

[Vol. 1]

SENGOKU DEMONS

CYAN OF MOGH

This work has been serialised online before, but now it's been edited yet again and is around 2.72% better now.

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Images used are taken from various films and anime and then given a collage makeover so I can call it my own piece of art. See if you can recognise them all.

I may do an e-book version at some point, in which case I'll have to dig out another of the ten ISBNs I've got buried in the yard out back.

All Japanese history in this work is an amateurish nightmare, though probably not as bad as the Hollywood treatment. I use italics for most Japanese words, and stop using them if I feel like that word is being repeated a lot, and that you probably know what it means by that point.

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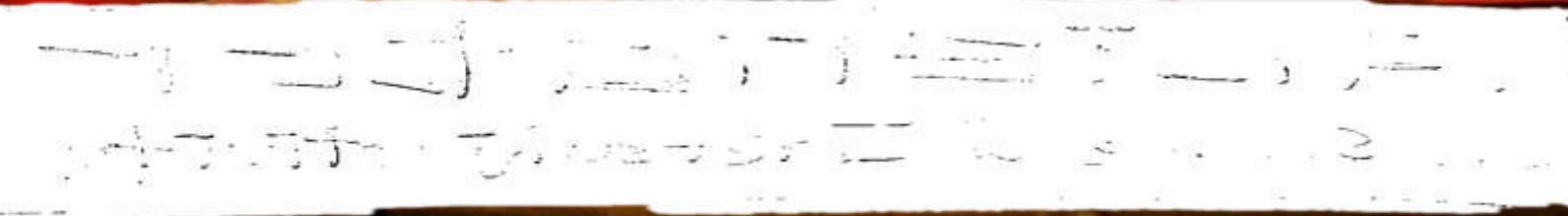
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CHAPTER 1

DON'T OPEN THE BOX

The box was shaking again, violently.

Five of the six ashigaru nearby stopped where they were and quickly drew their katanas, as if the ghost of Taira no Masakado were going to jump out any second and massacre them.

A passing vanguard of scout ants stopped too, though they were too small to have katanas, or daggers, so they just gawped upwards at the giant monolith instead.

‘Definitely something in there,’ said Takuya, the largest and, judging by the spit that flew out with his voice, most brainlessly aggressive of the group.

The other ashigaru replied chaotically, shouting over each other, their trembling blades aimed vaguely at the box’s lid.

‘Fucking told you it wasn’t empty.’

‘You think it wants out?’

‘Gods, it’s restless.’

‘Restless? Drunk more like.’

‘Could be a bear.’

‘No, it’s a ghost!’

‘An enemy soldier!’

‘A bear ghost!’

‘Bear demon!’

‘Kappa!’

‘Bunch of idiot fucking brain cells more like...pissing themselves over a wooden box.’

‘Wah, who said that?’ shouted Takuya, shifting his katana in the direction of Akira, the only member of the group who hadn’t panicked at the sight of the vibrating box. If anything, he looked kind of bored.

‘Point your toy somewhere else,’ the lax ashigaru replied, stretching arms out and yawning as he scanned the forest surrounding them.

‘Toy what?’

‘You heard me.’

‘This blade right here...a toy?’

‘Guess not.’

‘Stop bickering,’ cut in one of the others, katana hand still shaking a little.

‘Who?’

‘Both of you.’

‘*Kuso*, he just said our brains were-’ Takuya paused, thinking back to what was just said and frowning. ‘He said all your brains were pissing on the box.’

The four ashigaru with their katanas still half-drawn heard the word *box* and, out of sense-reflex, looked at it again. It had ceased its convulsion act and appeared to be a regular box again. Well, not regular exactly; four feet long, two feet deep, lacquered wood, gold hinges, two sinister-looking birds carved on the side with wings the size of temples. It was definitely something valuable. And mysterious. And important. Lord Shingen himself, in person, without make-up, had instructed them to escort it to a specific worship point in the forest, and then yank off the lid, all without giving them any idea as to why.

‘Okay, it’s stable again,’ muttered one of the ashigaru, patting the side of the box.

‘Maybe we’re imagining it. Heightened nerves or something.’

‘I *am* pretty tired.’

‘Or maybe it’s Shingen’s pet dog and we’re taking it out for a walk.’

‘Yeah, a little shih tzu maybe.’

‘With its mouth gagged so it can’t bark.’

‘Gods below...’ Akira shook his head and walked farther along the path, stopping beside a giant larch tree at the bottom of a generic slope. Next to it was a sign, worn down by previous winter storms and tilted slightly to the side.

‘Worship Point – 50M,’ he read out loud.

One of the other ashigaru, a young rookie called Yasu, appeared next to him and asked very politely how much longer it would take.

Akira responded by pointing at the sign.

‘Wah, I hope the *M* means metres.’

‘Ask your brain.’

Yasu coughed, performing a hasty bow. ‘Sorry, *meijin*. I was just trying to lighten the-’

‘Akira.’

‘Err...’

‘You know I hate all that honorific shit.’

‘But you’re samurai. A higher rank.’

Akira let the word end then growled *Akira* again, clipped Yasu on the ear to make it stick then started up the slope.

Behind them, the other ashigaru had sheathed their katanas and two of the larger ones were carrying the box forward again, with Takuya showing off his strength by using only one hand.

‘Almost there,’ he said as they reached the sign.

‘Thank the chubby cheeks of Ebisu,’ replied Junto, the roundest of the group.

‘Wah, don’t say that, he might appear,’ blurted out his polar opposite, Gen, waving a skinny arm in the air like a herbed-up geisha.

‘Good, then I can thank him in person.’

‘No, no...he’ll punish us.’

‘For saying thank you?’

‘I’m serious. All these gods are super sensitive. If you don’t do exactly what they say, they get angry. And you want to call him here like a maid.’

‘Ah...maids,’ said Junto dreamily, staring up into the autumn yellow canopy of the trees as they started up the slope. ‘Probably the finest material pleasure this shit-stain world has to offer.’

‘Yeah, long as they don’t talk,’ countered Takuya, his tone quite bitter.

‘What do you mean? I love hearing them talk. They have the best stories. Did I ever tell you about the girl in Wakayama? She was fantastic. Had eyes like two little jade stones. Possibly mage-assisted,

I don't know. And her stories...you won't believe this, but she told me once, after about seven bottles of shōchū, that each warlord secretly has a cabal of child-eating demons assisting them, each one operating out of a local izakaya, in the back rooms, and-...no, it's true, the only reason no one knows about them is cos these demons can disguise themselves as humans. Usually beautiful women so they can get what they want from the warlord. And the reason they help the warlord is basically all down to the-...'

'We're here,' said Akira, breaking Junto's tale and making him look confused for a second as he gawped at their surroundings.

He wasn't alone either; all the other ashigaru were doing the same thing, standing in the forest clearing that had come out of nowhere, staring at the six *hinoki* poles dug into the ground nearby. On top of each pole was a polished human skull, with green paint smeared childishly over the eye sockets.

'This is pleasant,' said Gen with a shiver, checking the gaps between the surrounding tree trunks.

'Fake, you mean,' responded Takuya, giving the signal to lower the box.

'Huh?'

'Those skulls are clearly papier-mâché.'

'You think so?'

‘No samurai would leave a skull behind like this. They’d bag it, take it home to show their family.’

‘True,’ said Yasu, glancing over at Akira and nodding a little too enthusiastically. ‘That’s what a real samurai would do.’

‘And me,’ agreed Gen. ‘My wife loves skulls. Turns them into little cups. Or pretty big cups, if it’s a weirdly big head.’

Takuya moved closer to one of the skulls and rubbed his finger over the green markings. Then ran it down the edge of the cheekbone. Satisfied, he turned back to the group and repeated, ‘papier-mâché.’

Akira did what he did best and shook his head in mild disgust. ‘Let’s just get this over with, shall we? It’s starting to get dark.’

‘Don’t be scared, big warrior man,’ replied Takuya, mimicking the voice of a nervous child, ‘there’s a ryokan a few kilometres along the path, remember? We’ll spend the night there.’

‘But...we’re supposed to return to Kōfu immediately,’ interrupted Yasu, standing up straight. ‘Those were our orders.’

‘Nonsense. They said as soon as the task is completed. Both of them, Shingen and Ka Yukio.’

‘That’s the same thing.’

‘Are you arguing with a senior, boy?’

‘No...*meijin*. I was just saying what our orders were.’

‘Sounds like arguing to me.’

‘Leave the kid alone, Takuya,’ said Junto, patting his stomach. ‘He’s only been with us a month.’

‘A long month,’ muttered Gen.

Takuya sucked in his gut and broadened his shoulders. ‘Mind your own business, fatty. This is a matter of protocol. Juniors must know their place or our whole system is meaningless.’

‘Well, I think that ship sailed,’ said Akira, just loud enough to be picked up, ‘about eighty-odd years ago.’

Takuya’s hand moved to the guard of his katana. ‘What did you say?’

‘Sailed and sunk, to be more accurate.’

‘Yeah?’

Akira looked at the katana sliding slowly from its scabbard and smiled. ‘Posturing again, Tak?’

‘Keep making jokes, horse dick.’

‘Sure. But about what? Your stellar performance at Un no Kuchi? How you led bravely from behind my back?’

Before Takuya could respond or growl, the box began shaking yet again. The other four ashigaru reached as one for their katanas, only this time none lost their wits enough to draw them.

‘Someone nail that fucking lid shut,’ barked Takuya.

‘Can’t do that, we’re supposed to open it now,’ replied Yasu, gesturing at the *hinoki* poles and the skulls. ‘As soon as we get to the clearing. The exact orders of Lord Shingen.’

‘Fine, open it then.’

Yasu looked around at the others and then back at the box; the vibrations had become so strong that the lid had begun to lift itself up.

‘It’s a two-man job,’ he said, glancing at Akira.

‘I recommend Gen,’ the older warrior answered, pulling out a sheet of rice paper from inside his *dōbuku* and moving off to the other side of the clearing. Unrolling it, he started reading out names to himself; other daimyō in nearby provinces and their starting salary offers.

Yasu bit his tongue and turned to Gen.

‘Bad back. Can’t do it.’

Then to Takuya, who was glaring at him while jabbing a hand towards the box.

‘Look, I need *someone* to help me,’ Yasu barked, turning to the ashigaru who no one could remember the name of. ‘How about you?’

‘I am fox fox boo from the pink waters of Mooboo.’

‘No, the lid, can you help me with it?’

The nameless ashigaru closed his mouth, put three fingers on his nose and pinched. He did it so long that his face went red and his body dropped to the ground.

‘Leave him, he’s insane,’ said Takuya, kicking some dead leaves at the unconscious ashigaru.

Muttering curses to himself, Yasu turned finally to the only option left.

‘I need a shit,’ Junto said blankly, looking over at the trees.

‘Now?’

‘No. Since we left Kōfu. I’ve been holding it for hours.’

‘But the lid...’

‘Sorry, kid, it’s bad for the gut if you keep it in.’

Junto let out a deep breath and patted his stomach again, then wandered off between the larch trees. Yasu did another lap of the remaining ashigaru faces, saw that his one, potential ally, Akira, had almost disappeared from sight completely, then threw both hands up in the air and said, ‘wah, will someone please help me with this stupid lid?’

As soon as the moan was complete, the lid made a final grinding noise and then crashed to the ground with a surprisingly soft thud. One of its edges landed close to a *hinoki* pole, making the whole thing shudder and the skull on top roll from its perch.

‘A great omen there,’ whispered Gen, looking down at the empty eye sockets pointed back at him.

‘Right, it’s off,’ said Takuya, putting his katana away. ‘Job done. Now let’s see what it is we’ve been sweating over.’

Yasu nodded and turned to the box, putting a hand on one of the slats at the side and leaning over.

‘Wah...’ he spat out, stumbling back a step as something began to rise out of the box.

‘What is that?’

‘A cat?’

‘Hair?’

‘Stowaway?’

The three ashigaru who weren’t either unconscious on the ground, studying a list of potential new masters, or taking a shit, stared with their mouths slightly agape and their eyes watery as the head of a beautiful, dark-skinned woman emerged, followed by a thin smile on crimson lips, and, finally, shoulders without any kind of clothing material strapped onto them.

‘She’s...’

‘Can’t be...’

‘...naked.’

‘...real.’

‘Is that smoke?’

