black hole sinking into the floor of the cave, and the uneven walls cast long, murky shadows across the water. He couldn't discern the exact sources of the shadows without looking very closely.

Thus, it was no wonder that Ryouji did not spy the human-shaped gloom lurking at the base of the rock that pedestaled the hokora until his arrival on the other side.

“Ack! Hey... There’s a woman here!”

No—a girl was more accurate. She looked to be in her midteens and was wearing skinny jeans and a flannel shirt. She lay on the sand-coated stone. Perhaps she’d been washed ashore as he had, then wandered into the cavern and collapsed.

“Hey, are you okay? Hey!” He rolled the girl over and checked her breathing.

She wasn’t.

He had just tilted her head to open her airway and placed his hands over her chest to start CPR when her eyes snapped open. Ryouji gasped in relief and was about to welcome her back, but...

Her chest was not moving.

“Mmh...? Who’re you?” she asked.

He took a cautious step back from the breathless, pulseless girl.

Crap... I ain’t wearin’ sunglasses, remember? His tengu eyes revealed both the worlds of the living and the dead without distinction. The girl was likely undetectable to the average person or any electrical equipment.

“Oh, I just got a li’l lost, that’s all. Who’re you? What’re you doing here?” Ryouji asked, realizing they were rather stupid questions as he said them. He couldn’t think of anything better to say, however, and regardless needed permission to spend the night in the cave; he had nowhere else. Given the situation, his best bet was to remain on calm, friendly terms with the spirit, no matter what she was.

“I live here,” the girl replied in a soft tone, pointing at the hokora above her with a smile. “What about yeh? Did yeh get washed ashore?”

“Ooh, I see.” He nodded. “Sorry to come rollin’ in while you’re tryna rest. Yup—I got into some trouble on the water and the waves abandoned me here. It’s a real nasty storm out there, y’know. Would ya mind if I stayed the night?”

“Makes no difference to me.” She smiled again. “But...” She timidly peered over his shoulder, staring across the black, swirling pool. On the far side, a spire of rock projected above the cave entrance. It was cordoned off by a shimenawa,

and the pure-white zigzags of paper flapped in the gale. “I’m not sure what Oji would have to say about it,” she said, focusing on the rock. It sounded like “Oji” was of higher rank than the girl.

“Oji? Is he out there?” Ryouji raised an eyebrow, tracking the girl’s gaze to the outcrop. He couldn’t see anything there.

“Aye... The weather isn’t right, and he probably made me go to sleep, too. I could hear Yaeka’s voice but couldn’t do anything,” she said sadly, her brow wrinkling. The sudden storm that had enveloped the island appeared to have had an effect on her mind.

“What’s your name? Are you the god of this hokora?” Ryouji asked. “Oh—and sorry ‘bout this. I’m gonna freeze to death if I don’t get outta these wet clothes.” He didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, but he’d end up a spirit himself if he didn’t take them off.

The girl simply gave him an amused smile, granting him permission. “My name’s Chii. I’m the deity here, aye, but I used to be a human. So, what’s yer name? Where do yeh come from?”

Chii, he silently mouthed to himself. The name reminded him of Shirota; it sounded like someone had given her a nickname and it had stuck. There was no way Chii was her real name when she was still alive.

“I’m Ryouji Karino. I live in the mountains near a place called Tomoe,” he explained casually while peeling off his waterlogged clothes. “D’ya remember much ‘bout the outside world, Chii?”

“Ryouji Karino...” the girl repeated to herself quietly. She smiled, apparently pleased to have someone to talk to. “Nah, not really. I only remember that people used to call me Chii before I came here. Oji told me that a river current brought me here.”

“Ah.” Ryouji nodded. He smoothed back his hair in an attempt to squeeze out some of the water, his usual waxy spikes completely flattened. The sensation of seawater plastering hair to his forehead and neck was highly unpleasant.

“What’s your role, usually?” he asked.

He could see that the god’s hokora was very well maintained, as if someone

visited on a regular basis to place offerings at its foot. The islanders' continued practice of enshrining drowned corpses that washed ashore was quite something in the modern day, though Ryouji wasn't in a place to judge; he was only a passerby, after all. The most he would do was nose around a little in their records via the Abnormal Disaster Unit—if he made it out alive, that was.

"Oh, I call fish to the island and calm the waves—things like that. Usually, I can take care of the water by myself, but...’cause Oji made the storm, I can't do anything about it," Chii said, casting a worried glance out to sea.

The night was too dark to see whether it was still raining, although the paper hanging from the shimenawa around Oji's rock was still flapping wildly in the wind.

She was effectively the god Ebisu—a deity whose powers included summoning fish. If the Kamiki Islanders still performed rituals the old-fashioned way, Ryouji was witnessing a piece of living history. He didn't think it right to trap a young girl in a cave after her death however.

Following the girl's eyes outside, something occurred to him. "So this Oji guy is the one whippin' up that crazy-ass storm?"

Chii had given Ryouji permission to drape his thoroughly wrung-out clothes—blasphemously—on her hokora. He laid them out while glaring at the rock jutting from the sea, reflecting the dim light of the bulb. He leaned against a nearby boulder to remove his life vest and shoes, wanting to dry them out as much as he could. It was highly likely the spirit that had attacked him had been trying to lead him to that very cave. In which case, the probability of a search party coming to rescue him was low. Therefore, best to get his life vest and shoes back to a functional moisture as soon as possible.

"I came to Kamiki Island on a fishing trip, y'know? Then this huge wave suddenly jumped up and swept me away," he sighed. "It was still super calm and quiet at that point in the evening, so it made no freakin' sense. D'ya know why this Oji is breakin' havoc today?" Crouching in nothing more than a pair of underpants, he glowered at the spire.

Chii sat down next to him, putting her right hand to her chin. She studied the ground in thought and said, "Not really. I'm living here 'cause Oji brought me

here, and I can't go against his will. Seriously—normally, I know exactly what the sea and sky are doing around here, but today's been one huge blind spot. Then, earlier, I thought I heard Yaeka's voice, but...I got way, way too sleepy to do anything about it. I feel like I dreamed about saving someone, but... Ugh, I really hope Yaeka didn't do anything reckless."

"So...who's Yaeka, by the way? Your friend?" Ryouji asked as Chii's brow creased in concern.

"Aye," she replied, then sighed. "Well, she's more like a li'l sister than a pal. She was born a few months before I came here, and now she's basically the same age as me. She's my shrine maiden, y'see. For as long as she's alive, I'll stay in this cave and watch over the island she lives on. She looks after my hokora and comes by to visit almost every day."

Shrine maidens were unmarried women who served a particular god and sought to soothe and appease them—yet another very traditional role that not many places retained in the modern age.

They sure are diligent with tradition on this island, huh?

In an era that prioritized individual needs over the community's, no praise or appreciation was spared for customs or faiths that bound people the moment they were born. Even so, they had survived on Kamiki Island. If the accompanying rituals required the use of incantations, the islanders involved were clearly deeply religious.

"I always tell her she doesn't have to come though," Chii said with a bitter smile, noting Ryouji's unsure expression. "Apparently there aren't any other kids her age on the island. Sure, she cares 'bout me a lot, but I really think she could find human friends if she studied and went off to college far away from here. I thought...I thought I was just someone she could talk to 'til then."

"So you were plannin' ahead, huh? But..." His eyebrows furrowed in pity. "Y'know what'll happen if she leaves, right? No one will attend to ya, you'll get weaker, and it'll be pretty rough goin'."

When Chii spoke of her shrine maiden, her kind eyes were full of love and affection—the eyes of an older sister who had been looking out for the younger ever since her sibling was little. Chii's outlook was that of a contemporary

Japanese citizen, at odds with the rituals that maintained her existence.

When the shrine maiden left the island, the god's hokora would fall into disrepair. And without anyone to pray to her, faith in the area would decline and Chii's divine powers weaken. Regardless of whether the girl desired such abilities, she would be forgotten, and her descent from godhood to ghost at sea would not be a pleasant affair. Ryouji worried that she didn't entirely understand the consequences of freeing her shrine maiden.

"That's true. Thanks, mister. Yeh know a lot 'bout this stuff," Chii commented with a smile, her eyes widening in pleasant surprise.

"Well, it is my job to know 'bout this stuff."

"Your *job*?" Her eyebrows shot up her forehead. "I had no idea that was a thing!"

"It sure is. I used to work in Kanto, and now I'm chillin' in the mountains of Tomoe as a Shugendo—...uh...a medium, basically. Back in the day, I used to have a few nicknames: Tengu Eyes, All-Seeing Ryou... But I ain't so well known 'round these parts."

He quickly recognized there was no point in giving his usual sales pitch to a spirit, yet she *was* a god. Maybe she would lend him her powers if something bad ever happened and he left a message through her shrine maiden. So he proudly proclaimed his titles nevertheless.

"Tengu Eyes... Ryou..." Chii repeated to herself, blinking. Then she looked down again with a sad, bashful smile. "I'll be okay. I might get a li'l lonely, but that's better than keeping Yaeka trapped here. And even if she *did* stay here, it's not like it'd be the same with her," she murmured, her gaze flitting to the dark distance beyond the cavern.

"The same...?" he questioned. Perhaps she was referring to the fact that she would never age whereas Yaeka would.

"Oh, sorry," Chii said in sudden realization, shaking her head. "Umm, sometimes...I get confused. I mix up my feelings for Yaeka with my feelings for..." She paused. "Well, I think I used to be somebody's older sister a long time ago, too, so I get her mixed up with them. Does that sound weird?" She hung

her head, ashamed.

“Nah,” he replied lightly.

So she’d looked after a younger sibling during her human lifetime as well. Those lingering emotions in her heart post death had combined perfectly with her care for her shrine maiden, establishing her as a protective, empathetic god.

Either way, I shouldn’t be stickin’ my beak in her business for no reason. I’m tryna work out what this “Oji” god really is, but...damn it. If Misato were here, I bet he’d know. Misato might have been a harebrained guy without any flair for surviving in the wild, but the spiritual knowledge inside his head was on another level. Typically, when Ryouji told Misato the bare bones of a case, he could easily come up with a solid theory.

“Either way, this sucks for real,” Ryouji said with a gruff sigh. “I have no idea why some sea monster would have a grudge against me.”

The cave protected him from the raging wind and rain, but it was late September, and he was wearing only underpants. He did some more stretching and light exercises to try to keep warm as he pondered the freak wave that had surged from the serene sea and snatched him away. Stormy weather was frightening enough on its own, let alone when it menaced him specifically. If Oji, the god of the island, was the one behind the tsunami, what the hell could he want with Ryouji?

“There’s a special king tide tonight. Maybe that has something to do with it,” Chii suggested as Ryouji tilted his head in bewilderment.

“A *special* king tide?”

“Aye. Apparently the same thing happened when I came here years ago,” she said, pointing to herself. “Once a year, every year, the tide reaches its highest level, then its lowest. That’s the only day when water spills into the entrance of the cave and fills the pool inside. That’s where the waves put the new god.”

Ryouji realized then that the rocks he’d washed up on were one of the entry points for the open sea into the tide pool. At its annual zenith, the tide engulfed them, surmounting their barrier such that the water could deposit a drifting

body in the cave. When the tide ebbed, the body left behind became a god, and Oji was likely the deity that welcomed them.

"So, if Oji was the one who snatched me...what does that actually mean?"

That Oji's rock was so close by was probably no coincidence. *But...why me?*

If a recently deceased person was usually chosen to be the next god, Ryouji couldn't comprehend why he would be targeted in particular—especially when there was already a god right in front of his eyes stationed on the island. Maybe Oji needed to contact a medium and had decided to invite Ryouji to his territory using the most discourteous method... If that was so, it was high time he showed himself.

Humming to himself in thought, Ryouji picked up his shoes and shook them upside down to dispel the water. He noticed the girl staring up at him.

"Hey, what's that look for...?" he asked.

She peered at him searchingly, wholly fixated on his face.

He stiffened, unsettled by the abrupt change in her disposition; her stare was long, hard, inescapable. Come to think of it, he didn't have the sunglasses that he always wore, and his natural eyes were on display. He had introduced himself as Tengu Eyes, so of course she would be interested in the strange, silvery green sheen of his irises.

Even so, she's givin' me a real hard look just for somethin' like that...

He could even glimpse his own unsure green gaze in the reflection of her obsidian, unblinking eyes.

She slowly opened her mouth. "Hey..."

"What?" His voice bounced off the walls of the humid cavern.

Swshhhh, swirled the pool incessantly, its quiet disturbance filling the air. The short yet notable pause between her words registered in Ryouji's mind as nervous hesitation.

"I, um...I barely remember anything from before I came here," she began. "But y'know, there was one other thing apart from my name I remembered." She intently eyed Ryouji's strange irises with something akin to recognition. "I

used to have a little brother. He was a special kid, and that made things pretty difficult for him. That's why I promised I'd always protect him."

Ryouji's stomach churned. The tone of her voice touched something deep within his mind. He was completely silent as he awaited Chii's next words.

"I don't remember his name, but...I always used to call him Ryou."

"It's okay, Ryou. Yer big sis will protect yeh, 'kay?" The voice that replayed in his head.

She can't be.

He was doubtful, yet there was no stopping the way his heart hammered in anticipation. Chii seemed to be around sixteen or seventeen years old. She had gentle, kind features and striking, slightly upturned eyes.

Ryouji did not recognize her. Yet...

"...No way..." he gasped, suddenly struggling for air. "Are...are you my sister?"

His sneakers fell from his grip, thunking into the damp sand.

Chapter 4: The Two Tengu

“HMM... Where should I start?” said the sturdy, tengu-masked man as he kneeled beside the bonfire and tended to it with a long branch.

Misato sat close enough to Yaeka that he could periodically check her pulse. She had worn herself out from crying so hard, yet the soul-soothing ritual was working well, and her condition had stabilized. He’d also used an incantation to dry her clothes, so her life was not in any danger for the time being.

“First of all, could I ask your name?” he suggested. Shirota had called the man Gyoukai, and that was a little too vague for Misato’s liking.

“Oh!” the masked man exclaimed in surprise. “Good thinkin’!” He roared with laughter. “I’m Gyoukai-bo of Mount Kamiki. I’m an ol’ tengu who lives at the summit of this island. I knew Ryouji through his dad, so he’s basically an old friend o’ mine. I’m one of the people who’s clued him in on all sortsa stuff since he was a li’l kid. My spiritual counterpart is up to all manner o’ mischief, so I descended the mountain to settle him down, y’know?”

“Ah.” Misato nodded in acknowledgment. Gyoukai was evidently one of the “old fogies desperate to stuff Ryouji’s brain with all the knowledge he’d need in life.” Furthermore, his suspicion that Gyoukai was the tengu from the haunted shrine Yaeka had told him about was all but confirmed. Although tengu were generally a type of Buddhist spirit, Gyoukai could reside in the Shintoist shrine as a remnant from the days of Shinto-Buddhist syncretism preceding the Meiji era.

“So, if Oji’s a part of you...did he target Ryouji because you knew him?” Misato asked.

The tengu seemed to be the original deity from which the god of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine was born. The name “Oji” might indicate an iteration of Shiotsuchinooji that had been transferred from Shiogama Shrine or another Shirahige Shrine, but Misato had developed another theory since Yaeka

informed him that Oji's vessel was a large, natural rock. There had been several other instances of a shrine borrowing the name of a more famous being to bring favor upon their jurisdiction even though the enshrined deity was none other than the extant local mountain god.

It was no wonder that communication between the dutifully worshipped deity and his forgotten origin was poor. Misato had expected the spirit poking his nose into their situation to be a full-fledged, monstrous tengu, however, which didn't appear to be the case. Kneeling on the sand, he kept a close, watchful eye on the man—who suddenly put a hand on the mask that covered his face.

"Nah, he doesn't seem to know Ryouji's an acquaintance o' mine. Right—now it's your turn," he said with an impish smile, his eyes settling on Misato's.

As he lifted the mask, the rugged face that emerged was that of a friendly man in the prime of his life. He had sharp, masculine features that bore no malice in the illuminating crimson of the fire.

Even so, Misato's brow furrowed. Judging by what the tengu-man said before, he already knew Misato's identity.

"Hahaha!" The spirit loosed a belly laugh. "D'ya really despise talkin' about yourself that much?! What's so awful 'bout your past? It might be misleadin' to say you should be proud of it, but y'ain't at any fault! You're a brave fighter with a real heroic tale to tell!"

The wrinkle between Misato's eyebrows deepened. Gyoukai had brought up his painful history as if it were no big deal. Eventually, he opened his lips and forced out in a strained voice, "I don't particularly want any heroic tales to tell. My name's Misato Miyazawa. And as I believe you're already aware, I was born to the Narukami clan in Izumo."

"That's all you're gonna give me? Awwh." Gyoukai deflated in disappointment. Misato realized then how Ryouji had turned out the way he did; he could just picture Gyoukai bantering with Ryouji as a child. He wasn't quite sure how to express the resemblance, but the way they enthusiastically latched onto certain details was very similar.

"So, ya don't introduce yourself as the Narukami Snake Eater? You're no fun!"

Did he really think I would?!

Misato could infer that Ryouji's loud fashion sense came from his father, who apparently wore aloha shirts all year round. But it was Gyoukai's influence he could easily detect in the way Ryouji treated anything bright, weird, and garish as completely normal. Or perhaps every tengu was full of that same cheerful energy.

Well, I guess tengu are usually depicted reciting mantras in mountain caves, playing musical instruments and dancing around... I suppose it's no wonder they're the playful sort.

"No. I feel no attachment to that nickname," Misato replied, the epitome of the word "blunt."

"I getcha, I getcha." Gyoukai nodded, his cheer evidently unharmed by Misato's briskness. "Besides, you're more like a snake spirit yourself than a snake 'eater,' ain'tcha? The Narukamis are descended from a dragon god, so your innate aura is pretty darn compatible with snakes. His name's Shirota, right? I appreciate that he's similar to ya, but it's mighty unusual for such a big, powerful spirit to emerge in the modern age. You've gotta be a pretty interestin' fella," he mused, glancing at where Shirota lay calmly on the other side of the bonfire.

He knew a lot. Not just about Misato, but also the genesis of the Narukami clan itself—although he still spoke about their past like it was nothing.

Misato's voice clogged in his throat in shock. He was being treated like something other than human by a *tengu*.

Gyoukai, meanwhile, paid Misato no mind as he rounded his back in front of the fire and continued to prod at the blaze. "Yeah, a real interestin' fella," he confirmed. "But it's good to be interestin'. Anyway—I ain't sure what to tell ya, so how much d'ya know about us tengu already?"

The fire snapped and hissed as it burst through the driftwood. The change of subject eased Misato's anger, and his thoughts turned instead to the best way to answer Gyoukai's question. He knew plenty of stories about tengu, but his knowledge wasn't so in-depth that he could summarize the category of spirit with just a few sentences.

"Well, I guess *tengu* is a loaded word for a lotta different types o' spirits, huh?" Gyoukai piped up again. "Big, humanoid *tengu* like us are variants who used to be human—for the most part, anyway. But ya already knew that, right?"

"Yeah." Misato nodded.

At the end of their ascetic training, some Shugendo monks strayed from the path of enlightenment to become buddhas and fell into the *tengu* world—a limbo outside the six realms of reincarnation. Most variants were born thus, and some chose to become a *tengu* of their own will. No matter their route to that existence, however, the fact remained that they were once people who practiced asceticism, then discarded their humanity in return for spiritual power.

"Back when I was human, I was part of a group called the Murakamis," Gyoukai explained. "I made a blunder in a battle—a battle you'd now call the Onin War. I was on a sinkin' ship and got hit by an arrow before slippin' into the sea. The current washed me up on this here beach, where the people welcomed me as a new god, *Ikitsukigami*. They tossed me onto the mountain, and my predecessor—Gyoukai-bo—accepted me with open arms. He picked me up and schooled me on how to use *tengu* powers. Eventually, I ended up inheritin' his name and powers myself, and I've been here ever since." He waved the wooden, handcrafted *tengu* mask in his right hand.

Misato had braced himself for a long, long story—Gyoukai was old and liked to talk—but his conclusion was surprisingly forthcoming. Misato had heard the name Murakami in the context of the Inland Sea before: the Murakami Suigun—pirates who were more akin to a navy than bandits. Kamiki Island was a long way from their historic base, so Gyoukai's body must have ridden the current directly from the battlefield. And despite his dress and injuries, the people of the island hailed him as a god named *Ikitsukigami* and abandoned him to the mountains.