Being the nearest to the box, Yasu was the first to notice the purple tinged vapour trailing the woman as she rose higher, and then also the first to comprehend that her skin appeared to stop dead below the collarbone and-

‘That’s not possible,’ he whispered, as the purple vapour grew thicker and the woman’s head rose above them, the only part that was identifiably human.

‘Demon!’ shouted Takuya, pulling out his yo-yo-like katana.

‘Wait,’ said Gen, tilting his head as if he were admiring a work of art. ‘This is Lord Shingen’s box.’

‘Yeah, with a demon inside it.’

‘Exactly. His demon.’

The woman’s head swayed the outline of an infinity logo, her eyes honing in on Gen. Sensing he had won an audience, the thin ashigaru took a step forward and held out his hands, gripping them together in a sign of friendship. At least that’s what he hoped it was.

‘We are the ones who have carried you here,’ he said, raising his voice yet careful not to make it command-like. ‘You have nothing to fear from us.’

‘What are you doing?’ hissed Takuya, hand still clutching his katana.

‘Diplomacy,’ Gen whispered back.

‘Well, it’s annoying. Stop it.’

‘Hey, what’s with all the yelling?’ yelled Junto from somewhere among the trees nearby.

The woman bobbed her head, studying the faraway trees, then floated on top of the purple mist around the three ashigaru below. Whether it was the mist controlling the head or vice versa was impossible to discern, and didn’t really matter, as the overall effect was still creepy. Yet, at the same time, quite soothing.

Probably due to the female face, thought Gen, as it drifted down to examine him close up.

‘To be truthful, we did not know what was inside the box. If we had known it was a being such as yourself, we would’ve initiated efforts to make your journey more comfortable.’

The woman’s eyes narrowed, as did her mouth. ‘Do you know what I find uncomfortable?’ she asked, her voice half words, half breeze.

‘Err...I’m not sure.’

‘The box?’ offered Yasu, seeing Gen’s own discomfort.

The woman shot a quick glance at the young ashigaru, then moved in closer to Gen, her mouth widening to reveal no teeth.

‘Food that talks.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Food that screams, on the other hand...’

The open mouth grew larger, swallowing up the woman’s entire head, and then dispersed into more purple mist. Before Gen could even utter the first sound of the ancient Japanese word for ‘fuck’, a strip of purple formed to his left and slashed diagonally across his chest.

There was no feeling...none whatsoever...until he tried to reach for his katana.

And even then it was brief.

Merely a cold, vacuum-like sensation in the middle of his lungs as the top half of his torso slid off and landed on a troupe of ants resting on the grass below. Luckily, none of them were seriously injured.

Gen, however, was as dead as a sliced-in-half man could be.

With his katana already out and well-angled, Takuya should’ve been the first to react. However, the sight of the purple mist swirling around the blood-lined midriff of his comrade, making pedantic little slash marks on the remaining skin, rooted him to the spot.

‘Gen...’ he whispered, barely even a word.

Another strip of purple detached from its source and streamed forward, performing a series of side swipes that left him with cuts on his face and neck.

Still he didn't move.

'Meijin,' screamed Yasu, charging at the mist from behind with his katana pointing slightly to the side, ready to slash.

The stream of mist made no attempt to adjust its position. Instead, it used its other strip to pick up Gen's lower body and fling it at Yasu's head.

It connected, knocking him off balance but not off his feet, as he stabbed his katana down into the dirt to steady himself.

'Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa ka ka ka ka,' screamed the oddball ashigaru on the floor, waking up from his self-enforced nap.

Yasu looked down confused, expecting to see the purple mist attacking his comrade-in-arms, but there was none. Only the tip of his own katana sticking out of the weird ashigaru's left hand.

'*Kuso*,' he said, pulling his katana out and receiving a geyser of blood in the face.

'Waaaaaaaaa tatatata waaaaa tatataa,' continued the injured ashigaru, even louder than a minute ago, and before Yasu could bend down and tell him to put a sock in it, a blur of purple swarmed past and silenced him for good.

'No, no, no,' mumbled Yasu, wiping the blood from his face, then closing his eyes completely when he saw the mutilated pieces of his mad comrade on the ground below.

‘Yasu,’ muttered Takuya, still frozen, as the mist rushed back to him, the woman’s face reforming itself. ‘Do something.’

‘You are far too tall,’ she said, nodding at her own words, then using her purple vapour tail to swipe at his legs.

As with Gen, the mist cut through like a laser, separating Takuya at the knees and putting him flat on his back next to the fleeing troupe of ants.

‘Still too tall,’ said the woman-witch-misty-thing, floating directly above him. She paused for a second, counting off seconds with little nods. Then, mind made up, utilised her tail a second time to take his head clean off.

‘Meijin,’ yelled Yasu, pushing himself forward again, katana aimed maniacally ahead.

‘You are particularly annoying,’ the woman replied, spinning back round.

‘Die demon!’

‘And loud.’

The woman’s head subsumed itself back into the body of mist and shot a tendril at inhuman speed right into Yasu’s mouth. The young ashigaru’s lunatic charge halted instantly, with both hands reaching upward to his own throat, clawing at the thing inside. He gasped desperately for breath, accidentally kicked his katana, tried to

conjure up enough strength in his vocal chords to scream, ‘die demon,’ one more time...

‘Silly human boy,’ whispered the woman, blowing purple wisps into his eyes.

Without bullhorn or fireworks, the tip of the tendril burst out of his stomach, followed by the rest of its arm. Yasu’s torso had little choice but to split in two and spill his lower organs down onto the grass below.

Despite this, and to the young man’s credit, he did manage to spit out the *D* of *Die demon* before expiring.

‘Beautiful,’ said the woman’s head, bobbing serenely on waves of purple mist, admiring her work.

‘Keep it down will you,’ came another shout from the trees. ‘I’m trying to get the second part of this shit out.’

The woman’s head turned, scanned the surrounding trunks and canopy, then shot off at murderous mist speed towards the not too distant voice.

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About fifty metres away from the clearing, Junto leaned forward until both hands were gripping his ankles and tried one more squeeze.

He even gave out a strangled ‘please’ to go with it.

But it was no good.



Just like the last Ebisu knows how many times, he couldn't shit properly. The first part, okay, but there was always something left that just wouldn't come out. And he knew if he didn't get it out now, his stomach would start aching later and then his whole dinner schedule would be ruined.

'Stupid asshole,' he grunted, glaring at the small of his back. 'Just do what I say for once, will you?'

The asshole didn't reply.

Shaking his head, Junto glanced back towards the clearing. At least it was quieter now, he thought. All that screaming had really been pissing him off. Trained ashigaru acting like little kids, for what? It was probably just some animal bones or human skulls in the box, nothing they hadn't seen before.

Unless it wasn't.

But what else could it be?

Trying one final squeeze and almost passing out from the effort, he pulled himself back up into a sitting position and said, 'hey,' to the pretty, brown face bobbing on purple mist no more than a metre in front of him.

Wait, what...

'Let me help you with that,' said the woman's head, smiling as a purple tendril rose up and then sailed through Junto's guts as if they were the lightest sponge.

He rolled forward into the mist, the second part of his shit spilling out onto the grass, just missing another troupe of ants awaiting the return of their scouting party.

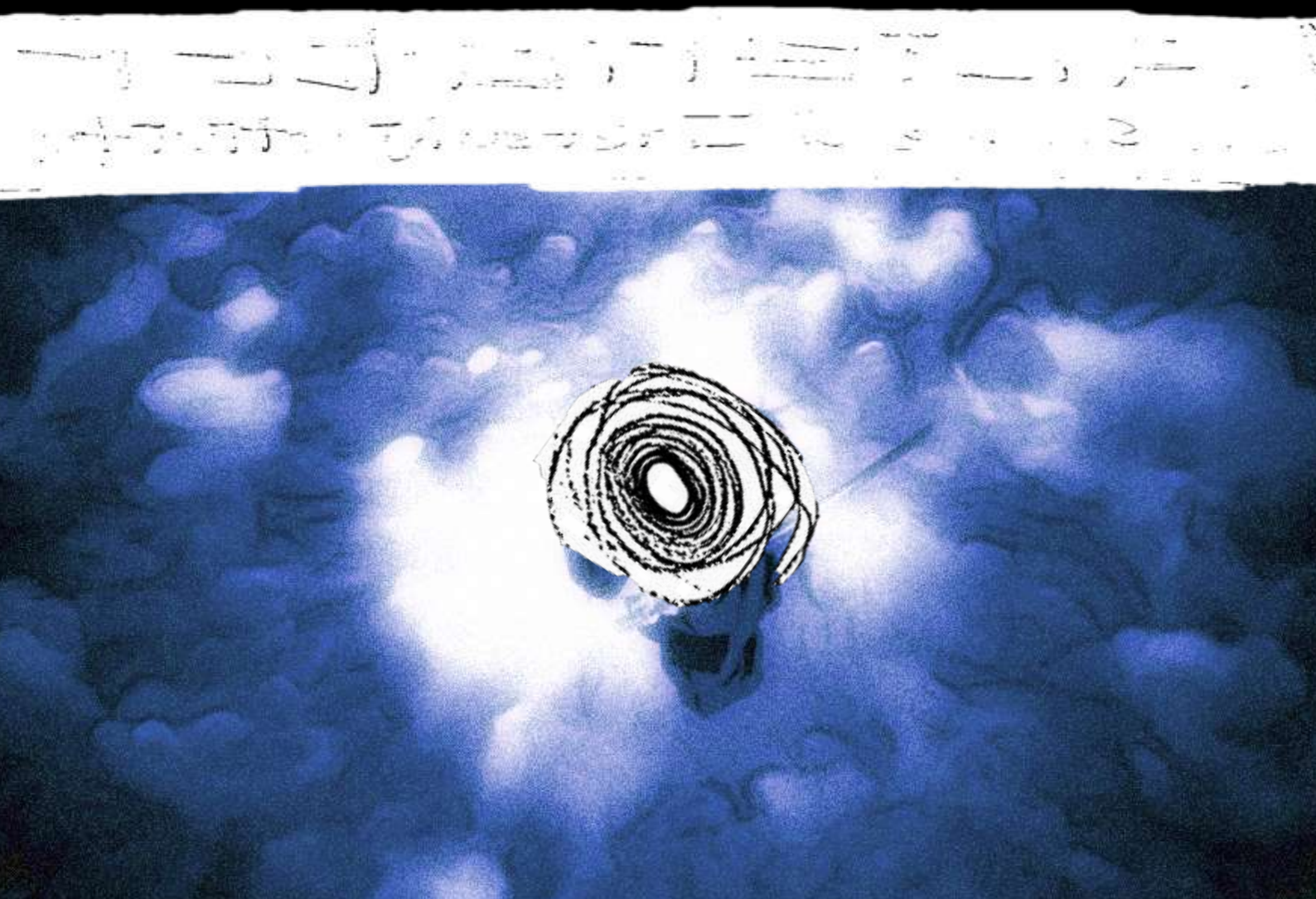
The vapour swirled and this time crackled with electric sparks as Junto's head and heart were consumed by the demon.

When the feast was done, the mass of purple funnelled itself into the shape of a full-bodied woman, with the same head as before. Licking her fingers, she looked down at the remains of Junto, and then back over towards the clearing.

'Fat man here, four over there.' She paused, taking the finger out of her mouth and jabbing her chin. 'And one more for dessert.'

# CHAPTER 2

## A HIGH-RANKING SMOKE DEMON



*Kuso, kuso*, right ahead, run, go, *kuso*, right ahead, go, go, go, go, Akira yelled manically at his own brain as he ran at ninety per cent top speed through the forest, a full hundred out of the question in case it made him trip and break his neck on a tree stump.

Somewhere behind him, another scream rang out, the same notes the others emitted when they were getting butchered by whatever that purple smoky shit was.

Shingen's pet mage probably.

Or one of those child-eating demons Junto was going on about.

No, don't think about it, the ashigaru told himself, focusing on the dozens of trees blurring past him. A few more yards and I should re-connect with the path. From there...the ryokan? The forest on the other side? Or just keep running, and hope that purple stuff doesn't catch up?

He had no idea which was the correct answer, and worse, couldn't figure out how to calm his breathing long enough to make a rational decision.

This whole situation was insane.

A dark-skinned woman rising out of a box, turning into a bank of purple mist, massacring his comrades. At least, that was the logical assumption. He'd caught the smallest sight of what it'd done to Gen and that had been enough to start him running. But perhaps the others had survived?

Junto was a decent fighter, so was Takuya...the less said about Yasu the better, but maybe they'd done okay.

In the distance, another scream.

Or maybe not.

He slowed down to eighty percent speed and glanced backwards, not really expecting to see anything, but trying anyway. Nope, nothing, only the trees he'd passed, some of them with the same green paint from the human skulls smeared on their trunks.

Okay, they're all dead, he decided. You can't kill smoke, not by stabbing it, and katanas were the only thing on hand. So they'd all died. Together. While he ran away like a small child in the opposite direction. A small child with brains and a functioning survival instinct. Sorry, guys.

Ah, perhaps they lasted long enough to slow it down.

Or they struck it in the head?

If just one of them could hold out on dying and taunt it for a-

The scenery in front suddenly lost all its trees, all bushes, all ground and green, replacing them seamlessly with a blanket of cloudless blue sky. Akira stopped running and arched himself backwards, the latter action enough to stop him stumbling forwards and plummeting down the side of the cliff that had just materialised in front of him like a bitter magic trick.

‘Kuso,’ he said, mostly spit and panic.

Getting some of his breath back and thanking the universe [then cursing it for putting the cliff there in the first place], he edged closer to the edge of the precipice that had almost eaten him up and peered over.

‘Ah, not that bad,’ he said quietly.

He was right. The drop below was more of a steep slope than a cliff drop and, by his own estimation, wouldn’t be impossible to traverse. As long as he avoided the sharper rocks poking out here and there and kept close to the grass root clumps then it shouldn’t be too perilous.

‘Are you going to jump then, little ant?’

Akira spun fast, almost tripping over his own boot as he made a grab for the katana guard. Luckily, he had just enough experience as a soldier to steady himself at the last second, and pull out his blade in an orderly fashion.

For all the good it would do.

The dark skinned woman observed him from the nearest tree, her back leaning casually against its trunk, as purple mist wisped and swirled around the rest of her make-believe body. There was a simple, white kosode fitted around it, but Akira had no idea if it was made from actual, physical cloth or just another part of the magic show.

‘Well?’ she asked, miming a jumping action with her fingers.

Akira’s training told him not to respond. Not yet. His voice might tremble at the beginning of his words or the end of them, or any part to be frank, and he couldn’t allow the enemy to see his fear. Even if they were oddly attractive.

Instead, he pointed his katana vaguely forward and adjusted himself into a hunched position.

‘You humans are incredibly tedious,’ the woman said, purple vapour rolling out of her mouth as she spoke. ‘Using your silly metal sticks to attack things you cannot comprehend. Not answering questions when asked. Imagining sexual activity with something that is about to mutilate you.’

Akira closed his eyes, cancelling the picture he'd just conjured up of himself and the smoke woman in an onsen; him massaging her shoulders, her saying she'd never met anyone as resilient as him before.

The woman laughed, creating an eerie whistling sound to accompany it. 'Ah, I was right, wasn't I?'

He squinted, moving weight to the other leg.

'Humans truly are simple creatures. Especially you male types.'

Okay, he thought, she's not telepathic then. Which means I can still strategize. Attackable points? Possibly the head. But not guaranteed. Could be compound mist. Escape? Yes, much better. Safer.

Turning his head an inch to the left, he glanced down at the rock-spotted slope.

Detecting his movement, the woman glanced too.

It's right behind you, Akira told himself. If you turn and jump well enough, there's a chance you can make it down there without getting hurt.

'Yes...I really do think you should try,' the woman said, left arm turning back into mist and creeping towards him. 'If you make it



down unscathed, you can run to Shingen. Tell him what happened here. Persuade him to send reinforcements.'

Akira gripped his katana tight, looking at the smirk on the woman's lips as her head and torso evaporated into purple haze then slowly rebuilt itself into a more familiar form.

'You...'

'I thought you might recognise me.'

Akira nodded out of habit, but didn't say anything more. The whole thing...was unreal. Atta Noe, Shingen's adviser, lover, *shamisen* teacher, whatever her role happened to be, was a demon. A fucking purple smoke demon. Or a fucking purple smoke demon was pretending to be Atta Noe. And it was standing there, unarmed, toying with him. Like a fucking wretch child.

'How about those reinforcements?' the demon who may or may not have been Atta Noe said mockingly, her mist-arm-tendrils still drifting towards him. 'Shingen will reward you greatly for exposing me.'

'Yeah, by bringing me back here,' Akira muttered, marking the ground with his blade.

Atta Noe tilted her head, the mist that was previously her left arm pausing on its trajectory towards Akira's head.

‘Probably not the first time he’s done it either.’

‘Ah, a caustic one.’

Akira moved his right foot back a step, positioning himself as best he could to turn and jump. If he was lucky, he’d have at least a full second of observation time to decide on his route before the demon could reach him.

‘I may not be an expert on your kind,’ she continued, examining the palm of her own right hand, ‘but is it not tradition for ashigaru to return to their master, no matter their fate?’

‘Only the brainless ones.’

‘Ah, individualism. Just like my dear Shingen. Very good.’ Her palm and the arm attached to it disintegrated into purple mist and followed the path of its twin. ‘I admit, you are more of a distraction than your comrades were. It is almost a pity that I must consume a large number of your internal organs. Almost.’

Akira wasn’t at all surprised by her words, he’d guessed she’d be eating some part of him, but the sudden turn of speed from the mist that used to be her right arm did catch him off guard, swiping his neck before he could raise his katana to block.

Not that it mattered.

The blade wouldn't have penetrated the purple vapour and he had no idea where her vital organs were, or if she even had any. And that was academic now, too, as the other arm of mist was shooting towards his chest and the only thing he could think to do was dodge.

Pushing his torso backwards, he lifted up his legs and surrendered himself to the gods of chance. The mist sailed an inch past his left arm, which probably would've looked impressive to a casual observer if he hadn't also been falling backwards down an almost vertical slope with sharp rocks sticking out.

As would his last ditch throwing of the katana towards the demon's head, if that same head hadn't dissipated into yet more mist to avoid the blow.

Ah well, he thought as he rolled over and up and over and up and over again all the way down the slope. I gave it my best shot. At least I didn't die while taking a-

His thoughts were cut out instantly as his head connected with a sturdy rock and his body continued downwards, finally coming to rest on a path in the clearing below.

It appeared that the gods of chance were smiling on him, though, as he wasn't dead. Unconscious and bleeding seriously from the back of the head, yes, but not dead.

Not that he would know that.

The mist demon hovered at the top of the slope, remaining in her most common human form: Atta Noe, advisor to Lord Shingen of Kai Province. From her perch, she surveyed the terrain below, retracing Akira's path down the slope and making a kind of gothic whistling sound.

It may have been annoyance, or admiration, there were no words from Atta Noe to clarify, but it continued as she evaporated completely into mist form and sailed in three separate channels down to the path below.

In response, Akira continued lying unconscious on the dirt-grass, defenceless, about to be slaughtered in his sleep, katana stuck in the trunk of a tree at the top of the slope, comrades dead to the last man.

Yet the purple mist did not attack.

It swirled in lines of three near the edge of the path, as if taunting the unconscious ashigaru, then merged into one form again, the dark-skinned woman, her hands launching forward and striking with a white shock of light some kind of invisible wall.

Whatever it was, it didn't break.

She tried again, this time spinning herself into a purple ball of mist with crackles of electricity escaping in chaotic bursts, and then unleashing it in one ferocious stream.

Again, she couldn't proceed.

No more than three metres between her and the prone ashigaru and she couldn't get to him.

The body of the dark-skinned woman re-emerged and gazed back up the slope, her head performing sporadic jerking movements. Then she phased into mist again, gusting up the side of the slope and disappearing between the trunks of the trees.

A minute passed.

The path and the clearing and the sleeping ashigaru became a landscape painting.

*Man at rest in rural Japan.*

*Or:*

*Bleeding Man at rest in rural Japan.*

It didn't last long.

At the top of the slope, the dark-skinned woman returned, casually dance-stepping down the dirt of the precipice. In her left hand, Akira's katana, the tip of the blade slicing off the taller clumps of grass as she made her way to the edge of the path.

'I would wait for you to wake up, ant,' she said, holding up the blade and doing a few practice swings. 'But I might miss. And that would be quite embarrassing.'

An obese cloud cruised past the sun, bringing a flavour of German Expressionism to the scene.

Atta Noe looked up and around and smiled at the invading shadow, then returned to targeting practice.

‘Torso not head, torso not head, torso not head...’

Making sure the katana was straight, she vetoed her own mantra, adjusted her aim to Akira’s head and let go of the handle.

The sharp strip of metal sailed through the unseen particles of air, arched perfectly to strike its target...which turned out to be grassy mud as it landed with an apologetic *dumpf* about seven inches from Akira’s left ear.

Staring at the katana, then her own aiming hand, Atta Noe morphed the other arm into mist and sliced the useless thing clean off. The hand dropped onto the grass and flipped over a couple of times before dispersing into its natural purple state.

‘... ..’ she screamed, definitely not Japanese, definitely something stronger than *oops*.



## CHAPTER 3

WAS DOING OKAY UNTIL THE DEATH THREAT

Stopping dead in the middle of the path, Miho held up the bun he'd just bitten into and frowned.

Grey with blue bits.

Not a typical colour for chicken, he thought, digging out one of the blue pieces with his fingernail and analysing it. But the guy selling it did say it was Kumamoto style, so maybe that's what chickens looked like down there?

Grey meat with flecks of blue.

Taking another bite, he remembered the kindly smile of the old man with the makeshift bun stall. Yeah, must be Kumamoto style. No way someone like that would misrepresent his own food products.

Miho started walking again, breathing in deep the fresh forest air and admiring the weird green slashes painted onto the occasional tree trunk. It was invigorating to be this far from home, the path ahead full of potential and possibility...and, hopefully, at some point, his beautiful, elusive Yuki.



Ah, how long had it been now? Three months?

She could've been halfway across the country already, or in the capital...or even in Kumamoto eating this weird-coloured chicken.

He paused again, his stomach cramping up tight and making a growling noise.

That didn't feel right.

Holding the bun closer to the sun overhead, he did another quick study. Grey meat with blue bits...was there any possible way it made sense?

In the distance, a bird screeched.

Miho lowered the bun and followed the sound somewhere to the right. Far as he could tell it was a bird, but when the same sound echoed out again, he thought it seemed more like a person.

'An attack,' he said out loud, reaching for the small dagger tucked into his *obi*.

The forest gave no response.

No more screeches, bird or human.

He waited a bit longer, keeping his breath low. Then, after a bird in the canopy nearby whistled out something more melodic, he took his hand off the dagger and resumed walking.

Probably a bird fight, he assured himself. Or bird ambush.

It had been two and half hours since he'd left Kōfu and so far he'd met just one other person; the old man who'd sold him the chicken bun. The chances of a random group of strangers battling each other nearby was so tiny that it barely even counted as a possibility.

Unless it was one of those secret training camps for ninja spies?

Almost on cue, a heavily splintered sign appeared on the right side of the path, slightly tilted. WORSHIP POINT – 200M. He moved closer, searching for smaller text. Nope, nothing.

But then ninjas wouldn't actively promote their camp.

Would they?

He turned to the sloped path indicated by the sign, watching the leaves shiver from the breath of the mountains.

Ninjas or not?

In truth, he had no idea. There had been tales in his village, mostly from Kentaro 2 and River Bitch, about Shingen using corpses possessed with demonic spirits as ninja assistants, but only about one third of the village had believed it. And in that third was about ninety-five per cent of the elderly population.

So it probably wasn't true.

He lifted the bun up to his mouth and took another bite, grimacing when he realised what he'd done.

Then mellowing a little as he chewed.

Just about edible, he told himself, swallowing. If you bypass the taste buds. And picture a red bean bun instead of grey and blue chicken.

Still...I should probably stop.

After the next bite.



After walking for a good ten or fifteen minutes, and warning himself at least four more times to stop eating the bun, he reached a narrow stretch of open glade.

The trees pushed back on both sides, as did the foliage, and the slope on the right re-costumed itself as a full-on cliff.

Ah, finally, a bit of space, he thought, stopping for a moment to take a piss. Even though there were no other travellers around, he decided to play it safe and traipsed over to the tree line on the far left, concealing himself behind one of the larger trunks.