Ikitsukigami, huh...? Not Itsukigami...?

While Misato had surmised that the meaning of "Itsukigami" was "settler god," the origin of the name was apparently the word "*ikitsuku*" instead—to

arrive and live. At any rate, the islanders' custom of deifying the people who washed ashore had not changed.

Another part of Gyoukai's story stood out to him. "I didn't know a tengu's name and powers could be inherited."

"You bet they can. Apparently, at other mountain shrines, they pick one of the ascetics that attend it to receive the powers. But this island's special, y'know?" Gyoukai grinned, then donned his crow-billed mask again. "Anyway, that's enough 'bout me! You wanna know about, uh... Yeah, about Ryouji's dad! He's another real old tengu, and we both have wings that let us fly freely between the physical world and the spirit realm. I was pretty close with Sougen —oh, that's his name. He picked up Ryouji right around when he came to visit me out here, y'know. I went east a few times and saw Ryouji there, but Oji ain't ever met him. I mean, I don't think Oji knows any of my chums."

Misato was interested in why Kamiki Island was "special" from a work point of view, but he was sure he could ask more about it when he had time. "I see." He nodded, then moved on to the most important question weighing on his mind: "Then...why on earth did Oji take Ryouji?"

"Hmmm," Gyoukai thrummed gruffly, crossing his burly arms. The white fabric of his shirt—which was notably *not* part of a Shugendo monk's garb and more like a cheap buy from a fast fashion chain—stretched taut over his bulging muscles and left little to the imagination. The incongruity between his clothing and his glossy, lacquer-like tengu mask was awfully stark. The absurd image of him going to the store to purchase his T-shirt and jeans entered Misato's head; did he really just pay for it like a normal person? Misato couldn't help but wonder. Incidentally, the tengu was also wearing flip-flops.

"In broad terms, I'd say it's 'cause he's feelin' more panicked now than ever—but on a smaller scale, if you're askin' why Ryouji *specifically*... That's probably 'cause he traced a familial connection to summon a more powerful Itsukigami than the current one."

Misato paused, cocking his head slightly in confusion; he couldn't work out what Gyoukai meant. Of course, he needed to know why Oji was panicking—but one phrase had caught his attention above all else.

A...familial connection? To whom?

Gyoukai quickly recognized the bewilderment rampant on Misato's face. He nodded, his voice mixed with a sigh. "The current Itsukigami is Chinatsu Karino. She was Ryouji's sister—the one that drowned when they both fell in that river."

As if roused by those very words, Yaeka groaned a little, stirring at Misato's side.

"INDEED—that girl there is your biological sister. I managed to haul you here using your shared blood, and I put your sister to sleep so as not to be disturbed by the shrine maiden—but my plan appears to have backfired. To think you would still remember that promise more than ten years after you forgot your own name..." A low, coarse voice rumbled through the cave like thunder.

Ryouji stopped dazedly staring at Chinatsu, the sister he'd lost ten years before, and whipped around to the sea. "So, you're that Oji bastard?" he snarled, although the god was nowhere to be seen.

In all honesty, Ryouji's memory of Chinatsu's face was hazy at best—even after seeing her in person. No emotional, overwhelming flood of memories rushed back to him. That said, he had a strange conviction that the girl was most definitely Chinatsu Karino.

In which case, Ryouji would not stand for what had been done to them.

"You've got some nerve, takin' someone's sister and trappin' her in a place like this!" he barked, letting his fury take hold.

It was cruel—even if she was being cared for. Since first discovering he'd had a sister, Ryouji had assumed she resided in the realm of the dead in eternal peace—not frozen in time and imprisoned in some cave.

The tense gloom seemed to swell in response. Then, directly in front of him, the crimson face of a long-nosed tengu materialized in suddenly appeared in the air.

"Then you may take her place. She's only here because she was protecting

you, after all.”

Oji’s words rendered Ryouji silent. His eyes widened.

Branch-like arms emerged from the darkness just below the tengu’s face, grasping for him with all ten fingers outstretched.

“You were taken at the upper reaches of a muddy river, and she shielded you and was swept away in your stead. You survived, drifted to the riverbank, and grew to adulthood. You extended your life on time borrowed from your sister. Thus it’s only fitting that you take her place now.”

Confronted with the truth, Ryouji fully froze, unable to process what was happening as Oji’s inhuman hands stifled his nose and mouth. Frosty cold seawater engulfed his face, obstructing his airways. By the time his instincts kicked in, his limbs refused to move. Oji had bound them with a mystical force.

A thin, old man in a bright red, long-nosed tengu mask appeared, his pure-white hair disheveled. Tall, single-tooth geta supported his feet. His rib cage was visible through the low, open neck of his kimono.

“Why?!” Chinatsu screamed, snapping out of her frozen terror and grabbing onto Oji’s arm as if to rip him away. “Why am I not good enough?! Let go of that man! Let go of Ryou!”

Chii...! Ryouji gave a choked gasp, automatically opening his mouth to try to stop her. Water rushed past his lips, and he slammed his jaw shut again in panic.

Oji leveled a disgruntled glare at Chinatsu, then mercilessly kicked her in the stomach with his tall geta, sending her flying. A short scream pierced the air as her dainty figure crashed backward into a nearby rock and crumpled to the ground.

“Because you haven’t the power, obviously!” Oji’s coarse, grating voice echoed through the cave with a timbre that resembled tumbling stone and a tiger’s roar. *“The island will perish at this rate. People leave, the houses rot, the fields grow wild, and the land returns to nothing. The parishioners meant to protect me will become extinct! This island provides not for its people, and that’s because it lacks in fortune. You and I are to bring prosperity to the island, yet*

you are not good enough! Not good enough at all!"

Says you, Ryouji silently spat, his face contorting under the onslaught of the unpleasant, ringing voice.

Neither he nor his sister existed for the prosperity of an island, although Chinatsu cared deeply for her shrine maiden. She saw her younger brother in Yaeka—saw Ryouji.

"S...So what...?!" She lifted herself to her elbows and crawled toward Oji along the sand. "Ryou...has nothing to do with that...!"

Oji didn't even look at her; he was too busy trying to drown Ryouji.

"I was only trying to protect him! Don't drag him into this 'cause of yer own issues! Stop it!" The petite girl scrambled toward them, hauling herself to her feet. Her legs were straight and sticklike like a child's, and her fingertips tiny where they gripped Oji's white kimono.

Damn it! A whirlwind of emotion devastated Ryouji from within. Was it frustration? Sadness? Misery? He didn't know, yet it made him want to lash out and curl up on the floor with his head in his hands all at once.

His older sister had been an adult.

While his recollection of her was no more than a vague silhouette, he remembered that they had been seven years apart in age. It was a significant gap, as he was in elementary school when Chinatsu was a high schooler. In his mind, she had been an adult.

But as his eyes frantically darted downward, he saw a mere child clutching Oji's kimono.

After sixteen years, Ryouji had long surpassed his sister in age. He'd overtaken her and become an adult at the expense of a sixteen-year-old's life.

Katsuki... How the hell did ya process this crap?

Ryouji's eyes closed, and floating behind them was Katsuki's face when he made his oath, Yasaka Shrine standing tall in the background.

Katsuki had said their circumstances were all his fault. Yet, while witnessing before his very eyes the magnitude of Misato's loss and recognizing the

incurable wounds Misato bore as a result of protecting him, Katsuki had managed to make peace with his guilt by pledging to smile so long as Misato smiled. Ryouji couldn't fathom how that spoiled brat had sorted through his emotions.

Misato was still alive and warm to the touch, if not fully human. His strange existence, however, was also due to indulging a clingy little brother who demanded love and attention.

"I'll fix it!" Chinatsu insisted. "Me and Yaeka will fix the island somehow! Please, just don't touch Ryou!"

Hey, no! Stop coverin' for me already!

He couldn't stop his lips from parting as he struggled for breath. A gush of salty water poured into his mouth. His chest squeezed, demanding a cough, but Oji was not so forgiving. The sea spilled into his lungs.

Wearing a sad smile, Misato had told Katsuki the burden wasn't his to bear. Did that really make Katsuki feel any better? Had Ryouji been in Katsuki's place, would it have made him feel better?

Katsuki's forlorn words and pained expression that day replayed in his head, illuminated in early summer sunlight: "No, it never could. It would be unfair to say there's nothing I could've done and just forget about it. What he lost... He can never get it back."

He was right—she can never get back what she lost. No matter what I do now, my sister will never come back to life.

Chinatsu was fighting for him. She was trying to be his shield. Even then, after all that time, she was trying to protect him. But...how could he let her?

"If you now become Itsukigami, your sister will be freed," Oji rumbled thunderously. The base of Ryouji's head went numb. He was drowning. "Surrender yourself to me. With your spiritual power, you can become an Itsukigami like no other!"

Sorry... I'm sorry, Chii. It's all my fault.

Tears welled on Ryouji's eyelashes—tears he thought had dried up years

before. He couldn't remember the last time he cried.

One painted a long, heavy streak down his cheek.

THE next time Yaeka opened her eyes, her clothes were completely dry, and she was comfortably warm. The cozy crackling of a fire soothed her ears; she could feel its heat on her left cheek. The sky was as dark as ever, but the light of the dancing flames illuminated the branches above in a warm orange.

"Hey there. Awake now, are ya?" A throaty voice that clearly did not belong to Miyazawa sounded from the other side of the bonfire.

Yaeka leaned forward, her eyes widening as she peered through the translucent flames. She saw a man wearing a bizarre mask with huge, goggling eyes and a black beak. The pure-white, painted eyes stood out from the black mask and seemed to pierce through the gloom. The beak was no less frightening as its glossy texture reflected the crimson of the fire.

"Wh-Wh-Who are yeh?!" She scrambled to sit up, thrusting her hands to the sand at her sides. At the same time, something around her wrists snapped; apparently they'd been bound. Her body felt amazingly light for having been on the verge of drowning in the night sea—did that really happen?—and she automatically brought her wrists up to her face to inspect them.

"Oh, sorry!" blurted Miyazawa in panic beside her. "That was my hair, but, um...it's okay!"

Although she was having trouble figuring out what exactly he meant by "it's okay," she could surmise, even with her limited knowledge of such things, that he'd performed some sort of ritual on her. That was most likely why she felt so light.

Her brow furrowed. She was aware that she should probably thank Miyazawa, but gratitude seemed awkward when she could barely understand what was going on in the first place.

In the end, the masked man let out an amused chortle before she could open her mouth. "There ain't many people out there who could have dried your clothes with the flames of Acala, girl! You'd better count yourself lucky! What a

valuable experience!"

Well, Yaeka had not been conscious while he dried them, and she certainly didn't feel as though anything special had happened to her—so she wasn't sure how to reply. Eventually, she simply wrencheded her mouth shut.

"No, no, it doesn't matter! Yaeka, please don't worry about any of that!" Miyazawa dismissed the man with flapping hands and an awkward smile. In that moment, he gave off the same timid, flippant air that made her initially think he was a college student.

He had almost definitely saved her life though. She needed to thank him and apologize for how rudely she'd treated him, but she was terrible at expressing her feelings to *anyone*. To convey her thanks without shriveling up inside was going to be very difficult.

"D-Doesn't bother me!" she ended up responding in a huff, pouting. Miyazawa chuckled. Unable to bear the embarrassment, she raised her voice to the big, masked man in an attempt to divert attention from herself. "Who the hell are yeh, anyway?! And where are we...?"

She slowly looked around to see a small beach cluttered by random debris that had drifted ashore. She struggled to place herself amid the darkness of their surrounds.

Was there a beach as tiny as this one...?

If they were on Kamiki Island, there were only so many places they could be. It wasn't as if there were hundreds of beaches on the small island. She swiveled her head again, studying the ancient-looking, dilapidated stone gate that poked over the lush trees, its surface covered in moss.

"Oh, right..."

This is the haunted shrine at the back of the island...!

So, who was the suspicious man in front of her?

The man straightened, folded his arms, and nodded cheerfully as though he'd noticed her dubious stare. "Hahaha!" he guffawed. "Looks like ya don't know me, huh? I'm Gyoukai-bo of Mount Kamiki, and I live on the summit of this here

mountain."

"He's the tengu you told me about," Miyazawa whispered in her ear.

"Huh?!" she couldn't help but squawk. *He's real?!*

Oji and Chii were real, so perhaps she should have expected the truth of the tengu's existence, yet she hadn't even considered the possibility until that very moment. She stared at the man in shock. His mask didn't portray the popular depiction of tengu that she was familiar with, although it did feature the tiny Shugendo monk hat she'd seen before.

"There used to be a shrine on the summit, and people used to call me the god of Mount Kamiki, but..." The tengu sighed. "A while after we entered the era y'all call the Edo period, Shirahige Shrine got built on the opposite side of the island, and all the islanders forgot 'bout li'l old me! Oji might've stemmed from me, but he's the one the people give their faith and ask for favor. As they should!" Gyoukai-bo seemed to bear no resentment for being forgotten and cast aside, simply laughing as if his obscurity made no difference.

The tasteless baseball jacket Miyazawa had been wearing was draped over her knees, having slid down her torso when she sat up. He was likely cold in only a thin cotton shirt, but he showed no sign of discomfort as he kneeled on the sand with a very straight back, his posture formal.

"So..." he broached, while Yaeka stared, speechless. "What reason would there be for the old man at Shirahige Shrine to disregard custom and summon a new *Ikitsukigami*? You said he's feeling panicked, but...why?"

Ikitsukigami? What's that? Yaeka had never heard the word before. Yet Miyazawa spoke as though he knew exactly what was going on—to a huge man calling himself a tengu, no less. Just who was Miyazawa? Her head swam with questions, and her gaze fell to where his hair still lingered around her wrists.

Would yeh really learn a ritual like this just 'cause there are priests in yer family...? I don't think that's normal, anyway.

"Well, it must seem like it came outta nowhere to you two, eh?" Gyoukai-bo hummed. "But, to tell ya the truth, he's been tryin' it these past ten years—started just a few years after the current *Ikitsukigami* arrived."

"He's...been trying to summon Ryouji to this island for ten years?" repeated Miyazawa in a low, shaken voice. His cold tone surprised Yaeka somewhat but was understandable given that his friend had been taken. Of course he would be angry.

The tengu remained unperturbed by Miyazawa's fury, however, and casually shrugged his shoulders. "Nah, not just Ryouji—*anyone* with a connection to Kamiki Island. He tugged at all the ties he could find, searchin' for someone powerful. Again and again and again..."

"Wait, wait," Yaeka interrupted. There were hundreds of questions she wanted to ask and plenty of answers she needed to know. But one question was foremost in her mind: "Why?"

Gyoukai-bo turned from Miyazawa to face her instead.

Yaeka would likely hesitate if anyone asked her whether she was proud to be a shrine maiden. She couldn't claim that she'd ever seriously considered the island's past or future. But Chii—her Itsukigami—was an honest, sincere, and loving guardian deity. In spite of those qualities, the tengu's manner of speech almost suggested that Chii wasn't good enough.

She's the one who got dragged here without any say in the matter! Don't they realize she probably wants to get outta this place, too? But even then, she's been so kind to me! She cares about the island! How could she not be enough?!

The whole affair was so painfully self-centered.

Yaeka's fists shook with rage, her knuckles paling around the gaudy baseball jacket on her lap. She was the one who forced Chii to stay—a fact she had not long awakened to. But she cared about Chii and was on Chii's side, and the guilt that lurked within her merely fanned the flames of her anger.

"Our current Itsukigami ain't particularly weak or anythin', I promise ya. In fact, she's pretty strong compared to the other gods we've had in recent generations. Even so...there's more to bite than she can chew," Gyoukai-bo said, his mask lifting to the lightless sky in what looked like resignation.

"Wh...what the hell...?" Yaeka retorted in bewilderment. She swallowed the fear creeping up from her heart. What sort of a monster had invaded their tiny,

peaceful island where nothing ever happened?

For some reason, Gyoukai-bo responded with a hearty belly laugh. “You already know the reason right down to the marrow of your bones! People leave this island, don’t they?” He pointed a finger in the air. “Kamiki Island won’t be inhabited for much longer at this rate. The community’s gonna die out, and the island will be abandoned. Neither Itsukigami nor Oji, nor I, have enough power to put a stop to it. I think Oji knows that, too—deep down.” He spoke with compassion, affection even.

Yaeka was at a loss for words. Indeed, she had known that; she’d known it deep in her heart the moment she gained awareness as a child.

Everyone left the island eventually. No one ever visited.

Hazily, she realized she was resigned to the fact that she would likely become one of those people. She’d been so focused on not leaving her precious sister behind that she’d chosen to flee from the truth.

There was nothing she could say.

“Yaeka,” Miyazawa murmured in concern.

She just gazed at her white knuckles in a daze, tongue-tied.

“I can’t say with any certainty what brought it on, but I think the thing that made Oji realize we were headin’ for extinction was the factory closin’ down over ten years ago,” Gyoukai-bo explained. “Unfortunately, he only realized we couldn’t keep goin’ like this once the crisis was already irreversible. Even if we help by manipulatin’ the weather and bringin’ good fortune, the fishers and farmers will just keep on dwindlelin’. He realized too late, so now he’s all panicked.”

Anyone might lead a fulfilling life if they could provide for themselves with the sea and fields around them. But that was no longer how society worked—a process that had begun long, long before Yaeka came into the world. By the time she was born, to depart in pursuit of greater things was the given course of action in a child’s life. She didn’t know what the isle had already lost or what history she should be grieving. And she saw no plan of action but to stop running from the reality before her eyes and to accept the inescapable demise

of Kamiki Island.

The factory Gyoukai-bo spoke of was probably the seafood processing company that went bankrupt when Yaeka was two or three years old. The aquaculture business had utilized the land of the former salt pan and encountered financial trouble when a worldwide recession hit. The marine park that had served as the island's sole tourist attraction closed around the same time, stripping the island of its spirit all at once. She had simply accepted those events without ever really thinking about their repercussions.

"All good things come to an end, but Oji ain't so quick to say that as I am; it's mighty difficult for him." Gyoukai-bo paused, holding his hands up to Miyazawa. "Hey—don't glare at me like that. It's not like I ain't just as sad 'bout it. According to my predecessor's memories, this island has been a sacred place since ancient times. People have inhabited it since long, long before there were samurai families governin' the area. All right, they weren't all pure, innocent farmers—more like a buncha crooks! But even so, I think it's sad that this place's history is comin' to an end."

From her angle, Yaeka couldn't see what expression Miyazawa had directed at Gyoukai-bo—but it had to have been one of heavy condemnation.

"And yet you're trying to help *us* rather than the spirit that wants to save the island?" Miyazawa questioned. "Even though you're the god of this island?"

Yaeka's eyebrows shot up; Miyazawa made a good point. She scrutinized Gyoukai-bo's masked face. The tengu may have saved them, but was he really on their side?

"Like I just told ya: all good things come to an end, and that ain't gonna change just 'cause Itsukigami got swapped out for someone more powerful. I mean, I'm the spirit of Mount Kamiki, no? Even if the people leave, the mountain ain't goin' anywhere. Plus, it's not like anyone visits my shrine anyway! No one worships me whether they're here or not!"

So from Gyoukai-bo's perspective, Kamiki Island's desertion didn't really have anything to do with him, since his lack of veneration was the same either way.

Also...they said something about this tengu knowing Miyazawa's friend, right?

What sort of a person was Miyazawa's friend if he kept company with tengu? It sounded like he had strong spiritual powers and was connected to Kamiki Island in some way, but...how?

"Alrighty," Gyoukai-bo said, slapping his knees and standing, seemingly oblivious to Yaeka's intense confusion. He picked up a pole about three feet long that reminded her of a tightly compacted umbrella. "Daughter of Shirahige Shrine! Tell me, do you love Itsukigami?" His broad voice rolled through the nighttime air with a sort of decisive, motivating energy.

She started to vehemently shake her head out of fear—then stopped. What good would fear do? She focused on his huge, bulging, glowing white eyes as she answered: "I do!"

She did not know Chii's real name. "Chii" was the only thing Chii herself could remember being called.

Chii might hate this island, but still...