His mother's gentle voice floated into his head, saying, literally, *piss on the road and I'll castrate you*. Strangely, it had worked. Even

if he were desperate, he would always find a bush or a stream, never a walkway.

As he shook off the final drops of his oddly dark urine [Kumamoto style chicken related?], a scream filled the air. That's no bird, he thought.

He was correct; it was a woman. An extremely shrill one who could probably shatter glass if placed close enough, but a woman all the same.

Initiating brainless hero mode, Miho hurried out from the trees and followed the fading echo of the scream. It seemed to be coming from up ahead on the right, so he jogged forward along the path, making sure to avoid the occasional potholes and sneaky rocks embedded in the hardened dirt, until the trees on the left curved in closer and the cliff on the other side mellowed into a slightly less precarious slope.

Keeping his eyes locked right, he caught something odd; a wisp of purple smoke coming from the higher tree line. Ninja vapour? Grape bonfire?

He was so distracted by it that he didn't notice the lump of clothes on the path directly in front of him, and when he did finally spot it, he was already tumbling down onto a surprisingly firm mound of soil.

‘Kuso,’ he swore out at no one, rubbing his shoulder as he lifted himself back up onto his feet.

Looking behind at the thing that had toppled him, he let out a gasp. It wasn't merely a lump of clothes, it was a clothed human, a man human, dead on the ground.

Or not dead, but injured?

Was that what this was?

Forgetting the sore shoulder, Miho shot forward and checked the unconscious figure for a heartbeat. Ah, it was faint, but he was alive. And there was blood coming from the back of his head. Didn't look like a slash wound, but he was no doctor, or warrior-physician, so he couldn't be completely sure.

‘Excuse me, *meijin*,’ Miho said, lightly shaking the man's shoulders.

There was a kind of *brrrrrrr* noise, but no distinct words. And his eyes were still clamped shut.

‘Sir, can you hear me?’ Miho tried again.

No response.

Giving up on the shaking strategy, he felt inside his own pockets for something to assist his efforts. There was no water left in the flask as he'd drunk all of it to wash away the taste of that chicken, and he

didn't have herbs or any of that new ball-shaped medicine from China cos that stuff was insanely expensive.

What could he do?

The only realistic thing that came to mind was the ryokan he was heading to. But that was another five or six kilometres along the path. He could probably carry him some of the way, but not the whole distance, not without some kind of active, conscious leg movement from the man himself.

'Kuso,' he said again, more at the hopelessness of the situation than anything.

Didn't this man have friends? What was he even doing out here, all on his own?

Miho let out an angry breath through both nostrils then another gasp [his third in as many minutes] as he finally noticed the katana laying in the dirt nearby. Wah, where did that come from? Was this a samurai attack?

Wiping pre-emptive sweat off his brow, he scanned the surrounding area again. The path was deserted, in both directions, and the slope didn't seem to show any sign of-

He paused, pushing his head forward and squinting like an elderly person at the wet market.

Was that...

Coming very cautiously down the slope, with the hem of her cloud-white yukata pulled up to avoid clipping the jagged rocks sticking out from the ground, was a woman.

Even with the distance between them, Miho could see she was pretty, and when she got to within talking range, he added *exotic* to the description, mainly because there were little plumes of purple smoke rising off her shoulders.

Was this the one who'd screamed, he wondered.

Did she know the man?

Was that her katana stabbed into the dirt?

'Oh, thank all the gods,' she said, coming to a stop about a metre from the edge of the path and acting out a praying gesture with her hands. 'I thought he had perished for sure.'

'Err...' Miho stammered, not sure how to respond.

'And my gratitude to you as well, young man. Tell me, did you see the villain he was pursuing? Is he dead?'

'Sorry, I didn't see anyone,' replied Miho, attracted again to the purple mist rising from her shoulders. 'Is he-...are you his friend?'

‘Then he has gotten away.’ She looked at the katana laying on the path, then back up to Miho. ‘Please, young man, if it is not too much trouble, could you help bring my friend back to our camp?’

‘Your camp?’

‘My other friends are waiting there.’

Miho looked over to the slope, trying to find the rope that could be used to help lift this wounded man up there. If not rope, then some other device. Obviously, she couldn’t expect him to lift a grown man all the way up there by himself.

‘Quickly, please. It looks like a lot of blood is pouring from his head.’

‘Couldn’t one of your friends come down to help lift him?’

‘Of course, I will call to them when we reach the bottom of the slope. But we must begin moving him immediately.’

Miho nodded, still unsure, and bent down to the injured man. There would be no easy way to pick him up, his body was the strong, well-stacked type, but he couldn’t just leave him in the middle of the path. A horse might come and step on him.

As he tucked a hand under the stranger’s armpit, there was a groaning noise from the victim himself. His eyelids fluttered for a moment, but refused to do any more than that.



‘Maybe we should call your friends down first,’ said Miho, standing up again but too coy to look the woman directly in the eye. ‘Or better still, there’s a ryokan a little farther along the road. We could take him there.’

‘No.’

‘They’re likely to have herbs and medical equipment, maybe someone with-’

‘Impossible. He is needed back in camp. Please, lift him now. Bring him over to me.’

Miho followed the woman’s hand and saw it was pointing directly at her own feet. Was that where she wanted him to be brought? Did it have softer grass or something? And why were her eyes suddenly glinting lilac?

He rubbed his neck, growing more and more suspicious. His heart was saying, do as the pretty woman says, but his head was telling him to keep back, the whole situation was weird.

Reluctantly obeying his head, Miho looked back along the path and said it’d probably be best if her friends came down and helped carry the man to the nearby ryokan. ‘Cos I’m not sure what kind of medical supplies you have up there,’ he added, aiming a sceptical glance at the canopy sticking out from the top of the slope.

The woman waited quite a long time before responding and, when she did, it wasn't at all what Miho was expecting. Sliding one hand beneath her yukata, she told him that she would be very, very grateful if he could bring her friend to the bottom of the slope for her.

Miho watched the woman pull the yukata to the left, revealing the pale skin of her shoulder.

‘If you do that for me, I will give you one full hour of my complete attention.’

‘Err...what about your friends?’

‘Them too.’

‘No, I mean...can your friends just come down here and help us?’

‘Do you not find me attractive, young man?’

‘Me? Well...yeah. Kind of. I mean, yes, you are beautiful. Obviously. But I’m spoken for already. Actually, that’s why I’m on this path, I’m on a quest to find her again. You haven’t seen her, have you? Pale skin, also very beautiful, doesn’t smile much. Goes by the name of Yuki...if she can be bothered to say it. She’s a bit anti-social sometimes, with strangers.’

Miho paused, realising the woman was staring at him. Her yukata was back in place and the purple wisps around her shoulders were starting to swirl more erratically.

‘I don’t know if you’re aware, but there’s some kind of...purple smoke...coming off your body.’

She switched her gaze to the ashigaru, shaking her head. ‘We don’t have time for this. I am Atta Noe, advisor to Lord Shingen, and my samurai protector is dying. And that villain could return at any moment to finish him off. I require you to at least pull him over to that tall clump of grass there. Allow him to be safely concealed while I go and call my friends.’

‘You’re connected to the Takeda Clan?’

‘No, I am advisor to Lord Shingen himself, with the power to bestow reward and riches as I see fit...even to a simple village boy. Now, will you carry my friend?’

‘Err...’

Miho measured the distance to the clump of grass, then checked the path again. No sign of anyone else yet, though the woman was probably right. Whoever had attacked this...samurai...could return at any moment, and with reinforcements too.

‘Okay, I will take him to that grassy patch.’

The woman placed her hands together and repeated the praying gesture from earlier. ‘You are a kind soul.’

Miho let out a reluctant, ‘yeah, I suppose,’ a bit embarrassed suddenly that he wasn’t taking the samurai all the way up the slope, or at least attempting to. But then he remembered that he wasn’t a sumo wrestler and that kind of effort was way beyond his physical abilities.

Removing his dōbuku and placing it carefully on the ground, he bent down and put both hands under the samurai’s armpits. Taking a few deep breaths, he started to drag him towards the woman.

‘Wah, he’s not as heavy as I thought...maybe cos I’m sliding him along the ground instead of-...’

Miho’s analysis was broken by the arm of the samurai shooting up and grabbing him by the neck. Followed by a strangled attempt at speech that sounded not unlike ‘stop.’

‘Wah, he’s conscious!’

‘Faster, keep pulling,’ insisted the woman, taking a step forward and then, for some reason, bouncing back again with a little white sparkle effect.

‘Are you okay? Can you hear me?’ Miho asked the samurai, secretly relieved that his arms could take a rest.

‘Deem,’ the man replied, opening his eyes and blinking like a lunatic at the sky.

‘Sorry?’

‘Deem On,’ he repeated, wildly swinging his arm backwards, clipping Miho on the ear.

‘Did you say demon?’

The samurai opened his mouth and coughed several times before finally forcing the words out. ‘Woman...is a demon.’

‘Who?’

‘Woman...purple smoke...demon.’

Miho squinted as if the words were visible bubbles of text in the air, then gave up and turned back to the woman. ‘I think he said there’s a-...’

‘... ..’

The interruption sounded more like a violent melodic refrain than Japanese, but that didn’t matter as Miho was too stuck on the imagery in front of him to notice.

And with good reason.

It was like some mythological stage play, out of nowhere, had been dropped down into the clearing. Hell pays a visit to Kai Province, Act 1, scene 1.

No, weirder than that.

The woman...who had been a woman a minute earlier...was now only half there. Her head, shoulders, hair and nothing else were...somehow...floating on a giant, chaotic cloud of purple mist. And that mist was whipping out misty tendrils towards the path, towards him...but falling short...with that weird white sparkle effect...almost like they were crashing into some kind of invisible wall before they could connect.

Miho reeled back regardless, assuming at least one of them would break through and hit him.

Fortunately, he assumed wrong.

The tendrils ceased their attack and the woman's head bobbed closer, her eyes boring right through him. 'Bring the ashigaru to me, and you *may* be spared.'

'Miss, you're on fire,' was all Miho could manage in response.

'This is a temporary offer.'

*Weird fire...*

'Ending in five seconds.'

*With no physical body...*

‘I suggest you start dragging.’

He blinked a dozen times, still trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It wasn’t fire, and it wasn’t a normal woman. What was it then? A demon, like the man said?

But...it couldn’t...were demons even real?

‘Stop gawping like a cow and bring him to me, wretch.’

‘I don’t...what will you do with him?’

‘Slit open his chest and dine on his organs. Throw rocks at his gormless head. And the same for you if you don’t start assisting me.’

Miho nodded, he didn’t know why. There was no way he could just give a man over to have his insides eaten. Or have rocks thrown at his defenceless head. But he also didn’t wanna piss off something that was half made of purple smoke.

‘Move him now,’ the woman commanded, calming her mist tendrils a little.

‘I can’t...do that.’

‘Do it.’

‘Sorry...no.’

'Move him, wretch.'

'I can't.'

'... ..'

'It doesn't feel right.'

The purple mist stopped abruptly, each tendril moving inwards to merge with the core.

'Then you are both dead,' intoned the woman, her voice and head absorbed into the smoke as it trailed at unnatural speed back up the slope and into the shadows of the forest.

Miho watched it vanish with his peripheral vision as the main parts of his eyes remained focused on the spot where the bizarre purple light show had happened. Where the woman had been standing. Where she'd looked pretty and seductive and dropped the shoulder of her yukata...then turned into a purple cloud and threatened to eat him.

He stood there for a long time, staring.

At the dirt.

Looking for purple residue.

Waiting for the woman to come back down the slope and say,  
'ha! Just kidding.'



But it didn't happen.

Nothing did.

Apart from the occasional shout of 'demon' from the delirious samurai below.

'Daydream,' Miho mumbled finally, shifting attention to the remains of the chicken bun sticking out of his *obi* bag. 'Has to be.'

In the trees beyond the slope, a bird screeched.

Four times.

The fourth a little more desperate.

Then nothing.

Silence.

## CHAPTER 4

## TWO OF THE NICEST ASHIGARU AROUND

$\frac{1}{x^2} = x^{-2}$



*Just a few more steps...*

Miho blew out what little was left of his existing breath and sucked in a fraction of what he needed to replace it.

He blocked out the nagging complaints from both his arms and legs, that they weren't built for this kind of work and would soon collapse. Eyes watered from the effort of keeping his head straight enough to see the end of the path ahead.

'A few more ste-'

His right leg buckled, followed by the left, leaving his body - plus the unconscious samurai on his back - with no choice but to drop like decapitated meerkats into a large pothole.

Luckily, it hadn't been raining so the pothole was dry, but that was scant consolation for Miho.

'Wah, it's like carrying a bronze statue,' he muttered, crawling out from under the dormant weight and looking back at how far they'd come.

*Kuso.*

About fifty metres, give or take ten metres. Take, more likely.

He could still make out the top of the slope where the demon woman had descended from, and the beginning of the path that had led him into this huge, open mess in the first place.

*Kuso, kuso, kuso. Kuso.*

Why didn't I just take the main road, he wondered, even though he knew wondering wouldn't change a thing. Follow those salt merchants back up to Uedara, listen in on tales about the salt trade, borrow leftover salt from their sacks to make salt angels in the-

Throwing a random stone in frustration, he watched with horror as it hit a larger rock and bounced back, striking the samurai on the side of his head. He moaned in response, forcing Miho into panic mode: he leapt back to his feet and shouted vaguely to the left, telling the demon to stop flinging rocks at his friend.

'Demon...' slurred Akira, managing to twist his head round and face the direction from which the stone had struck him.

'It's okay, *meijin*, she's gone.'

'The road...' Akira rotated further, squinting at the path behind them. 'That slope...'

'Yeah, we're making progress.'

'...where?'

‘Actually, *meijin*, you’re heavier than you look. I think it’s the dōbuku you’re wearing, looks quite weighty, maybe the katana too. But...never mind, now that you’re awake, you can help me shift the weight a bit.’

Miho paused, wondering if he should add another *meijin*...then decided two was probably enough; any more than that and he’d have to use it every time he spoke, and no *meijin* would appreciate that degree of pedantry. At least, he knew he wouldn’t. If he ever got to *meijin* level.

‘The demon, where is it?’ asked Akira again, trying and failing to grab the collar of Miho’s yukata.

‘Don’t worry, she’s gone, really. Turned into that weird purple mist and blew back over the slope. Blew? Is that the right word? I don’t know. I’m still not sure it really happened, to tell the truth. The whole thing feels like a bizarre dream.’

The samurai ran shaky eyes over Miho’s quite tall but also quite skinny physique. ‘You defeated her?’

‘Err...not really. Like I said, she just blew away. Also said we were dead men for not letting her eat us. Which reminds me...’ He gestured at the path ahead, the tree line slowly narrowing on both sides. ‘You want me to lift you again, or are you okay by yourself?’

‘Which direction...is that?’ asked Akira, rubbing his head.

‘Generally, it goes all the way to Suwa, so I was told...but there’s a ryokan a few kilometres ahead. That’s where I was planning on taking you.’

‘Not to Shingen...’

‘The daimyō?’

Akira groaned, changing from rubbing to digging knuckles into his scalp.

‘Is that your master? Shingen?’

‘Ryokan...’

Miho frowned, triple-checking the man’s dōbuku design to make sure he really was a samurai. Crooked tree motif, red sun, yup, seemed legitimate enough, as did the katana he’d picked out of the path dirt and tucked in the man’s belt, but his answer was still odd. Unless Shingen had been killed and he hadn’t heard about it yet?

Dusting off his dōbuku, Akira put both palms flat on the ground and pushed himself up. The effort was far too swift and energetic for his current state, and, as soon as he was vertical, he began to wobble.

‘Hey, watch out,’ said Miho, darting forward and grabbing Akira’s sleeve, just enough for it to rip and the man himself to drop back towards the ground.

‘Kuso...I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-...’ Miho held the little chunk of torn sleeve in his hand, basically apologising to it.

‘Too weak,’ whispered Akira, rolling onto his back. ‘My head...throat...’

‘Right. I agree. You need food, water.’ Miho checked his pockets, pulling out the only thing he could feel inside and instantly regretting it. ‘Err...apparently, this is a chicken bun. Kumamoto style. Not sure if you wanna eat it, but-’

Akira raised a hand and grabbed it, shoving it without fanfare into his mouth. Clearly unused to Kumamoto style, the samurai lasted about five seconds before it came shooting back out, some of the soggy, greasy bits landing on Miho’s foot.

‘I had a similar reaction,’ the young villager replied, wiping his contaminated *zori* on a nearby rock.

Sensing food, a trail of ants marched out of the grass to the side of the path, crawling over the chicken remains. To the ant palate it must’ve tasted okay as they stayed there a while.

‘Ryokan...’ mumbled Akira, eyes starting to close.

‘Yes, with both of us walking, shouldn’t take too long.’

‘Not Shingen...’

‘You are going to stand up, aren’t you?’

Akira gave the softest possible ‘yes’ and then returned koala-like to an unconscious state. Which meant he probably wasn’t going to stand up.

That was Miho's deduction anyway.

And it was a fair one.

Especially now he could see drool sneaking out from the edge of the samurai's mouth.

'Six kilometres,' he said to himself as he bent down and got a firm grip on the ashigaru's armpits. 'Carrying someone whose name I don't even know.'

Storing up as much breath as he could hold in one go, he lifted the samurai and manoeuvred him into a diagonal slant against his shoulders. Then, letting out the held breath, and probably sucking the same particles right back in, he shifted round the side and placed the man's arms around his neck.

After a few tentative steps, he made the mistake of looking ahead, tripped on a dirt-covered rock and almost fell over again. Somehow, his calves took the strain, he managed to steady himself and, after a few dozen awkward shuffles, his feet settled into some kind of rhythm.

Walk a few steps. Stop. Walk a few steps. Stop.

It was just about tolerable.

Even with the samurai drooling on his shoulder...and swinging his arm up every half minute or so, clipping his ear.



Ah, just think of the ryokan, Miho told himself. The scenic, serene, mountain-side ryokan where your arms won't hurt anymore and the chicken might actually look like chicken.

Ah, sweet, tender chicken...

~~~~

‘Poison!’

A dish with a mutilated onigiri attached sailed through the air - missing the staff girl's head by only a millimetre - and crashed into the ryokan wall. As said wall wasn't made of sponge, the dish broke instantly and dropped in scattered pieces onto the tatami floor, while most of the onigiri defied physics and clung on to the Sugi wood.

‘Incompetent girl, you were supposed to catch it,’ roared a stocky ashigaru on the other side of the lobby, his eyebrows not only meeting in the middle but setting up a small encampment there.

‘Reflexes of a dead bear,’ said the other ashigaru beside him on the futon sofa, scratching a blue piece of cloth tied loosely round his wrist.

The girl in question – tall, scruffily dressed in ryokan-issue tan yukata, no more than nineteen – kept her back to them and watched the remains of the onigiri she'd just presented slide slowly down the lobby wall.

‘Hey, servant wretch, we're talking to you,’ said the eyebrow ashigaru, picking up his friend's dish.

‘Answer him,’ ordered his friend, swiftly taking it back.

‘Why didn’t you catch the dish?’

‘Or even try to catch it.’

‘Exactly, she didn’t even raise her hand.’

‘Pathetic child.’

‘Reflexes of a dead cow.’

‘I am not your servant,’ the girl replied, tone skating close to the edge of the volcano but not diving in.

‘The hell you’re not!’ shouted the eyebrow ashigaru, kicking the table leg in front of him, advancing into the cleared space. ‘Now stop talking back like a little shit and pick up the mess.’

The girl looked at the entrance to the kitchen, only a few steps away. Then back at the pieces of dish and bits of onigiri decorating the floor right by her feet. Then into the metaphorical lava. ‘It is not my responsibility to clean up after drunks.’

The eyebrow ashigaru’s face almost exploded, his eyes scrambling for something new to throw, while his friend made a poor attempt at a whistle.

‘You dare call us drunks?’

‘Well, you’re clearly not sober.’

‘Pick up the mess. Now. This instant.’

To add urgency to the command, the eyebrow ashigaru drew his katana and advanced, the tip of his blade reaching out and down towards her knees.

‘This instant,’ he repeated, the sudden movements he’d just performed making his breath ragged.

‘No stabbing,’ said his friend, moving not an inch from the futon.

‘Go. Pick it up. All of it.’

Keeping the blade in peripheral view, the girl put both hands behind her back and dug nails into her left palm.

Apologise, pick up the onigiri. Apologise, pick up the onigiri. Apologise, hit him with the onigiri. Stab his foot with a broken shard of dish. Hide in the kitchen. Stab anyone who follows.

She looked left, at the painting of Mount Kaikoma.

No, not tranquil enough.

Shifting right, she focused on the Eastern Shore of Lake Suwa, hanging on the opposite side of the ryokan lobby.

Okay. Better.

‘What in Hachiman’s name is wrong with you?’ said the eyebrow ashigaru, making a swiping motion with his katana. ‘Pick up the fucking mess.’

The girl closed her eyes, taking a meditation breath.

‘Don’t try to sleep. Obey. Insolent little wretch.’

‘What’s going on here?’ shouted a voice from the direction of the entrance.

All three actors in the one-stage drama turned round and glared at the fresh entrant, a middle-aged woman standing by the open door panel, body covered in the same tan yukata as the girl. In her right hand hung a strangled chicken, and on her face, specks of blood, either from the chicken itself or its friends and familiars.

‘Your servant girl is broken,’ said the eyebrow ashigaru, lowering his blade to the floor.

‘Refuses to do her job,’ added his friend, scratching the blue cloth on his wrist again.

‘Is that true, Aya?’

The girl, apparently called Aya, looked as pointedly as she could at the eyebrow ashigaru’s katana short of actually walking over and prodding it with her face. ‘This man...threw a dish at me.’

‘Nonsense! I was passing it back to her. The onigiri did not look well-made.’

‘He’s lying, Himiko.’

The woman, Himiko, raised her hand, and the dead chicken along with it. ‘Enough. I will not have this kind of ruckus taking place in the lobby of my ryokan. Now, apologise to the two guests, and clean up the mess.’

‘But-’

‘That is the last time I’ll say it. Understand?’

Aya glanced down at the katana still not too far from her kneecaps, grumbled something under her breath then said out loud that she’d be right back with a cloth and tray.

‘And a well-made onigiri,’ shouted the eyebrow ashigaru.

‘Another decanter of shōchū, too,’ added his friend, raising the old one and not blinking in the slightest when drops of alcohol splashed out over the rim.

‘High quality shōchū.’

‘The best you have in stock.’

‘Of course,’ replied Aya, already building up the first molecules of spit she was going to add to both items.

‘Be quick about it too. I’m starving.’

After Aya had scuttled off to the kitchen, making throat hacking sounds as she went, Himiko approached the two guests, chicken corpse still in hand, and told the eyebrow ashigaru to put his katana away.

‘No one tells a samurai what to do with his weapon.’

‘Obviously not. Though it will be hard for you to drink the complementary bottle of shōchū if it’s still in your hand.’

‘Complementary?’ asked the eyebrow ashigaru, sheathing his katana.

‘Don’t think you can so easily buy our good will, ryokan lady,’ said the blue cloth ashigaru, gesturing at his friend to sit back down.

‘All I want is a peaceful environment here.’

‘If that is the case, then free shōchū will not be sufficient.’

Himiko looked through the gaps in the shutters behind the seated ashigaru, out onto the snow-flecked courtyard, her hand tightening its grip on the neck of the chicken. ‘What would you suggest?’

‘Two things come to mind.’

‘Go on.’

‘First, a new room. The place we currently have is small and has a poor view.’

‘I can arrange that.’

‘Not just any room,’ said the eyebrow ashigaru, moving towards the shutters and pulling the nearest one open. ‘That cabin up there.’

‘I’m sorry, but that is already taken.’

‘Then make it untaken.’

‘I don’t think I’ll be able to do that.’

‘You don’t think you’ll be able to? Does that not imply that you could, if you so desired?’

A shadow filled the lobby, cloaking Himiko’s instinctive reaction, and prompting the eyebrow ashigaru to look at the open

shutter in confusion. When he realised the afternoon sun blockage was coming from the entrance, from a person, the katana promptly came back out.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, aiming the tip of his blade at the man in the oddly green yukata obstructing the entrance.

‘The co-owner of this establishment.’

‘Ah, finally, the real boss. Look, this woman here tells us we can’t have that cabin up there, the one on the slope. But I have a suspicion that’s not entirely true. What do you say?’

‘Of course, you may have the room,’ the man in the green yukata replied, monotone, not shifting an inch from the doorway.

‘They may?’ asked Himiko, switching the dead chicken to her left hand and running a fingernail over the green necklace peeking out at the top of her robes.

‘It will be ready by six this evening.’

The eyebrow ashigaru raised the guard of his katana, stroking his chin with it. ‘Hmm, a bit long to wait...though it might be bearable with the free shōchū you’ve promised us.’

‘We apologise for the inconvenience,’ said the man in the green yukata, turning to leave.

‘Second condition,’ said the ashigaru with the blue cloth, tapping his empty cup against the edge of the table.

‘What?’

‘The girl who broke the dish. I wish her to spend the night with me. In the cabin.’

Himiko opened her mouth to answer, but was beaten to it by her colleague, his back still turned to the lobby. ‘She will be sent to you an hour after your evening meal.’

‘Good, good.’

‘Is that all?’

The ashigaru with the blue cloth turned his eyes to the kitchen entrance. ‘We are...satisfied.’

‘For the time being,’ added the eyebrow man, winking at Himiko. ‘Though it might be a bit more expedient if you were the face of the-...

The remaining words died on his lips as he realised the man in the green yukata had already left and taken the clouds with him.

‘If you need anything else, you can find me outside,’ said Himiko, putting the chicken back in her strangling hand.

‘Maybe after a few more glasses of shōchū,’ mumbled the eyebrow man, returning his katana to his *obi*.

A few moments later, when it was just the two ashigaru slumped on separate futon sofas, lost in their own fantasies of the coming night, Aya re-appeared with a tray of fresh onigiri [made by a very

irritated Chef Amo] and a new decanter of spit-enhanced shōchū. As she placed it carefully down on the table, she noticed the ashigaru with the blue cloth on his wrist staring at her, and the fatter man smirking, but for some strange reason they didn't bark any orders.

Or point their katanas at her kneecaps.

Or try to grope her ass again.

Odd, she thought, faking a smile and moving over to the mess on the floor. Whatever Himiko said to pacify them, it had definitely worked.



CHAPTER 5

JEWEL OF KAI RYOKAN

A small hawfinch sat on a branch of an ancient tree, watching with bored curiosity as the human hand on the ground below started to spasm.

Then the arm.

Then the neck.

Then, finally, what was left of the torso.

When the eyes shot open, draining out a trapped deposit of blood, the hawfinch decided enough was enough and flew upwards into the canopy, swearing never again to hang out at a human worship point.

On the blood-and-leaves covered ground left behind, the mutilated corpse of Gen continued its series of spasms; the hands attempting to plant themselves on the dirt in order to lift up the torso, finding it to be impossibly delicate work, and, inevitably, buckling and bringing the whole body down on top of a perished troupe of scouting ants.

With purple vapours evaporating off the scalp, the corpse tried again, and this time managed to secure a firm enough grip on a nearby rock.

It moved the left arm forward, steadying itself, then followed with the right. The procedure went smoothly for about four metres, until a crevice appeared in the path and, unable to keep its balance, the ashigaru zombie rolled over on its side.

‘... ..’ emanated from Gen’s mouth, along with a stream of purple mist [inadvertently flushing out a rogue maggot].

Atta Noe reformed into her regular female shape and slammed both fists on the lid of the box, which was still loose on the ground, next to one of the other ashigaru corpses.

‘Where are those two fools?’ she said, practically spitting the words out.

The other corpses didn’t answer.

Nor did the trees.

Nor the ant inspection team that had just arrived on the scene, sent to investigate the disappearance of group ZX887.

She moved on from the lid and struck the box instead, feeling no pain at all despite using her knuckles.

Late by four hours, she fumed internally. What level of ineptitude is this? That cursed ashigaru and the idiot boy will be miles away by now. Out of Kai Province even.

She glanced down at the corpse of Yasu, his chest sliced in two down the middle, and pulled at the sleeve of her white yukata.

Stupid ashigaru. Why had he not died more prosaically? Why had he forced her to do that amount of damage to him?

Now she was stuck there, at one of those ludicrous human worship points, relying on the competence of two drunk *ashigaru*, who when they did eventually turn up would probably try to grope her.

If that neurotic wreck Atta ka Saori had taught me better, she thought, thinking back to earlier years, then I'd be able to transport my own box.

Or expand my range a few metres at least.

That would have been enough to grab those two little parasites, get them up here and slowly rip tiny, little strips of ant flesh from their faces, force them to listen to lines of Shingen's juvenile poetry as it's done to them.

Looking down again, she noticed the line of ants scurrying away from her feet, seeking sanctuary in one of those fake skulls.

'And where do you think you're going, little pests?'

Her foot trickled out into purple smoke and formed a trail around them, hovering for a few seconds as the ants stopped, confused...then closed in with brutal speed, crushing them all.

‘That’s better.’