There was a lot Yaeka didn't know. Just the scene before her eyes in that moment was beyond anything she'd imagined. But when she thought of Chii, the answer was always going to be the same. She pursed her lips in determination and clenched her fists, looking up at Gyoukai-bo with a fierce stare.

He nodded in approval, then turned back to Miyazawa. "Misato! Tell me, do you love Ryouji?" he thundered.

"Of course I do," Miyazawa replied in a weighty, somber voice. Gyoukai-bo nodded again, pleased with the conviction in Miyazawa's quiet voice.

"In that case..." began Gyoukai-bo gallantly, before cutting himself off as he flourished the pole over the flames, revealing it to be a sword. "Could ya both slay a god for the sake of a pair of siblings?"

His low, serious tone made Yaeka's throat go dry. Slay a god? A pair of siblings?

"Yeh mean...slay Oji?" she ventured. "And...what siblings?"

"Indeed." Gyoukai-bo nodded. "Your Itsukigami's real name is Chinatsu

Karino, and the man Oji succeeded in summonin' is her younger brother, Ryouji Karino. Ryouji and I go way back, y'see—maybe that's why it was easy for Oji to latch onto the fella."

A chill crept up Yaeka's spine; the sudden knowledge of Chii's human life threw her off-balance.

Her name's Chinatsu...and that's why people called her Chii. She had a little brother, too...

The discovery was somehow terrifying to Yaeka. It was like being confronted with the reality that she was not related to Chii whatsoever. It reminded her that Chii was not *hers* and that Chii had been a *real*, living person with *real* bonds with other *real* people, such as that little brother.

"Shrine maiden—could ya slay a god that's kept this island safe for generations for the sake of your own desires? What 'bout you, Snake Harborer?" pressed Gyoukai-bo gravely. His warning hit Yaeka with another realization.

"If we slay Oji, what'll happen?" she asked.

If Chii—... If Chinatsu disappeared, Yaeka couldn't offer an immediate answer to his question. Chinatsu herself had no idea whether Oji's death would lead to her extinction or liberation.

Gyoukai-bo appeared to intuit the deeper concern behind Yaeka's query. "Nothin' will happen to Itsukigami. This has always been a divine isle—as in, it's sacred land that deifies those who wash up on its shores. That's why Oji can't summon wealth or fortune on his own. Those that bless the island must come from the sea. I wager if Itsukigami's freed from Oji's control, she'll have a lot more flexibility."

In other words, Chinatsu's existence as Itsukigami would not be affected by Oji's defeat.

"But what if we can't do it?" Her brow creased in worry.

Perhaps Chii—Chinatsu—welcomed the change Oji was attempting to enact. Preventing it might mean going against her wishes. Nevertheless, Yaeka brushed off her hesitation and put her mind to how they would succeed.

Gyoukai-bo stopped for a moment. His beak shifted to the side slightly. “Hmmm... What we know for sure is that Ryouji, Chinatsu’s brother, would be killed and forced into the position of the next Itsukigami. But...I can’t say what’ll happen to Chinatsu,” he sighed. “We’ve never tried havin’ two Itsukigamis before, so who knows if it’s even possible? Logically, I think Chinatsu would be dismissed from her post and returned to the realm of the dead, but...I’m certain you know better than me what she’d choose to do if her very own brother had to be killed in exchange.”

That was a good point. Chii, and presumably Chinatsu Karino, was a compassionate girl who’d treated Yaeka with all the care of a real sister. There was no way she wouldn’t try to protect her own brother in the same way.

“In that case...I’ll do it,” Yaeka responded bluntly, her face taut with resolution. Gyoukai-bo stared back at her, and there was no telling what expression he wore under his tengu mask.

Silence consumed the air for a few seconds, interspersed with pops from the seething fire.

“Very well.” Gyoukai-bo nodded. “What ’bout you?” he asked, pivoting to Miyazawa.

Miyazawa wordlessly rose to his feet and walked with a flowing elegance to stand in front of Gyoukai-bo. His long ponytail followed behind like an afterimage. “So long as you have a blade for the job, I’ll do it.” His voice was clear and concise, and he aimed his words directly at Gyoukai-bo’s face. He reached out unwaveringly, his pale fingers closing around the sheath. “I don’t care if they’re a god or a buddha or *whatever*. I’ll destroy anyone who tries to sacrifice my partner.”

The tengu’s booming laugh echoed under the heavy clouds stifling the night sky.

OXYGEN deprivation was sucking the reality around Ryouji away. A plethora of images whirled through his mind.

The front garden of his house. The kitchen. The narrow road that led from the

main road to his house. The fields on either side. The bamboo grove further up the mountain. They were sights he'd become accustomed to in the past two or three years.

No... It's different.

The scene in his mind wasn't quite the same as the one that occupied his memory. But he still recognized it.

The man-made hill to the side of the main house used to be where Ryouji went to get away. No matter the season, it was always shaded by trees clothed in deep-green leaves, giving Ryouji a safe hiding place.

"Ryou! Ryou!" His sister's voice rang out from behind him as he ran behind a well-groomed holly bush and crouched.

"Ryou! There yeh are!" She sighed with both relief and exasperation, her voice drawing closer alongside light footsteps.

Ryouji glared at the ants that crawled across the mossy ground.

"Yeh really startled the teacher, y'know? He's still waiting for yeh, so let's go back."

If Ryouji recalled correctly, the teacher she'd been referring to was an instructor for a traditional dance called the *jingi* that was performed at fall festivals. As a second grader, he was to participate in the *jingi* at Uji Shrine's fall festival for the first time. It was a Sunday, his first day of practice, and he'd already fought with one of the older children. Ryouji had grabbed the kid, thrown him to the floor of the community gymnasium, and fled the building.

"C'mon, Ryou. Teach isn't really mad at yeh or anything. Don't cry." A hand softly touched the top of Ryouji's head as he clutched his knees and stubbornly trained his eyes on the ground.

Still hugging himself, he firmly shook his head in response to his sister's soothing words. His eyes swam with angry tears. He hated to imagine how frustrated he would be if they asked him to apologize. It wasn't his fault, after all. He wasn't going to just bow his head and allow someone to treat him like a monster because of the color of his eyes and spread gossip filled with half-truths.

He sniveled, choking back tears.

His sister chuckled. "Shhh, it's all right," she said. "Don't listen to anyone who tries to insult yeh, okay? Once yeh get bigger, study lots, go to a high school far away, then college...yeh'll definitely find a friend who really understands yeh. But 'til then, I'll always be there for yeh. That's a promise."

They were memories Ryouji was sure he'd lost.

Oh. Is this what people mean when they say your life flashes before your eyes?
He was surprised to find out it wasn't just a figure of speech.

"HOW the hell am I s'posed to pick up a rock this freakin' *huge*, you dumbass of a dad?!"

The scene in Ryouji's mind shifted. He was standing in front of a boulder that would require arms much longer than his to carry, annoyance grating on his patience. His shrill voice echoed across the mountain, still only half broken.

"Well, y'ain't gettin' fed 'til ya do, you dumbass of a kid! Ya gotta know how to use your body and train your mind! Strengthen your core! Y'ain't just pickin' it up with your arms, remember?!" yelled a man diagonally across from Ryouji, both hands stuffed in his pockets. They were on a mountain in Kanto that was famous among Shugendo practitioners. It was early summer, and the buzz of tourists in the distance formed a constant, quiet drone.

"Why am I the only kid who has to do lame-ass stuff like this?!"

All the other children his age had parents who took them out to restaurants and bought them treats, so why did Ryouji have to endure so much hardship? Not to mention he'd completely lost whatever past he'd lived and thus had absolutely no one to rely on aside from his adoptive father—who was constantly working him hard in every aspect of his miserable existence. He slumped gloomily.

Oh, there's my old man...probably about three years before he skedaddled. What an idiot.

The tall man lifted his brawny right hand to scratch at the back of his neck in

frustration. His tousled, long hair was tied back in a disheveled bun, and as always he was dressed in an aloha shirt and flip-flops, which he wore regardless of the season. His name was Sougen Ueoka—Ryouji's adoptive father.

“Damn it... What am I gonna do with ya?” he sighed.

Ryouji remembered hearing that phrase over and over again in that same listless tone. His father plodded up to him and casually placed a hand on Ryouji's head before ruffling his hair as if he were a dog, which only contributed to his irritation.

“Hey—!” Ryouji complained, slapping his arm away.

“Get stronger, Ryouji.” A voice much sterner and lower than Ryouji had expected sounded from above him. “You're always gonna be extraordinary. That's why you gotta develop extraordinary strength, too—else you're not gonna survive in the normal world. Ya need the skills to match your natural gifts. That's the quickest way of gettin' whatcha want. If you can properly wield the talent you were born with, you'll find that people just as talented will gravitate to ya. Once ya got all that, you'll be able to live a normal life.” His father grinned at him.

Ryouji vaguely recollected snapping back at him with something like “Ya really think I'm gonna believe that?!”

But from that day forth, Ryouji began to approach his training the slightest, tiniest bit more positively.

“I don't want to be with someone else. I don't want to save someone else. I don't want to be there for someone whose face I don't even know. There are people who need you. There are people who want you to be happy.”

When Ryouji heard those words, he'd been wholly prepared to die to honor his promise to a total stranger. He'd been determined to protect someone who possessed that which he did not, mostly because he didn't place the same importance on his own empty existence as he did the lives of those who had what he yearned for so badly.

“I want you to be happy and healthy. Really, it's got nothing to do with you.

It's an entirely selfish desire."

Misato had said that with a peaceful, composed expression without any fluster to his tone. Rather, Ryouji was the one who'd blushed in embarrassment.

"Let's do this, partner."

They had been right in the middle of a huge showdown when Misato put a name to their close, comfortable relationship. That development, especially during such a tense situation, had taken him thoroughly off guard. But that was just the sort of man Misato was. He was a natural airhead and always quick to lend an unconditional helping hand. While Ryouji pretty much defaulted to arrogance or chagrin depending on the circumstances, Misato was much more straightforward. In many ways, they were completely different.

Different—but perfectly comfortable when they were together.

Oh...right. That's true. Chinatsu and my stupid old man both told me this would happen, huh...?

"One day, if yeh keep on looking..."

"One day, if ya keep on survivin'..."

One day, he would find someone he could call his equal. One day, he would find someone who saw the world the same way he did.

They had told him that when the time finally came, he had to be a man worth wanting.

STRENGTHEN your core. *Don't just pick it up with your arms. Delve deeper and pull.*

Ryouji gritted his teeth and tore through the invisible chains that bound him. With both hands finally free, he latched onto the tengu spirit's wrists, the tengu's arms old and withered like shriveled-up branches. Then, with all of his might, he ripped away the earthen hands that plugged his mouth.

"You're a tenacious young man—and that is exactly why you must be the one to assume Itsukigami's position and restore the island!" Oji roared, leaping

backward to put space between himself and Ryouji.

No longer smothered, Ryouji fell into a vicious fit of coughing, his breaths coming in wheezing gasps that made his shoulders tremble. “Shut your mouth... you damn island ghost.” His voice rattled. “I got no intention...of becomin’ fish food in your li’l breeding farm.”

The old man rose before Ryouji, the long nose of his mask protruding over his disheveled pure-white kimono. He was utterly set on sacrificing Ryouji to the island.

“*Namah samanta vajranam ham!*” Ryouji formed a mudra with shaking hands, summoning the flames of Acala. After erecting a barrier of fire between them and the old man, he turned to Chinatsu.

“Chii...” he heaved. Breathing hurt. No matter how much he wheezed, every breath was an arduous undertaking. He doubled over, bracing his hands on his knees as he said, “I’m sorry, Chii... Yeh know, I...I finally made a friend.” Instinctively, his voice lapsed into the same Hiroshima accent he would have used when he was much, much smaller than his sister.

“...Yeah,” she replied softly.

Already stripped of her mortality, she didn’t appear to have suffered a single scratch from being thrown against the rock. She calmly stood, nodding as she walked back over to Ryouji. The ghostly flames, invisible to most humans, illuminated Chinatsu with a white light. She was wearing the same exact clothes as when they left their campsite for the very last time.

“He can see weird stuff just like I can—though he’s stronger an’ smarter than me.”

The seal on Ryouji’s vague, distant memories had finally broken. He remembered the promise his beloved sister had made. In the end, he never did go to high school or college, but he *did* make a friend. His friend was a complicated man—someone who stood alone on the boundary between life and oblivion. Although he never hesitated to aid others, he was reluctant to accept any help offered to him. There had been no one he genuinely trusted, and he’d kept his gaze trained desperately on his feet as he pushed through life on his own.

Ryouji had seized that man's arm, pulled, and forced the man to turn and look at him—forced Misato to look at him.

Ryouji was happy when Misato said he needed Ryouji and frustrated when he nonetheless attempted to shoulder his burdens all alone. Ryouji wasn't sure whether Chinatsu truly believed him—but there was no way he could let Misato go at that point. He could never betray Misato, couldn't shatter their relationship—not when they'd finally put a name to it.

"But, uh...he's got some issues, yeh know? And...and if I'm not there, he'll..." Ryouji's shoulders quaked, and heavy tears tumbled down his cheeks as he squeezed the words out. "He needs me...!"

"Shhh, I know. I know," Chinatsu choked. Her voice was also thick with tears. She smiled, her eyes glistening.

"I'm sorry, Chii. I can't take yer place and save yeh," Ryouji croaked.

His life had changed, and he could no longer die for someone else's sake.

"I know, and that's fine. That's good." Her hand hovered gently on his back. "So long as yeh're happy and healthy, that's fine with me."

He forced a smile. He could do that much for her. "Y'know, I actually became a professional medium."

His eyes that saw too much had become an asset. He made good use of them in all sorts of situations. The breadth of his knowledge had grown, too, as had his body. He was far stronger than he once was.

It wasn't as though he wanted an existence full of calamity and trouble—of course not. And after so much tragedy, Ryouji had built a life for himself regardless and was still standing on his own two feet. There had to be some sort of meaning in that. His experiences were worth something.

"That's why I know I'm gonna make somethin' of myself."

He wasn't the same child who darted behind a hill, hugged his knees, and did nothing but cry in frustration.

Chinatsu's eyes shimmered as if dazzled, and she nodded tearfully.

An instant later, the wall of purifying flames dispersed. A colossal mass of

water immediately flooded into the cave and descended on them like an avalanche. Ryouji grabbed Chinatsu's thin shoulders, covering her as the current roared into the cavern and swept his feet from under him.

GYOUKAI pulled out a huge paper lantern from seemingly nowhere and guided Misato and Yaeka through the abandoned Shinto gate. Their surrounds were difficult to discern in the dark, but after a mere five minutes of walking, Misato saw that they had come out onto yet another beach. Shirota, still in his largest form, was on a different mission so as not to further scare Yaeka. He was heading to Itsuki Island alone, hopefully able to swim through the rough sea safely.

No moon hung in the sky, and Misato was far too disoriented to determine where he was, but Yaeka gasped in recognition ahead of him.

"Hey! This is my beach!"

Apparently, it was the same stretch of coast where he'd chanced across Yaeka within the grounds of Shirahige Shrine. Glancing around, he realized that they weren't far from the rocks he'd climbed over to access the beach after Shirota led him there on the trail of Ryouji's scent. He'd parked the car a few hundred yards away on the other side of the stone wall, in front of another small beach.

"Indeed. Our target is just here—right next to your house, young lady," Gyoukai said, coming to a stop and turning back to them. Although the wind was much stronger than on his portion of shore, his mystical lantern swayed not an inch as it illuminated the waterfront. The waves continued to break violently, the water level stretching even higher than before. They had to shout to be heard above the sea, yet the people within the shrine building likely wouldn't hear them from that distance.

"Next to my house... Yeh mean the inner sanctuary of the shrine?" Yaeka wrapped the baseball jacket more securely around her torso, shielding herself from the howling wind.

"Indeed," Gyoukai hummed.

The inner sanctum of a shrine housed its deity's vessel. In the case of Kamiki

Shirahige Shrine, the worship hall had been built on the flat, sandy soil near the shore, and the sanctuary one level higher, where it perched atop the bluffs that sectioned off the beach, connected at an oblique angle to the oratory. The shrine officials and Yaeka's father, the chief priest, were evidently crammed inside the outer structure at that very moment, performing some kind of ritual.

Misato's hand tightened around the sheathed sword, and determination filled him anew. The sheath was basic and practical. It wasn't made out of wood, which was strange for a sword that presumably had been dedicated at Gyoukai's shrine; normally the blade would have been stored in a plain wooden casing intended for preservation rather than use.

Curious, Misato drew the blade out of its sheath a little, its gleaming, unblemished surface reflecting the light of the heatless lantern.

"I'm certain ya worked it out already, but that ain't no ordinary katana," Gyoukai boasted, his pride palpable even through his mask.

It was as he said: Misato sensed a strong spiritual aura emanating from the blade. "Um... Is this your vessel, Gyoukai?"

Ostensibly, Gyoukai was a mountain deity that had been enshrined on Mount Kamiki since ancient times. By that logic, Misato would have thought Gyoukai's vessel was the mountain itself, yet the overwhelming surge of power from the sword made him doubt himself.

"Naw. Accordin' to my memories—well, the previous Gyoukai-bo's memories—it washed up on the beach durin' the Genpei War," Gyoukai explained cheerfully, his demeanor growing reminiscent. "The sword couldn't have drifted here by itself, so it must've been on one of the fallen warriors. Then the islanders offered it up at the shrine, and it was situated in the treasure house for a good ol' while, and...in the meantime, it somehow picked up Gyoukai-bo's powers—either that, or it possessed mystical powers since the beginnin'...and turned into a different sword altogether. I've never really thought 'bout it a great deal, but I fancied it might come in handy if we're gonna fight."

Despite his enthusiastic tone, Yaeka eyed Gyoukai with a look that suggested she couldn't fathom what was so interesting about the story.

The Genpei War had taken place while *tachi*-style samurai swords were in

fashion; the Japanese katana's classic silhouette shouldn't have existed yet. Tachi were much longer, and the width and curvature of the blade, as well as the sheath, were completely different from a katana's.

"Unless someone switched it out while no one was lookin'," Gyoukai added with a chortle.

"I really don't think so," Misato commented, in awe of the sword's power. For one thing, if any regular sword were kept in a sharkskin and lacquer sheath for a long period of time, the blade would surely rust. A wooden sheath would keep at least some of the oxidation at bay, but not even that would maintain such a brilliant shine over hundreds of years.

Going by what Yaeka said, it sounds like it would've been impossible for someone to secretly visit the shrine of Mount Kamiki without Gyoukai knowing about it. Plus, the power in this thing is crazy.

Swords were predisposed to absorb spiritual energy by nature, and almost a thousand years had passed since the katana was carried to the sacred ground of Mount Kamiki and subsequently forgotten. With all the energy it had quietly accumulated during its time in the mountains, it was essentially a spirit in its own right.

"Hahaha!" Gyoukai guffawed. "Lisin' your nerve, are ya?"

"No chance," Misato scoffed. Yaeka looked far more surprised than Gyoukai that he should laugh off uncertainty so casually.

"I shoulda known," the tengu responded with a perceptive nod before stepping forward again. "The lantern will shroud our presence so long as we stay in its light, so keep close—though it'll stop bein' effective if we get caught in a brighter one." He guided them along the crashing edge of the tide to keep as far from the glow of the shrine building as possible.

It can do the job, so there's no use fretting over whether the sword's a spirit. We're about to slay a god, for crying out loud.

In fact, Misato had vanquished a deity once before.

Although...a huge mass of pure fear is a totally different matter from Oji.

Unlike the concentrated fear born of parishioners' distorted perceptions in Yasaka Shrine on Mount Kagura, Oji had long been revered as a guardian deity of salt making, and his worshippers prayed to him still. To annihilate Oji was to annihilate the faith of those who worshipped him.

To the devout, their god was the very foundation of their heart. In the modern age, many did not consider themselves religious, yet when confronted with the overwhelming unfamiliarity of the world around them, people saw belief as something that would always be on their side.

That belief did not have to be a sophisticated concept strictly outlined in scripture, nor did it have to be in one particular god. Religious tradition in Japan comprised all sorts of customs: reverence for the mountains as they changed with the seasons; appeasement of the sea for it offered both prosperity and tribulation; celebration of one's trade and tools; the offering of flowers at neighborhood Jizo statues or hokora; upkeep of home altars, memorial tablets, or household shrines.