~~~

The path leading up to the *Jewel Of Kai Ryokan* was about as pleasant as any path in Japan could be.

A gentle stream running parallel, with no lurking bears. Endless mountains to the left that may have had bandits camped somewhere within during the summer months, but at the tail end of winter, no chance. And, in a clearing up ahead, a young woman planted behind a giant sheet of rice paper, painting a young man with his kosode off, hand propped up against a slanted cypress tree.

The last thing was especially pleasant because it reassured Miho, as he hobbled past with Akira slumped on one shoulder, that there were actual guests at the ryokan, and that it wasn’t just a spider-trap set up to lure in salt merchants and rob them while they slept.

‘Beautiful afternoon,’ he said, sticking his hand up to wave and instantly having it swatted away by the delirious samurai.

The painter didn’t notice, focusing instead on her brush strokes, while the man moved a step from his position and shouted, ‘don’t let him throw up in the stream.’

‘He’s injured,’ Miho replied, taking a long breath before adding, ‘not drunk.’

‘Oh. Don’t let him bleed on the tatami then.’

‘Position,’ shouted the woman, pointing the man back to the tree.

‘Don’t let him bleed on the bridge either.’

Nodding politely, Miho continued on, whispering to Akira that the guy was probably joking, but the samurai didn’t respond.

Not even a muffled groan or random arm swipe.

‘Almost there now...thank gods...’

Crossing the first of two bridges, Miho briefly considered stopping and propping up his human baggage on the wooden railings, but he could see the entrance to the ryokan now, and the lodging rooms beside it, and another, grander one on the slope to the left that was presumably for VIPs, so he decided to push through the dull pain in his legs and arms until he could collapse on the bench just outside the front door.

And that’s what he did.

Over the bridge, past another guest sitting on an unnaturally positioned rock by the stream, across the second bridge [with one section of the railing snapped off], almost tripping over some replica chicken statues in the ryokan courtyard, and finally making it safely to the bench.

‘Kusoooo,’ he breathed out, dumping both himself and the unconscious ashigaru down on top of it. ‘We made it.’

‘Graarrg,’ slurred Akira, sliding diagonally down.

Calling the owner and getting a room was clearly the next step, but Miho was too tired to stand up again, and they’d probably seen him through the lobby window anyway.

He closed both eyes, returning his breathing to a more regular rate, and let the sun warm his eyelids.

The samurai next to him made a few of his routine groaning sounds, but mostly stayed as committed to sleep as he had done for the whole trip.

If Miho were a cynical type, he would’ve suspected the man of tricking him, of pretending to be unconscious just so he could get a free lift to the ryokan, but that kind of thinking was for bandits and high-level aristocrats, not him.

Besides, the trip didn’t seem that bad now that he was resting on the bench. The sun had been a companion most of the way, there was no chilly wind coming in from the north, no bandits pretending to be lost tourists with a fake map, asking where the nearest apothecary was.

Apparently sensing Miho’s new found comfort, the clouds above shifted, blocking out the already dipping sun.

‘Stop dragging it,’ shouted a rough voice nearby.



Miho opened one eye and looked across the courtyard, then at the cabins on the right. Two fairly large men were following a young girl in a brown yukata out of the nearest one, hitting her with a large piece of bamboo every time she dropped the large trunk she was attempting to carry.

‘If there’s any marks on it, I’ll cut a piece of you off in return,’ shouted the fatter of the two men, not even looking at the trunk.

‘Tomorrow,’ added his friend, smirking in a way that made Miho shift in his seat to subdue the sudden cold shiver sensation invading his limbs.

It got worse when he noticed the katanas tucked in their belts.

‘Samurai,’ he whispered to Akira, getting an ‘urrrrr’ in return.

The girl continued along with the trunk, not responding to any of the provocations, though her face did look quite stern. Miho had seen the same expression on River Bitch once, when a local warlord’s son had come to the village for the day and forced her to carry him on her back.

She must work here, he thought, examining her yukata again.

It wasn’t the most impressive deduction ever, as the only possible alternative was that she was the two samurais’ sex slave, but he was still quite proud of himself.

‘You dropped it again,’ yelled the fat ashigaru, finally losing patience and kicking the girl hard in the ass.

Somehow, she kept her balance enough not to fall over, but that only incensed the fat ashigaru further, and he swiftly sent her stumbling forward with a fierce blow to the back of her head.

‘Hey...’ shouted Miho and the other ashigaru at the same time.

Hearing the echo, both ashigaru instinctively looked the wrong way, up towards the mountains, then realised their mistake and switched the spotlight to Miho.

At some point, he’d stood up and moved off the bench and, figuring that he should probably offer a follow up, said in a lower, more playful voice, ‘hitting people weaker than yourself will only damage you too.’

‘Who the fuck are you talking to, boy?’ demanded the fat ashigaru.

‘Are you mad?’ added the other, taller one.

Miho considered both questions, while also taking the chance to see if the girl was okay. As far as he could tell, she was unhurt, though she was still on the ground. And looking at him with a very weird, squinting expression.

‘Don’t enter into silence around me, boy,’ shouted the fat ashigaru, advancing with his katana halfway out.

Miho stood his ground, remembering his father’s stories about the noble samurai and their code of honour, but the fat ashigaru didn’t slow down and his face looked like a demon who’d just had his

mortgage doubled, and his katana was already pulled back, ready to thrust forward and-

‘Morita!’

Miho turned, puzzled for a moment when he saw the samurai he’d just dragged almost four kilometres sitting up on the bench, then quickly adjusted.

‘Kōtoku,’ blurted the fat ashigaru, almost dropping his katana on the spot. ‘Is that you?’

‘No, it’s my body double,’ Akira groaned, rubbing the back of his head.

‘What the king of hell are you doing here?’ asked the slimmer ashigaru, taking a hand off the girl’s shoulder and walking up next to his stuttering comrade.

‘Vacation.’

‘The box...you were supposed to be...’

‘Demon.’

‘...carrying it to-...what?’

‘Demon in the box. Everyone dead.’ Akira finished with the head massage and pulled himself up into a more formal sitting position.

‘What are you two doing here?’

The two ashigaru exchanged glances, telepathically asking for a semi-believable cover story. Luckily, they didn’t have to articulate

their final choice - ‘we’re reviewing ryokans for Shingen’s new census’ – as Himiko pushed open the entrance door with a kendo stick in her left hand and demanded to know what all the ruckus was about.

‘Talking to an old friend,’ said the fat ashigaru, frowning at the stick.

‘Old?’ asked Akira, coughing.

Himiko nodded and looked at Aya, who was back on her feet now and moving over to the trunk. ‘What are you doing, silly girl? That trunk’s far too heavy for you.’

‘She can manage,’ said the slimmer ashigaru.

‘Obviously, she can’t. Anyway, that’s irrelevant, Chef Amo needs her in the kitchen. You’ll have to carry it yourself.’ Himiko shifted the kendo stick to her other hand and turned to Miho, who was just about to collapse on the bench again. ‘And you two? What do you think you’re doing on that bench?’

‘I was just taking a rest,’ said Miho.

‘Only paid guests can sit there. And it’s a two night minimum stay. In the room, not on the bench’

‘Okay. We will take one room.’

‘Two,’ said Akira, eyelids barely able to stay up.

‘Sorry, one is all we’ve got. Two futons, very cosy.’ Himiko tapped the kendo stick against the wooden door panel. ‘Come inside and I’ll get you the key.’

Miho bowed slightly, keeping his eyes on the kendo stick, and looked at Akira. As seemed to be his habit, he was unconscious again.