The world was not often open to discussion. Disasters, illnesses, and accidents occurred with no negotiation or warning—as did death. Incidents with no context or meaning were thrust mercilessly upon every human. The rationalization that bad things happened as recompense for bad actions was, for the most part, no more than an illusion.

Most humans could not accept that suffering happened for no reason. Why, they were compelled to ask. They craved a framework that could bear the responsibility for calamities they could not handle—a being that could explain why they deserved such misfortune. That or a ruler who could tell them how to escape hardship, who would grant them mercy so long as they followed that code.

To lose that foundation was no different from having your soul stolen and abandoned in the wilderness of existence. That was what slaying the god would do to the islanders. Misato would hurt them.

I know that, but I can't afford to falter now. There isn't a doubt in my mind that I need to do this.

A long time past, long before he and Ryouji extinguished the adzuki bean

weevils, an attempt was made on his life. Any hesitation he might have felt was thrown to the wind that night—the night when he cursed the cruelty of the world from the bottom of his heart, not stopping for even a second to hope someone would save him.

People lived surrounded by strangers. That night, Misato had learned that the existence of Misato Miyazawa was most valued by none other than himself. At the very end, he was the only person who prioritized his own life and, in turn, the things that mattered to him. No matter how much he tried to sympathize with others on a regular basis or how honest or obedient he strove to be, that world of strangers would never bend to suit or protect him.

That's why I won't hesitate. No matter what the world wants, I'm going to protect my partner—because I don't want to lose him.

Gyoukai had said Oji was like a part of himself—a segment of a god that was installed in Shirahige Shrine as a guardian deity for the flourishing salt industry of the Seto Inland Sea in the Edo period.

Oji was summoned for the sake of the people and functions for the sake of the people. He can't be allowed to kill a living human! That was his opinion both as an exorcist safeguarding the boundary between life and death and as Ryouji Karino's friend. His resolve could not have been firmer.

"Hey. Could I ask a question?" Yaeka asked in a murmur, staring at Gyoukai's back.

Misato thought her voice hadn't reached him through the cacophony of wind, but after a few paces, Gyoukai halted. "What is it?" he replied, his crow-billed mask angled at her.

"Is it 'cause of Oji that the sea's so rough? And...is it 'cause of him that Chii didn't answer my prayer to sail to Itsuki Island?" she guessed, her voice wavering with anxiety.

"That's right. Oji ain't got the power to attract prosperity like Itsukigami, but he can at least control her. I'd wager he sealed her power so that you couldn't interfere."

The relief on Yaeka's face was visible even in the dark. Misato watched her

closely; something seemed to have been weighing very heavily on her mind. Sensing his stare, she snapped her head around to face him and glowered back.

They walked along the shore for a while longer until Gyoukai paused where they could see the illuminated front hall of Shirahige Shrine. Frenzied wind whipped Misato's ponytail into the air, and a violent roar unbecoming of the Inland Sea battered their ears.

"You're up, young lady. I can't go any farther, so you'll have to lead," Gyoukai declared, handing the lantern to Yaeka. There was a barrier around the shrine, he insinuated.

"I'll follow you," Misato said with a slight bow of his head as Yaeka pursed her lips, unsure.

"Okay." She nodded in return, then turned back to Gyoukai. "Is that the only thing I need to do?" She had also been posed the question of whether she could slay a god and appeared to be disappointed that her responsibilities might end with being his guide.

"Hahaha!" Gyoukai answered with a belly laugh. "Relax. There's still plenty more for ya to do. First off, you're not gonna be enterin' the shrine like normal, are ya? There are a good few barriers that stand between that mystical sword and Oji's vessel, and you can use your status as a shrine maiden to push through 'em," he instructed. "There's no use gettin' nervous. If you're worried 'bout Oji, he'll be thoroughly concentrated on that li'l island right now. Get close before we arouse suspicion and get the deed done. It's a race against time. It's two hours 'til full tide, and I'm sure he'll come to settle matters here by then." He looked to the dark sea.

"Let's go, Yaeka. Show me to Oji's vessel," Misato prompted.

"All right." She nodded again, stepping forward.

Misato inclined his head to her once more, then fell in behind her—only for Gyoukai to call out to him. "Hey, Mr. Narukami Snake Spirit."

Misato couldn't help but shoot him a sharp glare for that nickname.

Gyoukai simply laughed in response, and his next words were far from what Misato expected. "When ya narrow your eyes all intense like that, you can be

fairly intimidatin'. It's a good thing." Gyoukai crossed his arms with a hearty smile. "When you're up against a strong will, you're gonna need everythin' you can get. Hold your chin a smidge higher. Never forget to look down on your enemy. War is all about bluffin'!"

"O-Oh, okay," Misato replied, deflating slightly and unconsciously rounding his shoulders.

"It depends on timing and the situation, of course, but I'm sure you're well aware of that. You've got both the spirit and the power to make things go your way, so let the other party see that when you're bargainin'. From the enemy's point of view, it's better to read the danger and retreat on their own accord rather than take ya for a fool and get pulverized for it."

Misato's eyes narrowed again; he had to wonder whether Gyoukai was misleading him with overblown statements like that. He heard Yaeka's footsteps cease up ahead. She was eager to get going, and Misato didn't have time to question Gyoukai's true motives.

For the time being, he settled on an apathetic nod. "Thank you for the advice. I'll trust you to look after Shirota and Ryouji," he said more seriously.

"Sure thing. Leave it to me. I'll borrow that serpent for a li'l while longer, if ya don't mind." And with that, Gyoukai headed back toward the sea.

Misato redirected his own path toward Yaeka. "Okay, ready. Let's go," he assured her.

As he strode up to her, his feet sinking into the sand with each step, a sudden, loud beating of wings sounded from behind him. He checked over his shoulder, then up above, where a flash of shimmering feathers crossed the sky. Yaeka gave a small yelp.

A black kite...

He'd heard that tengu could transform into birds of prey and fly the firmament. The huge wings circled over their heads once, then disappeared toward the sea. Gyoukai had said Ryouji was the son of an old friend, and he himself spoke fondly of Ryouji. And there was no doubting the sheer power he'd lent Misato.

Hang in there and stand your ground, Ryouji. Your life isn't as meaningless as you think it is.

Once, Ryouji had attempted to sacrifice himself for a complete stranger that he'd never even met. So long as he was determined, however, Ryouji could survive pretty much anything—especially since his skills surrounding life in the wild far surpassed Misato's.

Believing firmly in the safety of his partner, Misato ran to catch up with Yaeka.

Chapter 5: A God for the People

SALT water raged and swept Ryouji's feet out from under him as it poured into the cavern. Still half naked and barefoot, Ryouji shielded Chinatsu, bracing his legs as he attempted to resist the force of the deluge.

"I will fill this cave entirely with water," Oji declared from where he stood atop the rocks that formed a barrier across its entrance. *"Now, ascend to godhood! If you wish it, I shall even permit your sister to rule alongside you. Bring prosperity and riches to this island together!"* He raised both hands to the heavens, calling forth the sea.

"Damn it!" Ryouji snapped, scowling at Oji.

The water reached the back of the cave in seconds and was rapidly rising. His ankles submerged, then his calves, his knees. The current was so formidable that he feared he would be washed away if he lifted one foot even a little.

"Don't worry about me, Ryou!" pleaded Chinatsu from within his arms. "Even if the waves get me, I can't drown!"

Ryouji looked down at her and grinned. His thighs were underwater, then his hips. Bit by bit, the swirling, murky water climbed toward his chest.

"I'm finally taller than ya, y'know? And these eyes give me a real boost at work, too. Thanks to you savin' me when I thought I was gonna drown...I grew up," he reminded her tearily.

He'd grown taller than her. He'd grown older than her, too—all because she sacrificed herself to protect him that day. An apology would mean nothing. He couldn't beg her forgiveness. Even if he was forgiven, absolution alone would bring nothing back. It could never return Chinatsu to life.

"Chii..."

So he swallowed the words "I'm sorry." If he apologized, she would eternally insist that it was okay. He could not make her feel obligated to forgive him. If he

did, he would only invalidate the choice she made that day as well as disparage the life she'd wanted for him. Therefore, there was only one thing he could say to her.

He thought back to the countless occasions Katsuki had said it when he visited Tomoe in early summer: "Thank you, Misato!"

At first, Ryouji was impressed that Katsuki had been raised to thank others so politely and often. He thought it was an admirable feat.

When he mentioned it to Misato at a later date, however, Misato had replied with a little uneasiness, "Um, to tell you the truth...I found myself taken aback by his manners as well. I kept thinking, was he always like that? Oh—don't get me wrong, though! He's always been such a sweet and honest kid! Always so adorable! But, um...it really feels like he grew up all of a sudden. I'm not really sure who Katsuki's been speaking to since the incident on Mount Kagura, but...I realized that he's done a lot of self-reflection, made a lot of independent choices, and learned to walk on his own. It *does* sound a little lonely, though..."

Thus Katsuki had decided who he wanted to be all on his own.

Ryouji finally understood: if he couldn't apologize, there was nothing to do but thank her—thank her for her unconditional love and sacrifice.

The water had engulfed Chinatsu up to her chest. The strength of the current had died down, but the rising depth of the water threatened to unmoor them.

Ryouji gently placed his hands on Chinatsu's thin shoulders. He gazed into her face as he forced the words from his throat. "Chii... Thank you for saving me back then."

She'd held him tight to her chest as he trembled at the frightening power of the muddy stream. He'd clutched her shirt for dear life. Funnily enough, at last able to remember that moment as if it had been the day before, he noted they were in a mysteriously similar situation. Though he knew it wasn't the time, the lower half of his vision began to blur with tears again.

Her eyes glistened in turn. "Yeah," she said croakily, smiling at him sadly. "Yeh got so big, Ryou. Yeh're a real handsome, brave man now."

The inky black water swelled, reflecting the dim vermillion glow of the

incandescent lightbulb.

"How are ya recently, Chii? There ain't nothin' bothering you, is there? If there's anythin' I can do to help, I will," he said sincerely.

The freezing cold flood was chilling Ryouji to his very core. As it scaled the bare skin of his flank and chest, it swiftly sapped his body heat. He saw his sneakers and life vest floating helplessly across the cave, snatched by the seawater.

Chinatsu smiled at his offer, a bright, sunny, somewhat embarrassed smile. "I'm okay. Y'know, I got a little sister this time 'round. Her name's Yaeka, and she's super cute. And actually, this place isn't too bad. I love the sea, so I don't mind. I'm fine, I promise yeh."

"Good," breathed Ryouji in relief. He squeezed his eyes shut.

The only thing I can hope for is that you're at peace after sacrificing yourself for me.

Ryouji was certain that prayer had soothed the minds of survivors since times long past. In the Buddhist services during the week of the equinox, they prayed for the safety of those they could no longer see. But what was Ryouji to do after finding the answer to that prayer in the world of the living?

Katsuki had put it so: "If his life here is peaceful, I'll accept that. I don't even have the right to say it isn't. If he smiles, then I'll smile with him."

Even if the guilt of knowing a loved one had sacrificed themselves for you was unbearable, to brandish that guilt in front of them was inappropriate. With newfound respect for Katsuki's choice, Ryouji vowed to follow suit.

"Aight. In that case, I'll do everythin' I can so you can be with your sister," he said with determination, gently letting Chinatsu go.

Chinatsu wanted to be Itsukigami. Ryouji did not. He also had someone he couldn't bear to leave alone. In view of those facts, the path ahead was clear.

The tiered rock that supported the hokora of Itsukigami at the back of the cavern was just slightly lower than Ryouji's shoulders. The water had already reached the hokora's base, but his clothes draped on its roof were yet

untouched.

First, I gotta get up there. There's nowhere else for me to run.

He kicked off the sand beneath his feet and propelled water out of the way with his arms. He couldn't swim, but he could move along the floor. Catching on to Ryouji's plan, Chinatsu gave his back a strong push from where she floated.

"It is futile!" Oji roared, muffled by the long-nosed tengu mask. His voice bounced off the walls of the small cave, and the water surged upward.

The current tugged Ryouji off course, and it took all his might not to lose his footing and succumb to the sea.

Damn it!

Cold clawed at the deepest recesses of his body, making his limbs feel heavy and sluggish. His stamina was failing in his battle against the current. Ryouji glared at Oji in frustration, and the tengu mask seemed to gaze down at him in triumph.

All of a sudden, something burst out of the sea behind the tengu, sending huge droplets flying into the air. It was white and enormous, and the inside of the cave shuddered with a fierce, low roar that reminded Ryouji of a gigantic flamethrower.

"A snake?!" Chinatsu yelped.

Ryouji's jaw fell open in shock as he observed the colossal white serpent, which reared its head threateningly, targeting Oji from behind.

Oji turned to face the intruder, abruptly distracted from Ryouji and Chinatsu. The snake's crimson eyes locked onto the tengu with a sharp glint. Then it opened its mouth and lunged. Oji lowered both of his arms to fend off the serpent with all his strength, and instantly, seawater stopped pouring into the cave. Lacking the unnatural force that propelled it, it began to rush back whence it came. The resulting current was just as extreme as the preceding one and washed both Ryouji and Chinatsu away, tossing them into the open sea.

AMID the sound of fierce wind and beating wings, an impossibly large bird of

prey soared into the sky. Yaeka watched as its silhouette grew smaller in the distance before disappearing completely into the darkness. Gyoukai-bo claimed he was going to save Miyazawa's friend—Chinatsu's younger brother.

Chii's brother... He came here to fish, got taken by the sea, and was ignored by the people of this island when he needed help. His sister was supposed to be dead...but was stolen to become a god of this island.

Yaeka had to wonder what sort of a person he was. He was likely around the same age as Miyazawa and probably very angry at the people of Kamiki Island. Not only for snatching his sister away, but also for the direct harm they'd caused him.

Of course he's gonna be angry. Hmm... Will Chii be angry, too? I reckon she's gotta be.

Oji had attacked Chii's brother and the islanders had left him to die, after all. She was probably furious. No—maybe she even hated them.

Several yards behind Yaeka, Miyazawa watched Gyoukai-bo fly away then turned back to her. He caught up to her at a jog, and they set course for the inner sanctuary of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine side by side. She stomped each step, trying to hide the fact that her feet were numb with the fear of rejection by someone she loved. Despite her own concerns, the most important matter was to defeat Oji and save both brother and sister.

Skirting the illuminated front hall as much as possible, they walked along the shore, maneuvering across the rocky area Yaeka had tied her boat in previously. Keeping their distance was proving difficult; less than two hours remained until full tide, and the beach had narrowed somewhat. There was little uneven ground to hide behind, so they were wholly visible to the shrine. No one had noticed them thanks to the lantern Gyoukai-bo had given them, but they certainly weren't invisible, nor were their footsteps silent. They felt exposed, as though in full view of the party.

Yaeka shot a sidelong glance at the worship hall. The entire shrine was aglow, and when she strained her eyes, she could see people milling around on the other side of the lattice door. She tensed, her gaze automatically locking on the entrance.

Observing her intense focus, Miyazawa called out softly, “Yaeka? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She started to shake her head but froze as the lattice door opened. Miyazawa seemed to notice, too, because he halted beside her, silent. Instinctively holding their breath, they watched as someone slipped out of the oratory no more than fifty yards away.

What? Why now...? Don’t tell me they saw us.

A large, seemingly male silhouette walked limply toward the shore, looking terribly disheartened. Yaeka and Miyazawa had already passed the front hall and were close to the rocks, and he didn’t appear to have seen them. She breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, she assumed the person was one of the officials and had left their post to take a break, exhausted by the nightlong ritual. But the evening was barely past the time of their usual sunset, and everyone should have been terrified of venturing outside at the critical juncture when Oji was said to welcome Itsukigami on the rising tide.

What happened? I mean...to be honest, I guess I’m glad if something’s gone wrong.

Perhaps Gyoukai-bo had saved Chinatsu’s brother and the news had just arrived at the shrine. If that was the case, Yaeka could hope for nothing more.

The figure staggered toward the sea, then came to a stop, oblivious to her and Miyazawa. Yaeka was only ten or twenty yards from where the figure stood near the surf; if the lantern were visible to other people, they would have been long spotted by that point. The man was not holding a lamp or flashlight, apparently relying on the residual light of the hall behind him to navigate the shore. She couldn’t make out his face in the dark and thus had no clue who he was.

No wonder then, that in the next moment, she was genuinely taken by surprise.

“YAEKAAAAAAA!” screamed the silhouette to the open sea. Its voice belonged to Toshihiko Kamiki—her uncle. He screamed over the whooshing wind and the seething clash of the waves. Her heart stung with how pained his cry was, and she rushed forward on pure instinct.

“Uncle!” she called back without thinking.

“Wait,” hissed Misato, grabbing her arm.

If her uncle noticed them, their plan would fall apart. Logically, Yaeka knew that—yet she couldn’t bear the sight of her uncle so distraught. She’d never seen him like that before. She whipped around to Miyazawa with a reproachful glare.

“I’m sorry, truly. But we don’t have time to explain who I am and what happened right now.” Miyazawa spoke sternly, apologetic yet insistent.

Yaeka frowned, her glower falling.

Her uncle continued to yell to the boundless sea. “Please come home to us! Yer mom’s cryin’ her eyes out! Please... I’m beggin’ yeh...!”

Yaeka finally realized the gravity of the situation. She’d left the house under the cover of darkness without a word to her family, then begged her uncle to get his boat out. When he refused, she resolved to sail to Itsuki Island on her own, then met Miyazawa. In other words, from her mother or uncle’s point of view, she’d set off for Itsuki Island and subsequently gone missing. Her intended destination had been clear in their earlier conversation.

Then the storm came... The storm really had capsized their boat, after all. Yaeka herself was in awe of the fact that she was still alive—let alone anyone who had no idea what had happened to her. Her uncle’s small fishing vessel could never have handled the waves to search for her on water, so they’d resorted to calling for her from land. All they could do was wait for her to return.

“That’s my uncle,” Yaeka explained in a whisper. “I left the house without telling my mom.”

All she wanted was for them to know she was safe, and her pleading glance told Miyazawa as much. But he shook his head sadly in reply. Yaeka clenched her fists, and the lantern swayed in her right hand.

“If we want to save my friend,” he said, “we don’t have time. Please stay with me. We can tell them as soon as we’re done.”

His grim stare persuaded her. She would be endangering his friend's life—Chinatsu's brother's life.

"We made a mistake...!" Her uncle wailed to the sea, falling to his knees. "We should never have gone ahead with it! But we were scared...!"

"Let's go," Miyazawa murmured. "If we act now, we can still stop it. We can save Ryouji, get you back home to your family, and we'll all live happily ever after. But we need to hurry."

Miyazawa had told her nobody responded to his call for help. Just like her uncle had said that evening, the islanders were ignoring all requests from the Japan Coast Guard. Then the sea turned rough, and Itsukigami's shrine maiden disappeared. Yaeka wondered what the world looked like through her uncle's or mother's eyes in that moment. It had to seem cruel and unfair. Her uncle's voice was strained with fear, guilt, and regret as he shouted her name to the waves.

"Oh, and make sure they scold you afterward for being so reckless," Miyazawa added with a smile.

She had caused her family a huge amount of worry. Her uncle usually kept his cool in any situation, and even he would likely be furious.

"Hmph," she sniffed in lieu of a reply, taking a step toward the sanctuary of the shrine.

The sand gave way to a grassy incline as they hiked up to a stony stretch of ground that shone light brown when the sun was out. The inner sanctum of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine was built into the weathered rock that surrounded the beach, nestled in a hollow. It stood one level above the worship hall, overhanging the other structure as if staring down from on high. Entry from the front was difficult, but by circling to the back, they could easily infiltrate the sanctuary from the overlying rock. Yaeka even knew where the key to the building was kept.

Laboring up the grassy hill that led to the back of the shrine, she vented in a bitter mutter. "Everyone's so selfish. Me, my uncle, my dad...and yeh are, too."

Everyone had their own motivations. Yaeka was so desperate to save

Chinatsu that she hadn't responded to her family's calls. Meanwhile, her family was deathly worried about her yet willing to let a stranger die. And Miyazawa demanded that she ignore her family's heartache and prioritize his friend's life.

"I know," he replied gently. "More or less everyone is born selfish. No one, not even a god, can be a philanthropist that treats all of humanity equally. Having said that, I don't believe we should stand for unfairness. It's precisely because everyone's selfish that we must protect the things we treasure. I'm saving my friend for my sake, and you're stopping Oji so you can see Chinatsu again—and that's okay. I act for my own sake, and you act for yours. Of course, sometimes people butt heads along the way to their respective goals. Letting it bother you won't do you any good."

Miyazawa discussed brutal subjects with remarkable composure. She halted and stared at him, unblinking. Just what sort of experiences had planted such ideas in an otherwise meek, mousy man?

"Um...what's wrong?" he asked with an awkward smile.

Yaeka gazed at him in silence, rummaging for a reply before giving up entirely.

His eyes darted about in unease until, eventually, his brow furrowed and he clenched both fists. "It's going to be okay! Let's leave the tricky stuff for later and concentrate on the now!" he assured her. "...And I hope that doesn't come off too pushy," he added in a quiet, more apprehensive tone, quickly returning to his awkward smile and scratching his head.

The dichotomy between his various mannerisms was staggering. One moment, Miyazawa was facing a masked man without so much as a flinch, and the next, he was grinning like a bashful idiot. She could hardly believe the same face could make both that cold, serious expression and that flustered smile.

"Yeh're weird," she blurted. Miyazawa stiffened, his shock palpable, and she felt her frustration lift a little. "How can yeh be so confident and so weak at the same time? Yeh just ruined that cool face yeh were making."

Still tense, he reddened even further. "Did I really look cool...?" he mumbled, hiding his face with his right hand while his left clasped the katana. Again, the juxtaposition between the two was hilariously stark. Yaeka couldn't help but snort with laughter.

"Who are yeh, anyway? Even if we've got the sword, can yeh actually use it?" She recalled him saying something about working at a town hall but frankly doubted a government establishment would allow him to wear his hair so long.

"U-Um... I learned how to use a sword back in high school. It's been a while, but I think I'll be okay. And, if you really wanna know who I am...I'm basically just a civil servant. That part was true," he revealed timidly, as if he wasn't expecting to be believed anyway. "And, umm...the best way to describe my job would probably be as a private onmyoji. Oh—but I don't just practice Onmyodo. Maybe it'd be more accurate to say I'm a Shintoist medium...?"

Despite his unconvincing explanation, he did seem to be a genuine medium.

"'Onmyoji' doesn't really describe everything I can do, and, um...above all, it sounds a bit too haughty for me," Miyazawa concluded with a self-conscious chuckle.

And again, in spite of his modesty, she had watched him interact with the tengu of Mount Kamiki on equal footing. And judging by the titanic snake that accompanied him as well, she thought the title of "onmyoji" suited him far better than "civil servant." His default demeanor, on the other hand, was wimpy. Meeting him on a surface level, Yaeka had assumed he possessed no spiritual power of any kind and that his long hair was a personal fashion choice rather than a tool for rituals.

"I agree with what the tengu said. I reckon people would be way more respectful of yeh if yeh acted a li'l sharper in yer everyday life." Although she'd been waiting some distance away, she'd overheard Gyoukai-bo's advice.

"Am I really that bad?!" despaired Miyazawa.

She huffed in disbelief and turned her attention back to the inner sanctuary.

Surmounting the grassy slope, she stepped up onto the rock, then down to land on the outer edge of the structure. Miyazawa followed. Gyoukai-bo had warned them with exaggerated threats of "a good few barriers" that would bar their path, but the inner sanctum was only around a hundred square feet.

After retrieving the key from its hiding place, Yaeka inserted it into the padlock that secured the shrine's back entrance. She turned the key and tried

to open the door, at which point a sharp snap resounded in her ears like static electricity.

“Wh—...?!”

Ah. The first barrier had appeared.

She bit her lip, automatically dropping the key and snatching her hand back.

Is this about etiquette? Maybe I gotta do it the way I learned... There was an incantation she was supposed to recite when she crossed to Itsuki Island or entered the inner sanctuary of a shrine. That was the only way through she could think of.

“O great miraculous god of the awesome cape, I offer my prayer to the peninsula of this land for the smiles of Shiotsuchinooji of Kamiki Shirahige and gods aside exorcise and purify.” In a garbled rush, she chanted the words whose meaning she didn’t truly understand, then clapped her hands together twice. “O great god your fearsome unseen power radiates the most sublime shine.” She kneeled and bowed her head deeply and repeated the incantation twice more.

Does this stuff even work when I have no idea what I’m saying? She recited with that panicked concern weighing on her mind, and on her second repetition, she fumbled the words. She started all over again. The anxiety set in deeper.

Why do I have to bow my head to this mean, stupid god in the first place?!

As Yaeka worked herself into a frenzy of frustration, Miyazawa placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Calm down. Breathe,” he said, mollifying her irritation. “It’s all right. Gyoukai’s working on the other side, remember? We need to find the vessel before Oji realizes we’re here. I’ll count from one to three, so time your breathing with that, okay? One...two...three... That’s it. Slowly does it. One...two...three...”

The way he lightly tapped her shoulder with each number felt nice. As though her frayed heart was being cleansed with a stream of nice, cool water, her anguish gradually dulled.

"There, I think you'll be okay now. Let's try again." Miyazawa stepped away from her, a gentle smile clear in his tone.

Yaeka didn't look back. She cast her eyes down, nodded, and began to chant again. Her words flowed a lot smoother that time. Her shoulders relaxed, and exhaling slowly, she tried to slot the key into the padlock again. That time, the key turned without shocking her. Wary of making any noise, she carefully eased the key out of the hole and set it on the floor, then gingerly pushed open the door and slipped inside.

As she crossed the threshold, the lantern's flame vanished.

"Looks like Gyoukai's power doesn't reach this far. Could you turn a light on?" Miyazawa asked.

"Aye," she whispered, blindly feeling for the switch. Electricity in a holy sanctuary intended for a god seemed somewhat redundant, but nighttime rituals were rather common at the shrine, and to hold them in the dark would not be easy for the humans.

She flicked the switch, and the blinding white glow of a fluorescent pierced her eyes. In the past, she'd always thought the light too dim—yet in that moment, it appeared unbelievably bright, as though her eyes had almost forgotten what light was.

Within the tiny sanctuary was an altar, and beyond that was enshrined a wooden box small enough to be picked up and carried. A staff decorated with paper streamers and a diminutive offertory stand preceded the altar. Miyazawa attempted to move the various offerings out of the way, and the staff shocked him in retaliation.

"Yaeka!" he whispered, urging her forward.

She fell to her knees in front of the altar. That time, she was able to lift the barrier on the first try.

"Good. Now...that's the vessel there, isn't it? Inside that box... I think it'll shock us if we try to force it open. Do your thing again, Yaeka," he instructed her calmly. She didn't dare look back at him.

He's way more used to this stuff than me, isn't he?

The more she realized just how extensive his knowledge was, the more ashamed she grew of the attitude she'd given him when they first met. He didn't appear offended—and that made her feel even worse. She would have preferred that he make fun of her in turn and give her a taste of her own medicine, but Miyazawa didn't seem like that sort of person.

Ugh, whatever! We can worry 'bout that later! She shook her head and forced herself to focus. It wasn't the time to fret over her manners. She rose again and approached the altar, then grasped the wooden box and placed it on the floor. She recited the incantation one more time, then opened the lid.

"It really is a rock..." she remarked, turning to Miyazawa with the box in her arms.

"All right." He nodded, completely unfazed.

"What do yeh mean, 'all right'? How are we gonna cut a rock?!"

"If this were a normal blade, it'd be impossible—but it's not a normal blade. It's imbued with the spiritual energy of Mount Kamiki," he explained. "And the vessel itself used to be a part of Mount Kamiki, too. With the power of the mountain, I think we can cut it. Could you take it out of the box?"

Yaeka cautiously lowered her hands into the container. She closed her palms around the rock and attempted to lift it. It was remarkably smooth and round for a mountain rock—likely eroded by the waves of the tide. When the shimenawa tied around it brushed her upper arm, however, a jolt zapped through her.

She clicked her tongue. *Another barrier?*

She quickly recited the incantation again before Miyazawa said anything, and removed the shimenawa. At last, she successfully extricated the stone from the box. She positioned it on the floor between them, glancing up at him. Mostly concealed anxiety pulled the elegant features of his face taut. He raised the sword, exhaling deliberately as he composed himself. He was clearly used to handling a blade.

I can't believe he's a civil servant. He's definitely not normal...

"Could you stand to the side? Sorry. I don't want to hurt you." He smiled.

Yaeka obediently acquiesced. The way he retained his poise and propriety in the midst of an emergency displayed that his power and knowledge was on an entirely different level from hers.

If I were powerful like him...I bet I coulda protected Chii all on my own.

For the first time, Yaeka sensed something brewing within her heart—something like a hazy image of the person she wanted to become.

THE salt water trapped inside the cavern flooded back into the open sea like an avalanche. Yanked away by its force, Ryouji found himself between waves under a moonless sky, still wearing nothing more than a pair of underpants. The stone barrier blocking the cave entrance was already fully submerged, so the current surged right over the top without smashing him against its jagged edge—his only saving grace. Because Ryouji was still a hopeless swimmer. His body didn't seem to possess the ability to float, and he was at a loss to navigate the rough waves he'd been dumped among. The moment he started to panic, however, Chinatsu saved him yet again. She tugged him up high enough that he could break above the water and gasp for air.

"What *is* that snake thingy?" she asked nervously, supporting Ryouji's shoulder.

He heaved a wheezing laugh between ragged breaths. "Hah...don't worry. That's...our pet. He's usually not that big, but...it's okay..." He paused, panting. "He's not *my* pet at all, actually; he's my friend's... He's gotta be here to save us."

No one other than Misato could hear the snake without touching him. Thus, Ryouji had no idea what the greedy snake was thinking or saying, though he was undoubtedly targeting Oji. The current had washed them some distance from the cave though, and the white serpent wasn't visible beyond the huge, undulating waves.

Nevertheless, help had arrived. That fact alone gave Ryouji immeasurable comfort. Shirota—and by extension, Misato—was looking for him and trying to save him. Blanketed by relief, he felt the despair and isolation gripping him simply melt away.

This situation is still pretty freakin' awful, though!

He accidentally inhaled a swell as it assaulted his face, and he choked as he attempted to pull himself above water. At the same time, a dull light appeared above his and Chinatsu's heads. It was the reflection of the old man's white kimono. Ryouji sucked his teeth in annoyance. Evidently, the god had managed to shake Shirota off.

"What a needless interruption. Still, we continue. Itsukigami—you must obey my command. Submerge that man," Oji ordered Chinatsu from where he hovered above the waves.

Chinatsu's body tensed as she continued to bolster Ryouji. A shallow, strained groan tore from her throat. She was fighting Oji's command. Her small nails dug into Ryouji's skin where she held his shoulders. Ryouji tried to swim away from her, sensing that whatever happened next wasn't going to be good.

"Let go of me for a sec, Chii. I'll be okay—"

A high-pitched noise suddenly cut him off.

For a moment, he thought it was a whistle—but it was the cry of a black kite careening through the night sky.

Kweeeeeee! the bird trilled as its expansive, glinting wings beat overhead.

"*You!*" shouted Oji in dismay. "*What are you doing here?!*"

A keening shriek reverberated through the heavens once more as if the bird was answering.

"A black kite...?" Chinatsu murmured in wonder, blinking up at the sky.

With one gigantic flap, the bird swooped down to Ryouji. As it drew closer, he realized it was not a bird but a winged man. The man glided between them and Oji and came to a stop with his back turned to the siblings, but not before Ryouji noted the crow-billed tengu mask covering his face. A cold light danced around the man, almost like will-o'-the-wisps.

"Well, y'see, I know this young man here. Would ya mind leavin' us to ourselves, Shiotsuchinooji?" the man asked in a relaxed, gruff tone.

"*I cannot!*" Oji responded, the irritation in his voice stark in comparison to the

other tengu's. "He is a necessary sacrifice if this isle is to survive! I must protect the island!"

"This is god for the people, huh? How mighty pathetic you are..." The man trailed off, his tone growing reminiscent. The way he perched his hands on his hips and shook his head in disappointment was surprisingly humanlike.

"Silence!" Oji barked, beginning to tremble in tense fury. Either he hated the tengu, or the tengu knew exactly which of his buttons to press.

In the meantime, Ryouji couldn't shake the feeling that he recognized the voice coming from under the man's mask. Luckily, Oji was distracted enough that Chinatsu had broken free of her compulsion, and her thin arms braced Ryouji as he rummaged through his memories.

"Before long, no one will reside on this island, and your duty will meet an end. There's no shame in comin' back to me," the crow-billed tengu said serenely. "There's no stoppin' the flow of time. No matter how much you resist, it ain't ever gonna stop. People move on, and times change. If there *is* anyone who can change that, it sure ain't either of us."

That inevitability applied to the entire country: Japan was declining slowly but surely from the outside in. Eventually, no one would live in the mountains or by the sea at all.

"We haven't the means to fight it because we ain't from the world of the livin'. I'm certain you already get that we can't change a thing by meddlin' in another realm's affairs. Though if ya still can't help but interfere because that's what the *shrinegoers* seriously want from Shiotsuchinooji, then I feel sorry for ya."

A god for the people... Going back to him... Ryouji slotted the pieces together. Hey, this tengu might be the deity that Oji stems from.

They were gods with different names, yet the same mountain was the source of their power. Additionally, the crow-billed depiction of tengu was older and more traditional, while the long-nosed variant had arisen in more recent history.

The winged tengu flapped once with a thud and swiveled to gaze down at

Ryouji submerged in the sea.

“Ahoy there, Ryouji. Doesn’t appear as though ya recognize me. What a cold-hearted boy,” the tengu gibed fondly, putting a hand to his mask and revealing the familiar face underneath.

“Hey!” Ryouji exclaimed in recognition. “You’re that guy my dad knew!” His body abruptly sank, probably because he’d expended all his breath yelling.

The tengu was one of the mysterious associates his adoptive father had called friend. His father had introduced the man as a colleague from the mountains, and Ryouji had assumed that meant the guy was some sort of Shugendo mountain ascetic or the like. The man was one of the people who’d instilled all sorts of survival skills in Ryouji—mainly through practical experience such as tossing him onto some unknown mountain or river.

The tengu laughed loudly in response. “Indeed. I am Gyoukai-bo of Mount Kamiki, friend of Sougen-bo of Mount Ashiho! You’re just as an atrocious swimmer as you always were, boy,” he chortled. “Now, Itsukigami—lemme carry you to shore.”

Chinatsu nodded.

Oji thrust his right arm up to stop Gyoukai. “*I cannot let you!*”

The sea parted with a furious splash, separating Chinatsu from the group. Ryouji lost his support, and Gyoukai scooped him out of the water as the waves threatened to swallow him.

“By golly, you’re a stubborn old fart!” snorted Gyoukai. “Hold on, Ryouji. We’re gettin’ outta here.”

“Can’t ya do somethin’ ‘bout him?! He’s *your* damn segment!” Ryouji cried as Gyoukai hauled him into the air.

“Hah.” Gyoukai loosed a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “Gods with active worship are strong. Meanwhile, the people have all but forgotten me. He could blow me away in a second.”

Gyoukai had claimed his origin was the mountain bearing the same name as the island, so both he and his younger iteration were rooted in the island itself.

The spiritual energy of the isle had accumulated and, once labeled by humans, become a god. People were what gave a deity its title and form. Without people, the island still possessed a spirit, albeit as nothing more than dust in the air without name or shape. If the spirit was to gain the power and authority of a god, then the people's faith—that which defined it—was absolutely necessary.

“You cannot run! I will not let you!” raged Oji, a gale suddenly picking up.

Gyoukai beat his wings several times to counterbalance the blast of wind. Ryouji could imagine that to bear his weight and fly in a straight line was already difficult, let alone with interference.

“Stick it out, Ryouji. You gotta take care of the life Sougen-bo spared ya. Don’t let it go without a fight.”

“‘Spared’ me?” Ryouji narrowed his eyes.

Sougen was his father’s name. He had taken Ryouji in on a whim and raised him with the knowledge to weather any situation. Yet after a mere five or six years, he vanished without notice and never came home again.

“Indeed. And ya keep some interestin’ company, don’tcha? At first, I didn’t understand why Sougen would spare you after five years of hard work, but...it’s a surprise to see that huge serpent so fond of ya. Just hang in there a li’l longer —the snake spirit said he’s willin’ to slay a god for ya!”

It took Ryouji a moment to work out that by “snake spirit,” Gyoukai meant Misato. He opened his mouth to respond, but his lips weren’t working as expected. He slipped as his right arm fell from Gyoukai’s shoulder. He should have felt cold given the strong wind ambushing his wet skin, but worryingly, he could barely feel it.

Crap... Did the cold get me? The thought crossed his dazed mind, recognizing the reality of his situation without sensing the reality itself. His consciousness waned.

“No!” yelled Gyoukai in a panic, readjusting Ryouji in his arms.

Oji didn’t miss his chance; a sudden rush of wind battered them as Ryouji’s vision began to blur. Oji was closing in on them when Gyoukai lost his balance. The angry god aimed his withered, branchlike arms for Gyoukai’s grip around

Ryouji's torso.

Ryouji had no strength left. If Gyoukai let go, nothing would remain between him and the crashing waves. The roar of the sea filled his ears, invading his skull. No—or was that his ears ringing? Amid his muddying consciousness, he could see only the eyes of the red, long-nosed tengu mask glaring at him. Then—

SCHWAP. The mask split cleanly in two before his very eyes, its halves falling apart with a crisp snap.

MISATO quietly kneeled before Oji's vessel, a rock about the size of a pumpkin. He gripped the sheath of the katana with his left hand and stared the stone down as he delicately put his right hand to the hilt. He could sense Oji's aura faintly encircling the rock and forming the final barrier. It was not one he could ask Yaeka to take care of. Besides, if they touched the vessel, Oji himself would likely be alerted to their presence. He figured a more sensible plan was to cut the barrier, clean and fast.

He lifted his hips and swiftly drew the blade, bringing his right knee up as he cleaved horizontally with a flash. The final barrier had been broken. He brandished the sword above his head at the shortest trajectory, still bending over his knee. He let go of the sheath and his left hand joined the right on the katana's handle.

He flipped the blade.

Swiftly and silently and as smooth as cool water.

Maintaining the momentum of snatching the blade from its sheath, Misato positioned the sword high above his head, directly in line with his core.

A vertical slash from heaven to earth. That's all.

"Hyah!" He reinforced the blade with both his spirit and physical weight as he whipped it down with all his might.

I can do it. So long as he wielded a sword heavy with the power of Mount Kamiki, he could slay a god.

He snapped his eyes open, aiming for the middle of the rock, and watched as

the katana's edge sank into its surface. He met no resistance, slicing the stone in half as though sliding a hot knife through butter. The tip of the blade wedged in the floorboards.

A beat of tense silence passed. Then the two halves of the rock broke apart with a snap, as if only just realizing their fate.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

A terrible scream ripped through the air, the spirit's final cry assaulting Misato's entire body. He quietly got to his feet and swished the sword diagonally to shake off what remained of the god's aura. The hemispheres of stone rolled in opposite directions, then crumbled, forming two little heaps of pebbles.

Misato moved to scabbard the sword with the correct form, only to find that the sheath was still on the floor at his feet. "Oh," he said with a sharp exhale, transferring the sword to his left hand and reaching down with his right.

"Yeh...yeh seriously cut it," Yaeka murmured in surprise beside him.

"Yup. We did it," he replied, his voice airy with relief. He truly had not wielded a sword since high school. If not for Yaeka's presence to ground him, he would have fretted about cutting off his own leg by mistake.

He picked up the sheath and stood back up with a grunt. Just as he slipped the blade inside, a buzz of sound approached. He could hear several pairs of footsteps and a man's voice converging on them.

"Who's in there?!" boomed the voice of a man in his prime.

"Dad!" Yaeka exclaimed quietly.

Evidently, Oji's dying howl had reached the lower half of the shrine, too. Misato slowly, so slowly turned around, still clutching the katana. A priest in a ceremonial kimono and a smaller, slightly younger man stared up at Misato from the bottom of a wooden stair. Misato's mouth gaped, unsure how to respond to their accusatory glares. Then, remembering Gyoukai and Yaeka's advice, he steeled his confidence, narrowed his eyes, and lifted his chin.