‘Fine, he can stay there. Temporarily. Aya, what are you waiting for? Get in the kitchen.’

Aya did the curtest of nods and let go of the trunk handle. As she walked past the other two ashigaru, she slowly opened the clenched fist of her other hand, releasing bits of dirt and tiny jagged flint onto the ground.

The fat ashigaru muttered something then bent down and picked up his katana. His slim comrade folded both arms, watching both Miho and Aya disappear inside the ryokan, before turning his attention back to Akira.

‘What are we going to do?’ asked the fat ashigaru.

As he spoke, more clouds appeared, covering completely what remained of the afternoon sun.

‘Not here,’ replied the slim ashigaru, gesturing with his elbow towards the trunk.

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A short while later, the fat ashigaru dumped the trunk by the futon and stood by the balcony window panel of Room 28, the ryokan's deluxe cabin.

It hadn't taken too long to carry the luggage up, but long enough for the sun to go down and the odd purple light of the witching hour to replace it.

'Looks like he's in bad shape,' said the fat ashigaru, peering at Akira through the panel gaps.

'Not bad enough,' replied the slim ashigaru, checking the inside of the tea pot then moving into the onsen room.

'There's two of us, one of him.'

'Don't be obtuse. We'll wait until he's asleep, then sneak in. The boy will have to be dealt with too.'

'Yeah, that little shit...' shouted the fat ashigaru, trying to wipe away a small green light from the door panel, '...saying *hey* like that. To a samurai.'

'Don't get too excited. We're up at sunrise tomorrow, remember? In and out, no frills. I'll do the same with the girl here. Then we go grab that fucking box and hope Shingen's in a good mood when we get back.'

He paused, dipping his hand in the onsen water and pulling it right back out again.

‘Kuso,’ he cried, wagging his hand in the air. ‘It’s like a fucking volcano. What the fuck’s she playing at?’

There was a whistling sound from the main room, but no words succeeding it.

‘Ahh, doesn’t matter. Might actually be fun. I can dip the girl in, scold her for carrying our trunk poorly.’

The thin ashigaru moved back to the doorway to the main room, sucking the minor burn on his finger.

‘You’ll have to go for a walk when she comes. Maybe go and chase that owner, see if she’ll let you play with her. It’s worth a try. Hey, when did it get so dark in here? Did you close all the panels?’

The fat ashigaru remained still, his shape a silhouette against the balcony screens now that it was so murky.

‘Light up the okiandon, I can barely see a thing.’

There was another whistling sound, then a dark green light where the fat ashigaru’s face hung.

‘Gods of Lake Hell, what’s wrong with...’

Two more green lights appeared, roughly where his comrade’s eyes used to be.

‘...your face?’

Before the slim ashigaru could add anything else, the shape of his comrade dropped as if it were nothing more than the yukata itself and

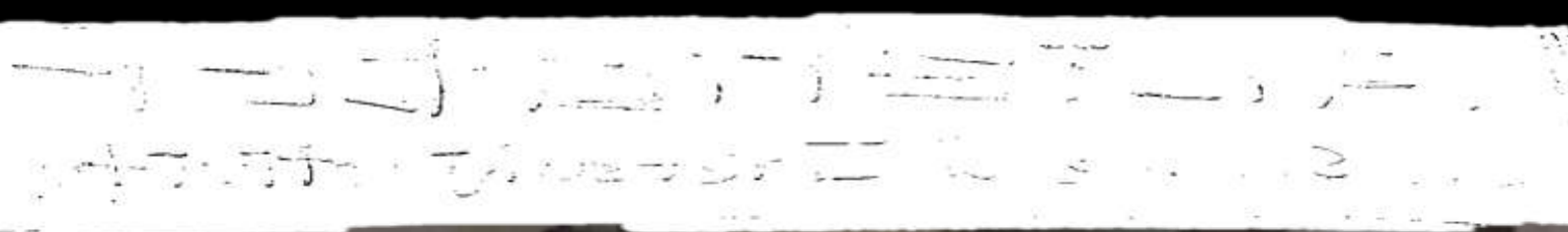
landed crumpled on the tatami. In its place, another shape stood, eyes and mouth glowing occultish green.

‘Morita?’ the slim ashigaru asked, backing into the wall.

‘No,’ the shape replied, green light extending forward as it spoke, absorbing the room and all its serving shadows.

CHAPTER 6

BAG FULL OF PEBBLES



There are times when nature's tiny creatures act smart and/or pragmatic, like survivalists, and then other times when they veer outright suicidal, as was the case when a single mosquito [big for its age] decided to sneak through the gap between Miho and the sliding balcony panel, and make its way over to the exposed neck of the unconscious ashigaru.

Fortunately for the little insect, Akira was too far out of it to notice the faint buzzing noise, and Miho didn't intervene because he was out on the balcony, mesmerised by the fairy tale landscape around the ryokan.

Snowy mountain peaks, a gentle river, cabins tucked away discreetly on the slopes and this little crack in the middle.

Jewel of Kai.

Was this the paradise Yuki had talked about?

He closed his eyes, sharpening the memory.

The two of them laying on the local hill, overlooking his village's main landmark; a rock formation shaped like a line of upturned rice

bowls. Him wrapped in two blankets, her wearing the thinnest possible kosode.

Lacks snow.

That's what she'd said, placing her cold hand on his neck and forcing him to suppress a reflex spasm.

And then she'd described her home; a place of endless white, of cabins dotted arbitrarily around mountaintops, of rivers that flowed off the edges of staggering cliffs and seemed to hang there indefinitely.

Well Yuki, he thought, looking at the stream below, one and a half out of three isn't bad. Or one and three quarters depending on how she judged the snow level. Most of it was higher up, spread over the slopes of the mountains leading up to Nagano, not exactly endless, but not too far from-

He stopped, spotting something odd on the slope to the left. Some kind of green light was streaming out from the main balcony of the cabin.

Wasn't that the one those two rude samurai were going to? Or ashigaru as the ryokan owner called them.

He thought back, shivering slightly when he recalled the fat samurai advancing on him with his katana drawn. All because he'd said *hey* about the guy punching a staff girl on the back of the head.

Not typical samurai behaviour. Not the type his father described anyway. More like that of a couple of drunk bandits, if he were being honest. And, weirdly, they seemed to know the samurai he was with. Greeted each other like friends. Kōtoku...that's what they'd called him.

Was he a thug too?

And what the hell was that green glow?

Miho leaned forward over the wooden railings and tried to pick out some details, but it wasn't easy; it was a green light, a bit hazy, forming an outline around the frame of the balcony door panels.

Behind him, there was a groaning noise, followed quickly by a rough *kuso*.

Miho turned to look and saw the samurai – Kōtoku – swatting at something in the air like a blind man.

A mosquito probably.

Must've let one in when he opened the door panels to the balcony. Or it had been camped out in the room all day, waiting for new blood. Or...that weird purple woman had sent it.

Putting his hand on the edge of the panel, Miho turned back to the cabin on the slope and muttered, 'okay then.' The green glow had gone, and everything was dark, as if no one was even staying there.

Maybe they were in a different cabin, he thought, going back inside the room and closing the screen behind him.

There was only one *okiandon*, but it was enough to light up the four walls, the two futons, the wisteria bonsai tree on the desk and the obligatory painting of generic mountain landscape, in this case, a pink-filtered Mt Aino. A smaller lamp with a handle lay by the balcony panel, presumably for impromptu, and possibly erotic, midnight trips into the solitude of the nearby slopes.

Not much chance of that, thought Miho, looking over at the occupied futon.

The samurai was still swiping at the mosquito, in a very haphazard manner, the sleeve of his kosode constantly getting in the way. It was quite hard to watch, so Miho walked over and tried to help him out; standing very still over his body and scanning each molecule of air for movement.

‘Got you,’ he said, a little bit too loud, clapping his hands on what he hoped was the blood-sucking insect.

Hope died fast as he opened up and saw that his palms were spotless. Except for the fruit knife scar his mum had given him.

To celebrate its escape, the mosquito buzzed near his ear, three separate times, before flying off to hide somewhere else in the room.

‘Kuso,’ he spat, sitting down on the futon and almost jumping backwards through the wall when he saw the samurai propped up straight as a rod, staring at him with *death herb* eyes.

‘Who are you?’ he burst out, so sharp it was almost in one single syllable.

‘I carried you here...*meijin*,’ replied Miho, holding up his hands flat in the peace pose. ‘To this ryokan.’

‘The demon woman...purple smoke...’

‘She’s gone. Disappeared. Ages ago. I told you that when you woke up before, on the path. Remember?’

Akira rubbed the back of his head, his eyeballs returning to normal size...and then narrowing further as he sized up Miho. ‘You carried me here?’

‘Yes, *meijin*. Seven kilometres, with several stops.’

‘Name?’

‘Err...Miho.’

Akira instinctively looked from Miho’s face down to his chest, then rubbed his eyes.

‘It’s true, *meijin*. My father wanted to call me Mito. But there was a mistake at the birth signing.’

‘Gods in a beach hut...’

‘After that, he said it was destiny. And changing it would bring a curse on our family.’

‘Miho. Mi-ho.’

‘I’m used to it now.’

‘Your father must be laughing his ass off.’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. He’s dead.’

Akira straightened up, losing the smile fast and coughing. ‘Lucky man. Came pretty close to it myself.’

‘The ryokan owner said she would bring some herbal tonic up soon. That should help you recover.’

Akira grunted in acknowledgment, and took in the room around them. The fresh kosode wrapped loose around his body didn’t appear to surprise him much, probably as he was too busy reaching for his katana. Miho had laid it out carefully beside his futon, making sure not to damage it in any way.

‘Not sure if it was a dream or not,’ he said, running his finger along the flat side of the blade, ‘but I recall seeing an acquaintance of mine outside. Another ashigaru...’

‘You mean the samurai?’

Akira laughed, trying to repeat the word *samurai* and quickly turning it into a hacking cough.

‘Sorry, *meijin*, he had a katana, I thought-’

‘Ashigaru. Default name. And no more *meijin* shit...it’s annoying.’

‘Sorry...err...’

‘Akira.’

Miho’s face performed what could only be called *maze within a maze sponsored by maze*, hearing the sounds of a first name but refusing to accept that’s what was actually said.

‘You can skip the shock, I tell everyone to use it.’ Akira pulled himself up higher onto the pillow. ‘What was this ashigaru doing?’

‘Well, the fat one...’ answered Miho, looking back towards the balcony. ‘...I think he was moving his luggage. And the other one-’

‘There was someone else?’

‘Yes. Him and another samu-...ashigaru. Not fat. Actually, they weren’t very friendly. The fat one punched a female staff on the head and then laughed about it. I think he would’ve done it again if I hadn’t-’

‘The second one,’ Akira cut in, darting forward and grabbing Miho’s yukata sleeve. ‘Did he have a blue piece of cloth wrapped round his wrist?’

‘Err...’

‘Think. Light blue cloth, quite thick.’

‘I’m not certain, but...yes, he had something blue, on his arm...maybe it was cloth.’

‘Kuso. Are they still here now?’

‘I think so.’

‘Where? Which cabin?’

‘I’m not sure.’

Akira let go of the sleeve and pivoted back to his katana, attempting to seize its guard and leap up to his feet in the same movement. It was an ambitious move, and failed quite swiftly as his head started to sway and, before he could get a firm stance with his right leg, the rest of his large frame had already started toppling over backwards onto the futon.

As his head hit the pillow, there was a knock at the door.

‘Donopenaa,’ Akira slurred, and that was about it as he quickly slipped back into his traditional comatose state.

Miho took two deep breaths, warned himself not to touch the katana, then got up and slid open the main door panel. Part of him expected a blade to run through his gut, but that was clearly a small and silly part as it turned out to be the ryokan owner standing there, not the fat ashigaru.

‘The herbal tonic for your friend,’ she said, holding it out for him to take.

‘Thanks.’

‘Is he awake yet?’

Miho took the drink back inside the room, performing the act of checking even though he knew Akira was clean out. ‘Not yet,’ he replied, coming back to the door.

Himiko bowed slightly, the green necklace around her neck hanging forward and revealing something else green behind it; a spiral tattoo on the top part of her right breast. Miho tried not to look, but the colour pulled him in and he was still squinting at it when she lifted herself back up.

‘We’re not that kind of ryokan,’ she said, pushing the necklace over to cover her tattoo.

‘Sorry?’