"I came to this island with my friend on a fishing trip," he announced in a low

tone. "My friend fell into the sea, and I believe the Japan Coast Guard contacted you to rescue him. Does that ring any bells?"

AFTER hearing what sounded like a shriek on the wind, Toshihiko Kamiki returned to the shrine's main hall with a sense of powerlessness and grief.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed. Akie, Toshihiko's sister-in-law and Yaeka's mother, was crying in front of the tatami-covered oratory. All the others present were shrine officials who had been crammed in the hall since earlier that evening. Some stood next to Akie, while others crouched in the corner of the room, and all of them were slouching their shoulders in exhaustion. Bunji's constant prayer hummed at the very back of the room, accompanied only by the sound of Akie's weeping and their gruff, heavy sighs.

It's awful that they don't even have the courage to stop Bunji's ritual and tell him about Yaeka...

Akie had rushed to the shrine to inform Bunji that their daughter was missing, and the officials had stopped her—one of them even adding, "It's probably too late anyway." At that, Akie had collapsed to the floor in despair. Both she and everyone else were scared and tired, confronted by a chain of unprecedented events.

The circumstances were novel to all of them. Never had a divine message signaled the arrival of a new god while both Itsukigami and its shrine maiden still lived, nor had there ever been a distress call on the day of the welcoming ritual.

Apparently, the SOS had come in just as Toshihiko was warning Yaeka not to go outside. By that time, Bunji had already begun the ceremony on the highest step of the offertory hall toward the back of the shrine. Because he was forbidden from taking any calls, one of the shrine officials held his phone, and when the request arrived, the man couldn't decide how to respond quickly enough. He hung up on the coast guard to weigh interrupting Bunji or asking one of the boat owners to sail out. When the official realized that the person in trouble was potentially the next Itsukigami, he recalled the island's custom of staying indoors on the night of the god's ascension.

Although Toshihiko didn't know much about the island's history, to his recollection, no one had ever required assistance during the ritual in all the years since their sea rescue team was established. Consequently, no one present knew how to deal with the situation. Even so, Toshihiko could not stomach the idea of letting someone die in their waters in order to enshrine the deceased as their god. After a long, fierce debate, they decided to contact the person who owned the biggest boat after Bunji's.

But they're still a resident of Kamiki Island...and too scared to set sail tonight. One look at that awful storm was all it took.

A storm, so furious that to dispatch a rescue vessel was insanity, had suddenly assailed the island. Oji was attempting to kill the target he had chosen to become Itsukigami, they realized. Fear had grasped the air of Shirahige Shrine ever since.

That was when Akie and Toshihiko broke curfew to go to the shrine. After calling Yaeka to the table at dinnertime, Akie checked Yaeka's bedroom to find her missing, then rushed to Toshihiko's house to look for her there. When he learned what had happened, he regretted not escorting Yaeka home from the very bottom of his heart.

To ignore both the victim and Yaeka... This has gone far beyond stickin' to our traditions. What the hell's going on here?

Battered by fear and regret, Toshihiko had ended up waiting in the oratory alongside everyone else, until—

An ear-splitting, wretched cry, almost like a dying scream, sounded from further within the building. That its timbre could belong to a human was difficult to believe; Toshihiko was sure vocal cords couldn't make a noise like that. It came from above them in the deepest recess of the shrine, and he didn't think for a second that Bunji was its source. It was too inhuman, too atmospheric to have been produced by any sort of living creature.

"What was that?!"

Everyone raised their heads in terror. Bunji's prayer had stopped. Toshihiko stood, but no one else seemed to have the energy to follow suit. Gritting his teeth, he sprinted to his brother within the offering hall.

“Toshihiko?! What’re yeh doing here?!” Bunji greeted him with surprise. He knew nothing of the drowning victim, nor that his daughter had vanished into the sea. Toshihiko winced; he opted to ascertain the origin of the sound first.

“I’ll explain, but before that, where’d that scream come from?”

“...Above,” Bunji murmured, staring up the stairs.

“The inner sanctuary?!”

They both looked up at the door at the top of the steps. Behind the door was an altar with a variety of valuable offerings, such as earthenware pottery, and a stand that held food, drink, and a heihaku staff.

“Let’s take a look,” Toshihiko said, creeping up the flight toward the inner sanctum.

“Hey,” Bunji whispered in alarm, catching his arm.

His brother always had been more conservative. Toshihiko had never thought of himself as particularly progressive or proactive, yet in that moment, on that day of peril, a strong sense of crisis in his heart warned that they could no longer simply sit back and do as they always had done. His heart told him that just once, he had to set his dependable brother’s judgment aside and press forward.

If only I’d stayed with Yaeka before. Even if I couldn’t take her out to sea, I at least shoulda seen her home. His regret had overturned his senseless fear of Oji and finally woken him to reality. And no matter how terrifying that reality was, they would achieve nothing by averting their gaze, plugging their ears, and trembling in the dark.

“All sortsa terrible things have happened since yeh started the ritual. I mean, nothing’s been normal since the divine message. I think we’ll be in more danger if we stay out here without seein’ or doin’ anything,” he said, pleading but firm.

The inner sanctuary housed the god. It was only accessed once a year on a specific day by a specific person. Normally, the interruption of a ritual that was supposed to continue all night and passage past the altar into the inner sanctum would be inexcusable.

Nevertheless, Bunji appeared to recognize the gravity in Toshihiko's demeanor. He nodded, then tucked his wooden ceremonial baton inside his kimono before ascending the stairs. He opened the door at the very back of the offertory hall, where more wooden steps connected the two buildings. With the door wide open, they could see that the light in the inner sanctuary was already on, and they heard movement from within.

"Who's in there?!" Bunji demanded.

The figure that appeared above was a stranger to Toshihiko—and incredibly beautiful. Long, flowing black hair that seemed to absorb darkness itself stretched down their back, and their chiseled cheeks had an otherworldly pale glow. While their clothing was nothing out of the ordinary, their gorgeous features, bearing, and distinctive hair exuded so much grace that the clothes were easily ignored. Had the figure been garbed in traditional dress, Toshihiko would have thought a spirit had graced their shrine.

"I came to this island with my friend on a fishing trip," a cold, ringing voice said. "My friend fell into the sea, and I believe the Japan Coast Guard contacted you to rescue him. Does that ring any bells?" The unsaid implication of his words was clear: he knew they had left his friend to die.

"N-No, I haven't heard a thing! What're you talking about?" refuted Bunji with a mix of surprise, bewilderment, and indignation. That was true; no one had told him anything.

The beautiful man narrowed his eyes in contempt. A high-pitched clang sounded from his hands, and Toshihiko's eyes drifted downward in wonder. He was holding a sword. "I'm an exorcist from the Abnormal Disaster Unit in Tomoe Town Hall's Crisis Management Division. I came here for leisure, but when the waves suddenly abducted my friend, I was forced to borrow this holy blade from the old god of this island—the manifestation of Mount Kamiki." Evidently perceiving Toshihiko's stare, the young man calling himself an exorcist showed him the sword.

The manifestation of Mount Kamiki... So he got the katana from the shrine up on the mountain?

Even Toshihiko was only vaguely aware of that shrine's existence. The tengu

rumored to dwell within was more well-known than the shrine itself since the legend was used to scare the children on the island.

"Yeh're lying, Dad. Of course yeh knew 'bout it," a higher voice piped. Another, smaller figure came into view. Toshihiko's eyes widened at the familiar tone.

"Yaeka! What on earth are yeh doing there?!" Bunji scolded, wholly ignorant of her disappearance.

"Yaeka! *Oh, thank goodness yeh're safe!*" cried Toshihiko in relief, falling to his knees. He'd thought he would never again see her in that life.

Bunji turned to Toshihiko with a face that commanded answers.

"Uncle... I'm sorry for making yeh worry, but I just had to stop him. 'Course, I didn't want Chii to go away, and...I just..." She paused, her face contorting and her fists clenching as she struggled to speak her next words. "I really didn't want yeh or Dad to kill someone for the island's sake."

Bunji opened his mouth in protest, and the sword-wielding man cut in. "Yaeka told me about Itsukigami and this island's faith. But I promise you, my friend was very much alive when something in the sea dragged him in and stole him away. I would never deny you your faith outright, but I cannot lose my friend."

Bunji pursed his lips tersely. Their glares collided as Bunji glowered upward with a stern expression and the man gazed down at him frostily.

The man lifted his right hand, pointing the blade at them. "That's why I cut the vessel of Kamiki Shirahige Shrine in half. To stop Shiotsuchinooji, the deity of this shrine, from killing my friend and making him Itsukigami."

"You cut it?!" the brothers exclaimed in unison.

The young man slowly nodded. Toshihiko automatically ascended the stairs in disbelief. He'd heard the vessel of Shirahige Shrine was a large, round rock. It wasn't the sort of thing that *could* be cut. Apparently thinking along the same lines, Bunji followed him.

"You're welcome to check," said the young man, stepping aside to allow them into the inner sanctuary.

Bunji approached first, Toshihiko behind him. “What have you done...?!” he gasped, going rigid. Toshihiko peered over Bunji’s shoulder and his jaw fell open.

There was no rock but the two heaps of pebbles scattered on the floor.

“Then, that awful scream... Was that Oji?” Toshihiko guessed. If that were the case, the feeling suffusing him was not concern but relief. No one would have to be scared anymore.

Meanwhile, Bunji’s fists balled and his shoulders quivered. In his position as a priest who was supposed to protect the shrine, he had to be unbearably distressed. His kimono-clad back swelled in anger, and bloodlust stifled the air of the tiny sanctum. Yaeka glared at him. The young man calmly gripped the sword.

Damn it, I gotta stop him!

Toshihiko panicked. Bunji’s temper was far more vicious than his own. If Bunji raised his hand against them, the situation would grow even more dire. Just as Bunji started to pull back his right arm, Toshihiko reached out to grab it.

“Stop right there!”

The sound of beating wings and a thick voice descended on them from the gloom.

“**MISATO**, I’ve got Ryouji,” Gyoukai urgently announced as he swooped through the door from outside, carrying an almost-naked Ryouji on his shoulders. “Do that soul-soothing ritual like ya did with the young’un. Time is of the essence.”

“Gyoukai! Ryouji!” Misato threaded between the two men blocking the doorway and wrapped an arm around Ryouji’s freezing, unconscious body.

Misato helped carry him to the back of the sanctuary and laid him down to check his pulse. It was frighteningly weak. And his face was so pale under the yellowed fluorescent light that he looked like a different person altogether.

Misato quickly unbound his hair and yanked a few strands free, then wet

them on his tongue before twisting them around Ryouji's wrists. He placed Ryouji's hands on his abdomen and tied the ends of the hair together.

He's still alive. I can make it. Just keep calm and breathe slowly. I know I can save him.

He kneeled at Ryouji's side, bowed twice, then loudly clapped his hands twice. It was the same ritual he'd performed on Yaeka. Keeping his palms pressed together, Misato chanted, "All that is pure shall not be corrupted. Ascribed to my relation with the gods, no prayer of mine will go unheeded. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!"

He squeezed Ryouji's hands. Taking a long, deep breath, he concentrated on letting his own life force flow into them. Gyoukai was still lending Misato power, so there was no concern that his energy might run dry. He focused his mind entirely on pouring as much into Ryouji's body as it could possibly take.

I won't let you die. I can't!

"Come forth! Flourish and sway!"

He tethered Ryouji's soul. He filled the body edging on eternal sleep with life.

Ryouji's body jolted from head to toe as if he had been shocked, and after a moment, he relaxed and his shallow breaths deepened. Misato held a couple of fingers to his wrist to confirm that his pulse had strengthened, then at last exhaled a sigh of relief.

His life was no longer in danger. If all was well, Ryouji would regain consciousness after some rest, as Yaeka had.

That said, he was in a dreadful state. Misato started to undo his shirt to give Ryouji more than a single pair of underwear to keep warm, and Yaeka reached in front of him. She was offering him the baseball jacket that was Ryouji's to begin with.

"Thank you." Misato smiled, covering Ryouji's torso.

"S'fine," Yaeka responded with a pout, averting her eyes.

Misato glanced between Ryouji and Gyoukai in appeal; he wasn't confident he could transport Ryouji's much bigger and heavier frame out of the shrine.

Gyoukai replied with an assenting nod, then turned to address the two men. “Now, believers of Oji! The god you worship made an attempt on a human’s life for the sake of your island. This young man here slew your god to save that human. I’m sure ya both got your excuses and complaints, but this man won the battle. In the battle between one human’s life and the future of your island, this man won.” He folded his arms imposingly. “I am Gyoukai-bo of Mount Kamiki—the creature you call the tengu of the haunted shrine! And I decided to lend my power not to Oji, but to this young man here! Bahahahaha!” He stretched out his wings and made a big show of flapping them, demonstrating that he possessed great powers despite his otherwise utterly normal appearance.

The two men’s faces paled as they froze in place. Though they worked at the shrine and enacted its practices, they had never actually seen Oji or used any spells. They gaped, totally speechless, at the huge, flying man with his even larger wings.

“Dearie me. Are you unable to forget your fear from when you were kids? Back when your parents threatened you with my name and made you so frightened you wet your beds?” teased Gyoukai, assuming the persona one would expect from a tengu. Misato glared at him. “I s’pose I’m not as obsolete as I thought! Naw, Misato—don’t give me that scary face. I get it already.”

Gyoukai sighed with a shrug. “Your god lost, so that god-welcomin’ ritual of yours is canceled. If you’re boutta rage that some outsider got in the way of your tradition, then let’s just say I was the one who stopped ya instead. In return, I want ya to treat these two men like what they are—welcome guests who got caught up in somethin’ horrible. You were born in such prosperous and peaceful times, and I’m certain you don’t *really* wanna sacrifice a guest of honor to the island,” he admonished, his tone kind, understanding.

The brothers goggled at him in bewilderment, but at least the tension in the air had slackened. The priest was still visibly livid, and his younger brother—Yaeka’s uncle, Toshihiko—spoke up first with a very cautious nod.

“I getcha,” he said. “Bunji, we gotta move that man at the back somewhere warmer. We never wanted somebody to die, after all, and...after this, I hope we’ll stop with these frankly terrifyin’ customs.”

“Toshihiko!” screeched the priest in disbelief. “What will happen to us then?! The god of our shrine... Oji... He’s gone!” he said in a voice strained with sorrow.

“Don’t fret now,” Gyoukai interrupted in a deep, compassionate rumble. “Shiotsuchinooji’s rock might be in pieces, but so long as you revere him, a god will one day return—even with a vessel of pebbles or grains of sand. A god only dies for good when forgotten by the people. But...Toshihiko—there is one thing I’d like ya to keep in mind.”

Toshihiko flinched in surprise and glanced up at Gyoukai, who stared him in the eye and continued grimly, “Gods do not control their believers. A god is... Well, ya might not like to hear that they’re your innermost nature, but they’re at least defined by the way you perceive and connect to the world. Maybe it’d be most accurate to say a god is the collective subconscious of its believers. Basically, if ya stop believin’ in your god, Oji will never awaken again. Likewise, if ya keep on livin’ the same as you always did, the same god will come back one day—the same Oji that traps people in the waves and forces them to bring prosperity to the island. If ya want Oji to take a different form next time, then it’s you folks who need to change.”

Toshihiko and Bunji’s jaws tensed. Meanwhile, Misato fussed over Ryouji, who was wet with freezing cold water and lying on freezing cold floorboards. He squeezed Ryouji’s hands where they rested atop his chest.

Gyoukai’s tone became solemn. “Ya mustn’t just sit and wait for your downfall. Keep your beaks open like baby chicks and ask for the blessing of visitors for once. Ya can’t keep maintainin’ the status quo and never allowin’ change into your lives.”

“You ask a lot of them,” Misato interjected without thinking.

He understood what Gyoukai was trying to say. Merely deterring the residents from leaving would not suffice if they truly wanted to restore vitality to a declining, aging community—all the more so for a remote location like Kamiki Island. They needed to bring in new people from other places. Plenty of obstacles prevented that, such as geography, industry, and economic stability, yet Misato felt that the most important change was one of attitude: they needed to be more welcoming and accommodating to outsiders.

Misato had once met a man who ended up living in a house haunted by an ogress because the nearby village drove him out when he didn't participate in the neighborhood council upon moving there. In many rural communities, a barrier persisted between new residents and locals. If they did not traverse that barrier and if regional taboos were not properly communicated to the newcomers, they could get into spiritual trouble. Time and time again, Misato found himself solving cases that could have been avoided if less conflict existed between outsiders and the people already living somewhere. At times, he himself felt the pain of being an Outsider keenly.

To accept visitors from beyond the island was to change themselves. If they refused to change, demanded that others follow the code of their community, and treated visitors as no more than tools to sustain their prosperity, they were no different from Oji when he summoned an Itsukigami and exploited its power.

But Misato also knew that people didn't do so out of sheer malice or selfishness; they lamented their declining population too, after all. They were anxious, scared of change, and wanted no more than to continue living in peace. An influx of residents stressed regional resources and systems such as garbage collection sites. If a stranger moved in next door, there was no guarantee that one's tranquil life was safe from interference. And if too much change happened in too little time, the community as they once knew it would disappear—the community they were trying to save in the first place.

Gyoukai's right, but making genuine change will be really rough for them.

In a city, it was possible to hire someone to provide a service, whether the vendor was the government or a private company. In the countryside, where such services did not exist, people had no choice but to do the task themselves. As such, cooperation was necessary. When one did not need to rely on their neighbor in an emergency—as in a city or metropolis—it often did not matter what their neighbors were like. To tolerate a range of different circumstances and people was easy if they did not directly affect you. In contrast, if members of a community necessarily had to ask one another for help at any given moment without promise of compensation, people obviously concerned themselves more with what kind of folks their neighbors were.

"You think it's askin' a lot, huh? Well, you're right. But if ya really crave somethin', ya got no choice but to put in the effort and pay the price," Gyoukai said with an assured nod. His confidence was that of a god that had observed people from on high for many generations.

Come to think of it...Gyoukai's still on Kamiki Island. After so many generations of kids fearing the tengu of the haunted shrine, he's definitely still a functioning deity here.

In fact, at that very moment, a guardian deity that watched over the residents was proffering guidance and forgiveness. Surely that was a blessing for the people of Kamiki Island. And as the one who'd destroyed Oji, Misato was silently relieved.

Gyoukai's words seemed to appease the priest's fury. The brothers looked at each other, unsure of what to do. Misato watched them anxiously, eager to get Ryouji somewhere safe as soon as possible.

All of a sudden, Ryouji's hand twitched in Misato's grip. Misato leaned over him to study his face. His sickly pale eyelids were twitching, too.

"Ryouji!" Misato shouted, unable to stop himself.

Ryouji uttered a quiet groan, his eyes opening the tiniest crack. Without glasses to obscure his irises, Misato could see the ceiling reflected in their green shimmer as Ryouji struggled to process his surroundings. Misato bent further to put himself in Ryouji's field of vision, and his long hair slid over his shoulder to brush against Ryouji's collarbone.

"Wha—?" Ryouji jerked, the sensation seeming to tickle him. His eyes blew wide open, and he blinked hard. "Misato...?" he said in a weak, hoarse voice.

"I'm here," Misato replied, his throat strangely thick with relief.

"Awake now, are ya? Good work, Misato," said Gyoukai approvingly. "Right! We're done for the night! If ya stay up past your bedtimes, I just might spirit you away to the mountains! Fetch those two a nice hot bath and somewhere comfortable to sleep," he commanded, clapping his hands twice loudly.

Toshihiko approached them with a guilty look on his face, then crouched beside Misato to check on Ryouji. And in spite of his sour expression, Bunji

made his way back to the main hall to inform everyone else of what had transpired.

Yaeka, who had been listening in silence up to that point, snatched Gyoukai's sleeve. "Hey!" she hollered, and everyone turned to look at her. "What about Chii? What happened to Chii?!"

Her goal was to ensure that no one stole her precious Itsukigami away, and Gyoukai still hadn't said what had happened to the god.

"Chinatsu's safe. You could even go visit her tomorrow if ya wanna. But, more importantly, I believe you have an apology to make, young lady." Gyoukai was most likely referring to her mother—yet he hadn't been present when she and Misato had that conversation.

Misato blinked in surprise, and Gyoukai simply raised one of his thick eyebrows and pointed mischievously to his ear. "I pick up all sortsa business with these ears. I can even hear her weepin' downstairs in heartache right now."

The color drained from Yaeka's cheeks.

"Yaeka," Toshihiko said gently. "Your mom's been worried 'bout yeh ever since she noticed yeh gone at dinnertime. I think she's still in the front hall. Go to her."

Yaeka nodded, then dashed out of the room after Bunji. The thump of her footsteps on the wooden stairs faded into the distance in just a few seconds. Bunji yelled after her in reprimand, and his voice soon faded as well.

Ryouji wrenched his wrists apart, breaking the hair restraining them before clasping Misato's hand to haul himself into a seated position. He watched father and daughter leave as he slid his arms into the jacket draped over his torso.

"So *that's* Yaeka, huh...?" he murmured. When Misato gave him a puzzled look, he elaborated: "Chinatsu mentioned her back on Itsuki Island."

"Yeh're both welcome back at my house for now," Toshihiko proposed, getting to his feet. "It's small and messy but...at least warmer than here. Once things have settled at the main house, we'll get a guest room ready for yeh there. It's gettin' late."

Misato nodded and rose to his knees to pull his phone out of his pocket and check the time. No matter how many times he pressed the button, however, the screen remained black and blank.

Crap, I forgot! It got totally submerged! And in seawater, too!

Misato's phone did not have any fancy, expensive features like waterproofing. Overcome by an abrupt exhaustion, he slumped back onto his calves.

"Oh, jeez," Ryouji quipped as he noticed Misato's drooping shoulders, "I coulda sworn there's a common sayin' for this exact situation... Oh, *right*. Ya get whatcha pay for."

"Shut up!" Misato snapped. "It's not like I planned on dumping myself in the sea!"

Ryouji appeared to have lost his clothes, phone, and even his signature sunglasses. Misato opened his mouth to launch a counterattack like usual, yet as his eyes landed on Ryouji—wet from head to toe with none of his normal effects—the severity of his partner's condition caused the words to catch in his throat.

Ryouji heaved himself to his feet with a grunt of effort, then laughed lightly as he smoothed his slick bangs back. "There's another good sayin' for our situation right now though: while there's life, there's hope." His voice was colored by cheerful hints of the same old Ryouji, and that alone finally allowed Misato to relax.

Ryouji walked a few paces after Toshihiko but stopped when he realized Misato was still slouched on the floor unmoving. "Misato?"

"Oh, um, sorry. It's just... I don't seem to be able to stand up," Misato admitted with a sheepish chuckle.

"Huh?!" said Ryouji, alarmed.

Anxiety no longer fueled Misato's muscles, and a devastating fatigue had overcome him, weighing him to the floor.

"I don't blame ya one bit," Gyoukai said, grabbing Misato's waist. "You've exerted your meridians like mad, commandin' all my power as well as your own.

Lemme carry ya." He easily hoisted Misato into the air like one would a child and held him braced across the expanse of his shoulders all the way to Toshihiko's house.

Chapter 6: After the Storm

THE following day, the sun had just passed its apex in the sky to begin its slow descent.

“Misatoooo...” Ryouji groaned, “why would ya give *all* our fish to the old man?”

They walked along the sandbank to Itsuki Island, the crossing revealed once more by the low tide. Various chaos had ensued even after they got to Toshihiko’s house the previous night, and it was midnight when they eventually went to bed. By the time Ryouji woke up, the day was already past noon. Meanwhile, Misato had risen earlier that morning, gone back to where they left their things at the marine park, and given all of the fish they’d caught to Gyoukai.

Toshihiko had offered them a simple meal the night before, and after using the bath in the main house of the Kamiki estate, they’d retired to a guest room laid out with futons. All of the clothing they wore, besides their underwear and Ryouji’s baseball jacket, was kindly lent to them by the family. Of course, Ryouji didn’t have any hair product with him either, so it remained flat and sad after his bath.

Appearance aside, considering he’d teetered on the verge of death, Ryouji felt astonishingly well. And while Ryouji had warmed up and eaten a good meal, and subsequently enjoyed a good night’s sleep, Misato had been physically unable to force any food down his throat the night before. He was on his back in a listless state for almost an hour after Gyoukai carried him to Toshihiko’s house.

That’s how bad I made him push himself... Damn.

Ryouji’s gaze fell to his wrists. Misato had apparently tied them together with his hair to perform a requiem ritual. He’d felt heat pour into them as Misato filled him with life force via the strands.

"Like I said, they'd probably go bad by the time we got home..." mumbled Misato in excuse, his eyebrows drawing together pathetically.

Ryouji was glad that Misato had recovered from the previous day, yet in his fishing inexperience, Misato had made a poor decision, presumably because he didn't want to interrupt Ryouji's rest. Ryouji wished the guy had just woken him regardless.

"They woulda at least lasted the day in the cooler box! Or we coulda bought some ice or borrowed someone's fridge..."

Instead, his beautiful catches were already long gone—right into the stomach of the rugged man striding beside them. Ryouji had snared so many huge, fresh mackerel. He was utterly devastated by the loss.

"Ryouji!" snapped Gyoukai, poking the back of Ryouji's head and clicking his tongue. "Has it already slipped your mind that *you* got baited instead of those fish? I won't hear ya complain 'bout mackerel when you almost drowned! Just let 'em be an offering of thanks for me breakin' my back to save ya!"

He made a good point, but with Gyoukai, Ryouji could never be thoughtful or obliging. His father had put him in Gyoukai's care on a regular basis as a child, and he knew better than anyone how the man could work someone to exhaustion. Out of all of Ryouji's "mentors," Gyoukai was by far the cruelest.

Misato giggled to himself. "You're acting like you're back in elementary school."

Blood immediately flushed Ryouji's cheeks in embarrassment.

There was not a cloud in the sky as the waves lapped calmly around them, reflecting the rays of the autumnal sun. It was warm enough that he'd worked up a sweat from walking. He dipped a finger into the collar of his shirt and used the fabric to fan his skin—a gesture that prompted Gyoukai and Misato to burst into laughter for some reason.

"Hey! What's so funny?! Keep up!" Yaeka, who was leading their party, turned around and raised her eyebrows at them.

She was Itsukigami's shrine maiden and Chinatsu's honorary little sister. Ryouji had heard that she'd helped defeat Oji alongside Misato the night

before.

“Sorry,” Misato replied, running to catch up with her at a half jog.

Ryouji trailed at the rear, glancing at Gyoukai as he matched the god’s languid pace. Although they were almost the same height, he instinctively looked upward in search of Gyoukai’s face. He’d done so countless times in the past, after all.

“Hey,” he ventured hesitantly. “If you’re a tengu, does that mean all the other guys were, too?”

His adoptive father had claimed to be one. Ryouji had seen him use remarkably strange charms and spells, so Ryouji had believed him. But he’d never noticed that there were other nonhumans among his father’s circle, too.

“Not all of ‘em, but a good number. The guy Sougen used to leave you with most often was human, through and through. It was difficult to teach ya ‘bout the modern world just with us tengu, y’see.”

Before his father vanished into thin air, the same man often looked after the kid Ryouji. He was evidently a lecturer at a cram school and had taught Ryouji a general overview of the education typically received in middle school. Ryouji had no clue what he was supposed to do with an X or a Y in a mathematical sense—he probably didn’t back then, either—but he at least knew that was a thing. Knowledge of such concepts allowed him to integrate into society more easily.

“Right. And...you said yesterday that my old man ‘spared’ me. Whaddya mean?”

If Gyoukai meant the occasion when his father happened to rescue him after he almost drowned, that didn’t seem like the right word to use at all.

Ryouji stared at Gyoukai’s face, searching his gaze. No sunglasses obscured his true vision. The blindingly pale landscape filled his sight, illuminated by the bright, perfectly warm autumnal sunlight.

Even when I concentrate, he just looks like a totally normal guy to me.

His adoptive father had dubbed his peculiar eyes “tengu eyes,” and of all

things, they were unable to tell tengu apart from living humans. How stupidly ironic.

“Oh, yeah—I said that. And you remembered.” Gyoukai paused. “Sougen picked you up so ya could inherit his name. He took you in and raised ya without ever lettin’ ya visit home. Sure, your parents were washed away at the same time as ya, but your grandparents were still alive back then, weren’t they?”

True enough, Ryouji’s grandparents had lived at the Karino estate for almost ten years after the accident. Of course, Ryouji had no idea of their existence at the time due to his amnesia, but a Good Samaritan would have returned him home.

Ryouji nodded, conflicted.

“Exactly,” Gyoukai hummed, crossing his arms. “We tengu live long, but we ain’t immortal. Sougen was a pretty old tengu; he pushed his way through the mountains during his training and earned his power a long, long time ago. People that become tengu durin’ their lifetime are still flesh and blood, y’see. With a human body, we can easily interact with people and retain our existence even if people stop believin’ in us or we leave our mountain. Basically, we can go wherever we like.” His tone grew grave. “But no matter how powerful we are, our bodies will one day break down and perish. That’s why our abilities and memories are passed from person to person. Long ago, mountain temples chose their strongest devotees to ascend, but most have scrapped those sortsa arrangements now. The same thing happened with Sougen’s mountain. So...he found ya, raised ya, and trained ya to succeed him.”

That was Ryouji’s first time hearing anything of the sort. Speechless, his jaw dropped. Sougen had told Ryouji nothing other than that he was a tengu. He didn’t even know where his father’s mountain was.

Gyoukai eyed him in amusement. “You musta been with us for about six years, right? Since we tengu are pretty free to go where we want, most of us visit each other and keep in touch. Everyone knew Sougen was comin’ to his end, and everyone knew he was raisin’ ya to succeed him. Needless to say, we were all gobsmacked when he left you in Tokyo and just up and disappeared.

Hahaha!" He chortled in affection.

Sure enough, about six years after the Sougen took Ryouji in, when Ryouji finally started to feel like he could get by on his own, the guy disappeared into thin air. He'd left Ryouji alone for a few days or months plenty of times before, so Ryouji had assumed he died during one such regular trip. In reality, his lifespan had at last petered out.

"So, when ya say he spared my life..." Ryouji trailed off in bewilderment. At some point, they'd both stopped walking.

Gyoukai nodded. "He spared your human life. We found out when we discovered a note he left behind on his mountain. He asked to keep it a secret from ya, but I'd wager it's about time ya knew. In his will, leavin' you human was his last request. He asked us to help him do that," Gyoukai recalled. "Turns out he was pretty fond of ya all right! He couldn't bear to rip ya from your humanity and force ya to live as a tengu for hundreds of years. Right at the end, I'd say he finally figured out what it meant to be a real dad." His tone was wistful and nostalgic; he clearly missed his friend.

Ryouji's bottom lip began to tremble. His mind was chaotic with questions that had no answer. *Why? Why would he never...?*

"Damn it...! Why...why would he...? That *dumbass* of a dad!" he barked, clenching his fists.

What use was it finding out after so long? He couldn't ask a dead man any questions, nor would he ever get an answer. He'd resented his father for leaving him. He'd told himself that his father was just that sort of man—a flake, unreliable—and waited for him to come home. Then waited some more. And some more. Until, eventually, he'd given up.

"Hahaha! You said it," Gyoukai guffawed. "He was a mighty pain in the posterior. I'm sure ya know that better than anyone. He didn't want ya to shoulder the guilt of what happened to him, so he took it all on himself. You might not be related by blood, but ya sure took on his personality, didn'tcha? Just don't try to do everythin' on your own like him." He shot Ryouji a teasing smile.

"I'm not gonna." Ryouji pouted. "Mainly cuz there's a guy at my house who'd

turn into a sun-dried tomato if I disappeared.” His eyes drifted awkwardly until they settled on the dazzling Seto Inland Sea. “I gotta look after him,” he whispered to the crashing waves.

Gyoukai’s sharp ears seemed to catch the addendum, for he suddenly exploded with laughter.

But...when I think back on what my old man said...

Once, when Ryouji was railing against his circumstances at the age of twelve or thirteen, his father lectured him on the significance of skill building. He’d recalled the exchange when he was in the cave the previous night. That Sougen had said all that with the intention of turning Ryouji into a tengu and bequeathing him the mountain was difficult to believe.

“Ya need the skills to match your natural gifts. That’s the quickest way of gettin’ whatcha want. If you can properly wield the talent you were born with, you’ll find that people just as talented will gravitate to ya. Once ya got all that, you’ll be able to live a normal life,” he’d said.

Ryouji had no way of knowing for sure. There was no telling whether his father’s plans for him had changed along the way or always remained the same.

He could not talk to a dead man. Therefore, the truth didn’t matter. Ryouji could decide for himself what their relationship had been.

With that thought on his mind, he gazed out into a bright, endlessly glittering world.

“**YAEKA**, um... It might not be my place to say this, but could I talk to you about something?” Misato had asked her that morning. While Ryouji was still fast asleep, he’d approached her with a proposition.

When introducing themselves more formally the night before, they discovered that Misato and Bunji had graduated from the same college—although Bunji only received a priesthood qualification and never learned incantations. Bunji had spoken about how he wanted to send Yaeka to the same college, and she’d explained that she was reluctant to leave home to pursue higher education at all.

"So, you know how I went to the same college as your father?" ventured Misato the following morning. "Won't you consider going there, too? I know you wanna stay on the island and continue being Chinatsu's shrine maiden—and don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting you give that up! It's just... Well, if you study there, you'll finally possess the power to protect what's important to you with your own two hands."

Just as Yaeka had complained the previous night, everyone was selfish. Therefore, if there was something she wanted to protect, her best bet was to arm herself with the means and knowledge she needed to do so herself. The spiritual power she was born with was nothing extraordinary; she could do nothing beyond what her role as Itsukigami's shrine maiden required. Compared to Keiko Hisaka, her spiritual energy was negligible.

Hisaka, however, wished to have no contact with spirits or the spiritual world whatsoever, while Yaeka yearned for the opposite. Even if her powers were weak, she desired a life with Itsukigami—a spirit—at her side. Misato wanted to tell her the steps she could take to achieve that goal.

"Anyway, take your time to think about it," he'd added. "Don't do something just because you think someone else wants to hear it. Choose your own path for your own reasons. Lots of people might tell you what they think the right thing to do is, and you can't let them influence you. There isn't another person in the whole world who sees the world the same as you and lives the same life as you. You're the only person who can decide what the right thing to do is."

Misato wouldn't pretend that the choices he'd made in his short existence were all admirable. But he was proud that he'd lived according to his own will, so it was okay to have a few regrets. Whether a choice was right or wrong could be determined only in hindsight. Only then could he use his past experiences to inform future decisions.

He wasn't trying to rush Yaeka. If she truly wished to pursue a similar path, he was happy to write a letter of recommendation to have her assigned to the dormitory where only students learning incantations could reside—the same dorm he'd lived in during his own Shinto priesthood course. *You can only apply to that dorm if a past resident recommends you, so it's the least I can do.*

In Misato's case, his high school teacher kindly offered to write the letter, although at first, he was placed in a regular dorm because he had no intention of studying the occult. Once he reconnected with Shirota, however, he managed to move.

Misato chased after Yaeka along the sandbar, leaving Ryouji and Gyoukai to themselves as they appeared to be discussing something private. The group was on its way to visit Chinatsu, Ryouji's older sister—who was also Itsukigami, the god Yaeka served.

When they reached their destination, they found that Oji's heavy waves had cleared out the entire grotto. Some wood that looked like it had once formed the shape of a hokora floated in the tide pool at the cave entrance. Yaeka stood in front of it, staring forlornly down at the water in silence.

Misato overtook her and peeked inside the cavern; he couldn't sense anyone within. "It really is a mess in here..." he remarked sorrowfully. He'd expected as much after hearing what had happened from Gyoukai and Ryouji, but the destruction was still shocking to see in person. Yaeka made no reply. "My snake is looking after Chinatsu, so don't worry. I thought they'd be here by now though... I wonder what they're up to."

He turned back around. The rocky outcrop Oji was said to descend upon was filthy with deposited sand, and a broken shimenawa lay limply around it.

They continued to wait, and still Shirota didn't show. Gyoukai claimed that he'd entrusted Chinatsu to Shirota when he returned to Shirahige Shrine with Ryouji. Shirota had allegedly agreed—although Chinatsu was probably scared stiff of him—and they arranged to meet back at the cave. Misato didn't have the chance to regroup with Gyoukai the night before, but while sleeping, in a state of half-consciousness, Misato communicated with Shirota to ask where he was going and what he was doing. In reply, he saw Shirota gleefully darting through the sea with Gyoukai's generous boost of power, then pointing out the cave on Itsuki Island.

Chinatsu's vessel was apparently a relatively large, earthenware urn. More accurately, her remains were inside that urn—so her original body was part of her vessel, too. The urn seemed to also have been washed out to sea.

“Is she really safe with—... No, forget it,” Yaeka said in suspicion before retracting her sentence. Her doubt was only natural—Shirota had terrified her when they inevitably met the night before, too. She didn’t seem fond of snakes to begin with, and gorged with power, he had been far too big for her to ignore.

“Don’t worry,” Misato said with a sheepish laugh.

“...I’ll think about what yeh said this morning.” To his surprise, she abruptly broached the college subject on her own. She turned her head away, her gaze flitting downward as she mumbled, “Just so I can protect Chii. I’ve never been interested in tradition or custom or etiquette or any of that stuff, but...I kinda realized that if I don’t know those things, I can’t do anything to help her.”

“That sounds nice,” he replied simply, though he couldn’t quite hide the relief in his tone.

Phew. If she goes ahead with that, Kamiki Island will have someone to protect it. Ryouji said he’ll probably visit a lot in the coming months, but still.

Apparently, Chinatsu had said the night before that she wished to remain on Kamiki Island as Itsukigami. Ryouji wanted to respect that wish. Plus, due to his connections with Chinatsu and Gyoukai, he was the perfect medium to watch over the peculiar island. The sole drawback was how far Kamiki Island was from Tomoe. Technically, the isle was under the jurisdiction of the Abnormal Disaster Unit in Takehara City, but...

It doesn’t seem like they’ve had time to check out the offshore islands. From what Misato had heard of the Takehara City unit, it currently comprised very few staff: two employees in total, one stationed in the central office and the other at a branch. Really, to call them a “unit” was a bit of a stretch. Kamiki Island had been made a part of Takehara City during the Heisei-era municipal mergers and was self-governed before that. Yet, according to Bunji, even after the merge, Takehara City asked the islanders to handle their own administration, citing personnel shortages and travel time.

Compared to other cities and towns in Hiroshima Prefecture, Tomoe’s Abnormal Disaster Unit was relatively large for the town’s population. There were likely many other religious communities on the islands of the Seto Inland Sea quietly fading away due to a lack of government staff.

Kamiki Island's future was unclear, and in the absence of Oji, Chinatsu and Yaeka would likely be the last pair to play the parts of Itsukigami and its shrine maiden. There was potential for much change on the island, so a spiritual specialist permanently residing there was the best possible solution to the regional labor shortage—if the shrine maiden in question could attain the right knowledge and skills, of course.

While Misato's professional brain was jumping from one thought to another, the two stragglers in their party finally popped through the cave entrance. And behind them, a white serpent coated in sand from slithering along the shoal slinked over the rocky barrier. He was still bigger than ever.

Chinatsu is coming...right?

Growing anxious, Misato walked to the cavern mouth to greet Shirota. There was no one else in sight.

“Shirota spit?” The snake tilted his head, cramming himself into the confined space, which only further emphasized his oppressive size.

In the past few months, Shirota had been praised for his “cuteness” more than ever before. Remembering Yaeka's entirely normal response to the serpent, Misato realized that perhaps he ought to take Shirota more seriously every once in a while. He was surrounded by too many people who did nothing but dote on the snake.

“Spit? What do you m—...” Misato paused. “Don’t tell me...”

Misato was the only human who could hear Shirota’s voice without touching him—but judging by Gyoukai’s reaction out of the corner of his eye, the tengu could hear it, too.

“Did you swallow her? Spit her out at once!” Misato commanded sharply in disbelief.

Oh, gods. When Gyoukai asked him to take care of Chinatsu, I didn’t think he’d go and eat her vessel!

The base of Shirota’s head began to swell, a mass slowly traveling up his throat to his mouth.

PEH!

Sure enough, Shirota spat out Chinatsu's urn. He'd swallowed it with the lid still intact, and the container rolled along the sand.

Yaeka screamed, her ear-splitting volume echoing back at them a hundred times over off the cave walls. "Chii!" she cried as she flattened herself against the rock as far as possible from Shirota.

Two translucent arms sprouted from the lid of the urn. Fortunately, Chinatsu appeared to be safe. True terror had struck Misato's heart for a moment when he considered that Shirota might have eaten the vessel's contents, and his subsequent sigh of relief was enormous.

Yaeka dashed to the urn and grabbed one of Chinatsu's arms. Bit by bit, she emerged as Yaeka dragged her out. Misato was struck by how similar the shape of her eyes was to Ryouji's, who idly observed from one step behind.

"*Shirota spit others?*" Shirota cocked his head to the other side, coiling against the wall to put some distance between himself and the girls.

"What? What else did you—"

Before Misato could finish the question, Shirota started to expel a second mass from his throat, his scales undulating. And one after another, he purged a variety of objects: Ryouji's shoes, life vest, pants, shirt, and phone. Evidently and kindly he'd searched the sea to collect them during the night. At times, Shirota acted according to Misato's wishes without being told. Either that was the explanation, or Chinatsu had asked him to be helpful.

Finally, last of all, Shirota spat out Ryouji's most treasured, valued possession: his signature sunglasses.

Ka-clack. They clattered to the ground. Shirota hinged his mouth shut and reared back, his triumphant, beady eyes focusing on Misato as if asking for praise. "*Shirota good boy?*"

Misato didn't even get a chance to reply before a certain someone came crashing past him.

"*Shirotaaaaaaaaa!*" squealed Ryouji in joy, launching himself at the serpent

and slinging his arms around Shirota's scaly neck. "You found 'em *all* for me?! You're so cute! So precious! I love youuuu!"

"Ryouji give lots of snack. Shirota love Ryouji. Snacks, please!"

Ryouji's treat-giving habit had won the snake over completely. His host wasn't so different though—Misato had accompanied Ryouji on his fishing trip shamelessly expecting him to cook up some nice mackerel dishes for the two of them afterward.

"Hell yeah! We're gonna eat a whole loada snacks! Luckily, you're just in time for the spiritual all-you-can-eat buffet!" Ryouji whooped.

"Hey! What sort of promises are you making?! Did you forget whose permission you're supposed to ask?!" hissed Misato in panic, peeling Ryouji's arms off Shirota's neck.

Seriously... Everyone around me spoils him way too much.

Yaeka, Chinatsu, and Gyoukai were watching the scene unfold at a distance.

Chinatsu giggled, clearly amused. "Good for yeh, little Shirota," she cooed. "Make sure Ryou rewards yeh big-time, all right?"

Ah. Yet another family member had fallen victim to Shirota's charm.

"Little' Shirota..." Ryouji murmured in disbelief.

Misato wondered then whether a lack of fear was directly encoded in the Karinos' genes.

"Mighty glad to see you all gettin' along." Gyoukai grinned, folding his arms proudly.

Misato was about to chastise him for laughing and demand that he put Shirota back to his normal size already—

"Chii," Ryouji croaked in a strained tone.

Everyone's attention turned to Ryouji. Meanwhile, his eyes were fixated on Chinatsu. Even Yaeka, who had been marveling at Chinatsu's ability to take everything in stride, swiveled her head to watch Ryouji nervously.

"Tell me one more time..." He exhaled slowly. "Whaddya wanna do next?"

What would make you happy? What would make you sad? We're experts, y'know, so...I wanna give you everything you want. Whatever it is, we'll try and make it happen." His voice was quiet, kind, and sincere, and not that of a little brother but a professional. Yet it was tight with an emotional undercurrent that demonstrated his desire to respect the wishes of someone he loved.

Chinatsu's eyes widened in dazzled astonishment. Then they softened fondly. To the side, Gyoukai regarded her with a teary smile.

Yaeka resumed Ryouji's line of questioning with a look of determination. "That's what I want, too. I gotta know what yeh *really* wanna do. Yeh said I should go and see the outside world, but what about yeh? Isn't it exhausting being constantly stuck in this place? Don't yeh...don't yeh wanna go visit yer home or...anything like that?"

"Yaeka..." Chinatsu said with wide eyes. Both her brother and sister gazed at her with mature, considerate expressions as they sought to protect her. She appeared surprised to be the sudden center of attention, blinking in silence before ducking her head slightly with a bashful smile.

"I... Like I said yesterday, I'm fine as I am," she replied gently. "There's not really anywhere I wanna go. I mean, I can barely even remember my original home. I remembered a few things about Ryou but not everything—and I think I'm a different person from Chinatsu Karino now. I'm just Chii, like Yaeka has always known me."

Sixteen years had passed since she became Itsukigami. The majority of her living memories had been lost to time and the ebb and flow of the waves. But the core of her personality was unchanged: a sister who loved her younger sibling. Ryouji's fist, the one closest to Misato—the one Chinatsu couldn't see—clenched.

"I think as long as Yaeka's happy, as long as she never forgets me, and as long as she loves me...I'll be happy, too." Chinatsu smiled. "I'll always be here, hoping for Yaeka's happiness—and hoping that she'll never forget that." She paused for a moment, linking her pale, slender fingers together in front of her hips. She wrung her hands hesitantly before saying, "But...yeh're so big now, Yaeka. Even as tall as me."

Yaeka froze, then gave a timid nod.

Chinatsu smiled again. "I'm not gonna get any taller, and I can't leave this place. I worry that if yeh find something yeh wanna do, or yeh fall in love and wanna leave the island...I might hold yeh back."

Yaeka shook her head vehemently. "Never. Never ever."

"What would make me even sadder, though, is if yeh forgot 'bout me. Because yeh don't need me anymore or I become a burden on yeh. If I'm just gonna shackle yeh down, I'd much rather disappear. But if yeh forget 'bout me when I disappear, that'd make me so sad..."

Yaeka padded over to Chinatsu and, throwing her arms around the girl, squeezed Chinatsu to her chest as though she couldn't quash her emotion any longer.

"If I ever disappear, please, *please* remember me," Chinatsu implored. "I want yeh to always keep me in yer heart and always remember that I'm praying for yer happiness."

"That's not going to happen! I'd never, *ever* forget 'bout yeh!" Yaeka insisted in a desperate wail. "If yeh like it here, then just stay here forever. You'll have me to protect yeh, 'cause I'm going to college to learn how. I've decided to become a professional medium, then come back here for yeh. All I want is to protect yeh, so please, stay with me."

Traditionally, a shrine maiden was supposed to be an unmarried woman. It was easy to say she was making a reckless decision that she would come to reconsider with age, but Yaeka had lived as Itsukigami's shrine maiden from the instant she was born. Chinatsu was her god, her sister, her friend. She wasn't going to let societal expectations take that away from her.

Chinatsu's eyebrows shot up her forehead in pure amazement.

"It looks like Yaeka has a good chance of attending the same college I did," Misato interjected mildly. "If I write a letter of introduction, she'll even get to study incantations and rituals like me."

"Are yeh sure? Really sure...?" Chinatsu queried cautiously, gingerly wrapping her arms around Yaeka in return. Her fingers settled atop Yaeka's quivering

shoulders.

“Aye,” Yaeka murmured. “For the first time, I’m totally sure that’s who I wanna become, so I’m gonna pursue that vision. All I want is the power to protect the people I love. Even if other people say it’s wrong, they just don’t understand—’cause I’m the only person who’s spent their life with you. I’m the only Yaeka Kamiki, so *I’m* the one who chooses what’s important and what’s right.”

“Yaeka...” Chinatsu sighed, closing her eyes. A single tear tumbled down her cheek. “Thank you,” she mouthed, her words voiceless in her choked throat.

Silence alighted in the grip of the cave for a few shining moments. The serene waves of the Inland Sea were inaudible, and the only sounds, that of birds chirping above in the island’s trees and cicadas crying from their trunks, filtered into the cavern from a distance.

“I don’t think either of us are gonna remember more than what we do now,” Ryouji supplemented quietly—calmer and more softly than Misato would have thought possible for him. Chinatsu and Yaeka separated to look at Ryouji. “My hometown is Tokyo, and you belong *here*, Chii. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

Oh... In Ryouji’s eyes, this is a farewell. If he remained a little brother pining for his only blood relative, he couldn’t in good conscience do what was best for Chinatsu.

The revelation of their memories and their reunion as family was no more than a fleeting moment for the two of them. In reality, they were almost strangers to each other—no longer the Karino siblings from Tomoe.

Misato instinctively laid a hand on Ryouji’s shoulder. To declare “You have me now instead,” would be wholly presumptuous, but he at least wanted to convey that Ryouji wasn’t alone.

There was a hint of a faint smile on Ryouji’s lips as Misato stared up at his profile. Ryouji’s hand joined his, then pulled on his forearm to draw him closer.

“But check this out, Chii! This guy’s my partner,” Ryouji announced loudly, looping his arm firmly around Misato’s shoulders. “He’s the one who sees the

world the same way I do.”

“H-Hi...” Taken aback, Misato could only stutter in greeting.

Yaeka goggled at them in wonder, while Chinatsu and Gyoukai erupted into boisterous laughter.

“WANT snacks! Snacks, please!”

Gyoukai had finally returned Shirota to his usual size, and the serpent was begging cheerfully for food, slinking back and forth over Ryouji’s and Misato’s shoulders as they walked side by side.

They were returning to their car in the parking lot a short distance from Shirahige Shrine, mostly ready to bundle into the sedan and drive home. The sun was nearing the horizon, and its crimson glow was dipping behind the silhouette of an island whose name they didn’t know, illuminating the sky despite the poor weather forecast.

They’d said their goodbyes to the Kamiki family back at the house, so Gyoukai was the only person they still owed a farewell. The thrum of the cicadas filled the air, echoing across the mountain as if to enclose Misato and Ryouji in a wall of sound. It was almost time for the last ferry of the day, and the week ahead of them was likely to be a tough one.

“Ughhhh, I keep thinkin’ ‘bout those mackerel! Ya woulda had plenty of snacks if we still had ‘em, Shirota!” sighed Ryouji dramatically in response to Shirota’s pleas, willfully bereft.

“Shut up, Flathead!” Misato snapped. “Besides, he can’t even eat mackerel!”

“No, *you* shut up!” Ryouji retorted.

Shirota had managed to retrieve Ryouji’s clothes right down to his shoes and sunglasses, but there was no way to recoup the hair gel on his head of course. Thus Ryouji’s hair lay limp in its natural state.

Gyoukai simply watched their quarrel with an amused smile on his face before calling, “Hey, Misato. Shirota.”

Ryouji was carrying most of their large quantity of luggage, full of various gifts

from the islanders as an apology for ruining their trip. Misato left him to load up the car before turning back to Gyoukai. Ryouji's footsteps faded into the distance as he continued toward the parking lot.

"What is it?" Misato asked.

"I was thinkin' you could give this to Shirota as a li'l treat. Let's say it's my thanks for gettin' those sunglasses back for Ryouji." Gyoukai outstretched his hand, proffering them the katana Misato had used and promptly returned to him as soon as they left the shrine the night before. He pointed the ornamental tip of the sheath at Shirota coiled around Misato's shoulders.

"Wh—?! Hey, wait...!"

But it was too late. As soon as the word "treat" left Gyoukai's lips, Shirota entered predator mode and slithered over to Gyoukai, unhinging his jaw.

CHOMP.

In seconds, the sword was sliding down Shirota's throat. Misato stared with his mouth hanging open while Gyoukai affectionately patted the snake's head.

"There. That was scrumptious, wasn't it?" Gyoukai cooed. "But don't eat it all at once. Just absorb the amount of power you need at the time, all right? And if Misato needs a blade, ya can spit it out for him. Handle first, of course."

PEH. As instructed by Gyoukai, Shirota easily demonstrated his ability to present the katana to Misato hilt-first.

"Feel free to use it as your own," Gyoukai offered. "Looks like the snake is a good match for it, too."

"But...that sword was dedicated to *you*..."

"Naw," Gyoukai brushed off the protest with a flippant hand, shaking his head. "It's not like anyone *made* it for me. I've just been lookin' after it temporarily. I think this is the perfect opportunity to do somethin' with it. Take it home."

"I couldn't possibly—"

"Why ever not?" Gyoukai laughed. "Ya used it well, and ya gotta be armed in your profession."

"Why're you being so kind?" Misato pressed, refusing to back down. "I didn't do anything worthy of a gift like that."

"Ya did, and I wanna thank ya," Gyoukai insisted. "I looked after Ryouji a lot back when Sougen was still around, but once he disappeared, he asked in his will that we tengu not interfere with Ryouji's life anymore. Basically, we had no choice but to let our contact with him die out, and it just so happens that bastard never even told him what bein' a tengu is all about—includin' our true identities." He sighed. "When the inugami latched onto Ryouji, he vanished without comin' to any of us first. I used to check up on him from time to time from the shadows, and I let my guard down 'cause he seemed so responsible and independent. Not even a tengu can stray from their mountain forever, y'see."

Shirota gobbled up the sword again, then returned to Misato's shoulders with a proud air about him. Misato had heard that Ryouji's father was an elusive man who didn't reveal much, and he appeared to have forbade even his fellow tengu from intervening in Ryouji's life before perishing.

"That's why you decided to give your power to Shirota first instead of saving Ryouji yourself?" Misato theorized.

"I s'pose so. Although I didn't actually know it was him 'til your serpent showed up. Plus, so long as he's human, another human should be the one to save him. I guess *you're* on a fine line between human and spirit, though."

Misato reflexively leveled a stern glare at him.

Gyoukai chortled. "I'd say Sougen didn't want Ryouji to find out 'bout all this just in case the kid tried to follow him to the tengu world," he mused. "Sougen's flesh might be gone, but the spiritual energy that comprises Sougen-bo of Mount Ashiho still remains on his mountain." He showed his tengu mask to Misato. "Those who become tengu inherit a mask imbued with the power of the mountain. To reach that point, you have to train 'til ya become worthy of that power, then put on the mask to dedicate your body as a vessel to the mountain's aura...but I ain't gonna tell Ryouji that myself. If there ever comes a time when ya think he should know, you can tell him for me."

Misato tilted his head in confusion. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. He's not gonna go chasin' after Sougen's legacy just 'cause I showed up and talked about him—not anymore, anyway. That's what I realized when I saw you. You and that snake of yours saved him from the inugami, didn'tcha? Don't be polite at your own expense. One day, you're gonna need a blade to protect what's important to ya."

If Gyoukai was that sure, Misato had no choice but to accept his gift. And with Shirota taking care of it, he didn't have to worry about weapon possession laws or frightening the public. He couldn't deny that the sword reassured him.

"Thank you," he finally relented, bowing his head deeply.

"Thank you. Take care on your way home, won'tcha? Come visit again soon."

"We will," Misato said with a nod, moving toward the car as Ryouji powered on the engine.

Dusk neared as the last remnants of sunlight seared the edges of the sky. Ryouji switched on the headlights and pulled out of the parking space. "What did the old man want?" he asked curiously.

"He just said to visit again soon," answered Misato casually as he clicked his seatbelt into its slot.

"Hah." Ryouji huffed a laugh, turning his face away. A wry smile tugged at Misato's lips.

It wasn't even a ten-minute drive to the harbor. The car cruised along the tiny road, the lanes dangerously narrow were another car to approach in the opposite direction. Fall's accelerated sunset was even swifter in the shadow of the mountain, shrouding them in darkness from all sides with no warning.

"He can talk. He stopped contactin' me the moment my dad went missing," Ryouji uttered bitterly as he drove.

They weren't far from the tiny isle's ferry port. As the car emerged from the alpine road into view of the coast once more, Misato gazed at Itsuki Island in the distance.

"Haha..." he laughed awkwardly. "Actually, it sounds like he was trying to be considerate. He said...he didn't want you to get dragged into the tengu world."

He was sure to keep it vague—but true.

Ryouji heaved a deep sigh. “That dumbass,” he grumbled. “Guess I will be visitin’ quite a bit though.”

“Yeah,” Misato agreed. Until Yaeka was qualified to handle it on her own, Ryouji was committed to checking on Kamiki Island at regular intervals.

“She ain’t my sister anymore, but...we decided I’ll look after Chinatsu ’til Yaeka graduates from college,” Ryouji murmured bashfully.

“Sounds good,” concurred Misato again.

While the siblings were reclaiming their past in a way, an eventual goodbye awaited them. Ryouji had remembered some details of his old life, and those memories impressed all the more keenly that he could never go back.

The past was gone. Only the present truly existed.

The car swerved into the harbor. Misato hopped out to buy the tickets. They waited for the ferry in the designated area. Under the violet firmament and across the dimming sea, the ferry materialized between the waves, gliding through the picturesque medley of islands and freckling the hazy water with gleaming light.

“Let’s go home. I’ll never be Chinatsu, but I *can* at least share a drink with you,” Misato quipped with a grin.

Ryouji looked back at him with a broad, cheery smile.

Afterword

THANK you so much for purchasing this copy of *Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes: The Call of the Roaring Waves*. Thanks to everyone's support, I'm delighted to say I've been able to publish three volumes of this series. The *Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes* manga began serialization after Volume 2 was released, and the first volume of the manga is now available to purchase in Japan.

Volume 3 is made up of two stories: "Shirota's Great Escape," and the main arc, "The Roar of the Calling Waves." I made so many additions and improvements to "The Roar of the Calling Waves" that it's now twice as long as the web novel version! I hope my usual readers will enjoy it this time around, too.

Volume 2 mostly concerned Misato's past, while the main arc of this volume is all about Ryouji's. I hope it does his story justice! Plus, in "Shirota's Great Escape," Keiko Hisaka returns after her first appearance in the extra story "A Normal Life" at the end of Volume 1. Both stories in the third volume take place in locations on the Seto Inland Sea, by the way.

I used a few books as inspiration for the tanuki and the Nio statues that featured in "Shirota's Great Escape." I based my interpretation of the tanuki on the new edition of *Nihon no minwa 23: Aki, Bingo no minwa* [Japanese Folktales 23: The Folktales of Aki and Bingo] published by Miraisha. The Nio statues were based on *Onomichi no minwa, densetsu* [The Folktales and Legends of Onomichi] published by the Onomichi Folklore and Legends Research Society. Reading them reminded me of how rich Onomichi's history and culture are. I also visited Onomichi myself to scout locations, where I ate some very delicious lemon cake.

Again, there are so many people who made this book possible. First, I'd like to thank the travel photographer Doumin no Hito (@North_ern2 on Twitter), who provided me with photos as inspiration for the cave on Itsuki Island. I'd also like to thank Asoka Nagumo (@asoka_nagumo on Twitter), a local resident of Takehara City who reviewed my concept for Kamiki Island and gave me

permission to use their ideas for a Takehara-based spirit-hunting team. I'm very grateful to you both!

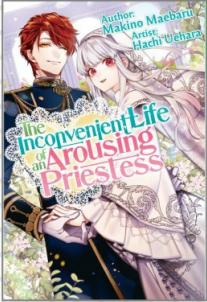
I also need to thank Yone Kazuki, who illustrated yet another beautiful artwork for the book, and Yoshinao Ooka, who designed the cover. Thank you so, so much. I get so excited every time I see the covers for this series, because if I saw them in a bookstore, I would definitely buy the books—even if I had no idea what they were about! Lastly, I'd like to thank my editor Onaka. I'm so sorry for miscalculating the number of pages *again*—and endlessly grateful that you keep an open mind and let me write so freely every time.

I wrote that Kamiki Island is Takehara City's only populated offshore island, but...in reality, there are no populated islands off the coast of Takehara City. Since I was raised in the mountains, I'm not familiar with what island life is like. Kamiki Island is entirely fictional, but I visited Osakikamijima to get a feel for it. The figs I bought at the store by the ferry terminal were absolutely delicious. I highly recommend visiting the islands of the Seto Inland Sea if you ever get a chance.

There is no silver bullet to immediately stop the declining population from devastating the Japanese countryside, but I'll be very happy if this story inspires anyone to connect more with rural towns and villages.

Yoshiko Utamine

May 2023



The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

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What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



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