‘That applies to the other staff, too.’

He blinked, his brain catching up to her words. ‘No, I wasn’t looking at-...there was a-...on your chest, the tattoo...cos your necklace was hanging down, it looked weird and-...sorry, I didn’t mean-...it was an accident, really.’

It was a stumbling, lunatic hermit of a sentence and did nothing to change Himiko’s stone-like expression. She placed one hand on the sliding panel door and the other out flat.

‘Payment time,’ she said, gesturing at her palm.

‘I really am sorry, I wasn’t trying to look at you...in that way.’

‘Eighty mon.’

‘Yes. Payment. Of course, I’ll get it now. Just a second.’

Miho hurried back inside the room, calling himself a fucking fool internally and trying to think of a way to correct the mistake. Ask

about the tattoo? Make it clear that he was looking at that, not anything else? But the tattoo was on her breast, so he was looking at that too. *Kuso*, it was a mess. Maybe if he just went back to the necklace, asked about that instead?

Untying the coin bag from his belt, he opened it up and...pretty much had a heart attack on the spot.

Flat pebbles.

The whole bag was-...it was empty. No coins at all, just a large pile of flat, fucking pebbles.

‘Is this a joke?’ asked Himiko, her voice-box seemingly perched on his shoulder.

He spun round, shouted, ‘wah!’ and spilled the whole bag of flat pebbles out onto the tatami mat.

‘These pebbles are your money?’

‘It doesn’t make sense, it was full of coins.’

‘Hmm.’

‘It’s true, you have to believe me. I used some in Nirasaki, buying food...the chicken bun...’

‘Stop. Speaking. Please.’

Miho tightened his mouth, nodding.

‘Thank you. Now, you’re either a con man or a fool, and I don’t really care which it is cos the punishment is exactly the same.’

‘Punishment?’

Himiko looked right, at the sprawled figure of Akira on the futon, then back at Miho, her arms folded. ‘Your friend is useless at present. Which means you’ll have to work off the debt on your own.’

‘Work it off?’

‘At least until he’s fit enough to join you. Yes, menial work around here. Cleaning the rooms, scrubbing the floor. Helping Chef Amo in the kitchen.’

‘Okay...that doesn’t sound so bad.’

‘By my calculation, assuming you’re staying in this room, the total debt will be settled in two and half months.’

‘That long?’

‘If you sleep outside in the courtyard, you can be clear in a week.’

Miho turned to the balcony, feeling the slight chill seeping through the minute gaps between the window panel and the wall.

‘Your friend too.’

‘Friend?’

‘The ashigaru lump over there.’

‘He can’t sleep outside, he’s injured.’

‘It’s up to you. Either way you’ll give me at least a week.’

Turning back, Miho stared at Akira unconscious on the futon, knowing he didn't really have a choice, and the thinking time he was acting out was just a gradual, seeping depression at having had all his coins stolen. Somehow. Without him knowing anything about it.

‘Okay, I accept,’ he said, bowing to Himiko.

‘It was not an offer,’ she replied, taking a last look at the prone ashigaru before turning and walking out of the room.

Kuso multiplied by infinity, Miho thought, watching her leave the door panel open. How did I manage to end up in this mess?

Karma?



As the moon emerged from behind a stubborn collection of clouds, the light bouncing off its surface sailed again without obstacle through the atmosphere and down onto the forest clearing/massacre site, illuminating the scratch marks on the lid of the demon's box.

No human would be able to read it, but it roughly translated as, ‘FUCK YOU ATTA KA YUKIO.’ The demon, who was in human form down to her waist, consolidated the message by throwing little twigs at the side of the box.

This kind of stillness, the complete lack of forward momentum, it was the worst kind of hell.

All the pedantic rules of this cursed place.

Stuck with the box.

Can't move it with your own force.

Can't possess live animals without their bodies breaking.

Can't possess dead ones as their tiny, little brains would explode.

Atta Noe knew them all well, had been told them multiple times, had even been warned against coming to the humans' side by other Atashhka, but still she had felt compelled to challenge each one of them.

Six foxes, three birds and several hundred ants later, and she had to admit that the other Atashhka were right.

About that particular rule.

Nothing else.

She picked up a twig and threw it at one of the hinoki poles, falling short by a few inches. These hands, she thought, looking at them with disgust.

‘... ..’

Phasing them into purple mist, she imagined all the things she would do when she got those two incompetent water carriers back to Shingen's castle. Making her wait this long, in such a quiet, tedious place. Probably on the orders of that snake Atta Ka Yukio.

Don't worry, we'll send two of our most reliable men.

You'll be back in no time.

Her hands came back, picking up a twig and snapping it in two. Then dispersed into frenetic purple again.

Yes, those two reliable dogs...their dismembering would be done by her personally, not the specialists. She would make them suffer for the same exact time she'd had to sit there, feeling the same pain she felt now.

Assuming they were still alive.

The purple vapours snaked up and around her arm, her eyes following their trails.

There was a chance they'd met some kind of accident on the road, or bumbled their way into a fight with the wrong people. Or simply got jumped by rogue bandits.

That would be disappointing.

She smiled, watching two streams of purple spark against each other.

But then, she still had the other two, the coward ashigaru and the idiot boy. They were the priorities. If she could ever catch up to them.

'... ..' she hissed in her own language, the rest of her torso turning to purple mist and drifting rapidly over the hundred metre stretch of canopy, curving into a small cloud when she reached the edge of the steep slope.

The scene of her failure.

No, she corrected in her own thoughts. Temporary setback. Not failure. Never that.

She reformed her human head and looked down at the precise spot where the idiot boy had defied her. A random human, coming along at that exact moment, utterly gormless. And she'd walked down the slope like she was out for an afternoon stroll.

Yes, bad tactic. She knew that now.

And she knew how to correct it.

A fox made a mewling sound somewhere in the trees behind her, probably coming across the other six foxes she'd accidentally exploded earlier.

Atta Noe ignored it and focused on the path below.

All she needed was another stranger to appear down there. Preferably in the morning.

Then she'd be able to fix things.



CHAPTER 7

HELL'S KITCHEN

Endless fields of snow, furtive kisses, less furtive gropes, Yuki performing the weakest ever handstand, her fingers completely untroubled by the icy touch of the ground, all of that was wiped out in a flash by a loud knock on the wall next to the door panel.

Miho rolled off the futon and muttered, ‘thunder storm,’ before opening his eyes and remembering where he was.

Gods in a lighthouse, what time was it?

There was no light coming through the gap in the balcony panel, and there were no melodies coming from birds stupid enough to still be outside during winter.

Another knock, this one even louder, followed by a sharp voice saying, ‘new worker guy, get up.’

Throwing on the brown yukata that Himiko had given him the previous night, he walked with a dazed stagger towards the door panel. On the way, he did a quick check on Akira, saw his chest moving up and down, and thought, good, he’s not dead.

Though he did look a bit pale.

Maybe more of that herbal tonic would help?

He slid open the door panel a couple of inches, and then let out a panicked ‘wah’ when a hand on the outside yanked it the rest of the way.

‘Took you long enough,’ said Aya, her eyes looking surprisingly alert for whatever horrible time of morning it was.

‘Sorry.’

‘But at least you’re dressed.’

‘What time is it?’ he asked, stifling half a yawn then just letting it rip when his eyes started to water.

‘Time for work, obviously.’

‘Oh.’ He looked back into the room, even though he couldn’t physically see much inside of it. ‘Do I need to bring anything?’

‘Your bag of stones,’ she replied, deadpan.

Miho opened his mouth to reply, but then turned it into another yawn when he realised there was no realistic comeback. He’d had all his coins robbed, and he still didn’t know how. Or when.

‘Come on, we’re expected in the kitchen. Chef Amo doesn’t like it when people are late.’

~~~

Aya was right, Chef Amo didn’t like it.

In fact, Chef Amo didn’t appear to like much of anything.

Within the first hour of breakfast prep, Miho had already received four clips on the ear, two kicks to the back of the calves, and one accusation of having nothing but a dead mouse and a broken training wheel inside his stupid, thick skull.

Just like being back at home, Miho thought, remembering the abuse his father used to give him when he didn't do something right.

Even things that weren't his fault, like the time his father decided to balance a cup of boiling hot green tea on his own stomach and it, inevitably, toppled over and spilt out over his crotch.

And now he had the same sensation, as Chef Amo was shouting at him for chopping the celery too small.

'And don't tell me that's how your mother used to do it,' he yelled, giving Miho a swift kick to the side of his calf, 'cos I've heard it a thousand times before, half of them from that idiot over there.'

He stopped yelling to point at Aya, who looked up from the pan of miso soup she was stirring and smiled.

'Hey, what are you smirking at?' he barked, switching targets like a true professional. 'You're still stirring the wrong way, after I showed you four hundred fucking times. Gods on the shitter, what is wrong with you kids?'

Marching over to the pan, he shoved Aya aside and took control of the ladle, stirring the exact same way she'd been doing it, only slower. 'Don't stand there like a yaya tree, go and help the new idiot

chop the rest of the vegetables. Quickly, breakfast is starting in twenty minutes.'

Aya nodded and walked over to Miho, who was standing on his tiptoes, trying to see if anyone was sitting down in the breakfast room yet.

'Don't bother,' she whispered, pulling him back down by the sleeve. 'There are only five guests. And only three of them bothered to come down yesterday.'

'Aren't we making too much then?' asked Miho, looking at the mass of ingredients on the counter in front.

'It carries over to lunch in the winter season. Though he still makes us come back in the kitchen early.'

'For what?'

'Performance. The guests need to see us looking busy. That's what he says anyway.'

Miho looked at the chopped celery on the counter and yawned, which turned out to be a mistake.

'Hey, idiot, stop drooling on the food,' shouted Chef Amo, leaving the miso soup and storming back over.

'Sorry, I'm just a bit tired.'

'Don't talk back, boy, just stop fucking yawning. Understand?'

Miho kept his mouth closed.

Chef muttered something inaudible to the knife rack, then turned and accidentally knocked a bowl of freshly diced ginger onto the floor. Luckily, Aya was standing nearby, so he grabbed her by the sleeve and gave her a quick clip on the side of the head.

‘Idiot girl, I spent an hour doing all that ginger, and you put it there, right on the edge of the counter. Don’t open your mouth, clear it up. Now. And put the ginger into a new bowl.’

Instead of pleading innocence, Aya bowed slightly and said, ‘yes, Chef Amo,’ though Miho did notice her left hand forming a very compact fist at the bottom of her apron.

‘And curb the clumsiness from now on,’ Chef yelled at her scalp as she bent down to pick up the ginger. ‘What are you gawping at, boy? Chop the vegetables.’

Miho didn’t form a fist, but he did frown.

‘Are you deaf? Chop. Now.’

‘I’m sorry, Chef, but that wasn’t her fault. You were the one who put the ginger bowl there. And the one who knocked it over.’

‘What did you say?’

‘My mother always told me, there are too many dishonest people in this world, don’t add to their number.’

‘You’re babbling about your mother, in my kitchen. Gods on a goat, why am I lumbered with such fools? Where’s Sachiko and Frog Face?’

Chef Amo seemed to be addressing the ceiling, so Miho didn't respond. Instead, he moved to help Aya pick up the pieces of the shattered bowl. Another mistake. The sight of comradeship among the workers made Chef Amo go even redder, and this time words weren't enough. Grabbing the nearest thing to him, a decorative shōchū decanter, he growled like an overworked bear and launched it towards Miho's head.

Either due to poor aim or a village boy's luck, it missed, sailing an inch past his left ear and smashing into pieces as it hit the wall.

‘Gods without papers, now look what you’ve done...broken my favourite decanter. Where was your head, idiot child? Why didn’t you stay where you were?’

Miho had no idea how to respond, so instead leaned in close to Aya and whispered. ‘You put up with this every morning?’

‘I’d go back to chopping if I were you,’ she replied, eyes on the ginger.

‘But this wasn’t your fault.’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

Chef Amo bent down to assess the damage to the decanter, then glanced back and saw them chatting. Or conspiring. Just as he was about to burst into another tirade, a cough came from the kitchen entrance, trailed by a stern female voice asking what all the commotion was about.

‘Incompetent staff,’ Chef Amo replied, getting back to his feet and keeping a spotlight style glare on Miho and Aya.

‘I see,’ said Himiko, doing a scan of the mess in front of her.

‘Next time, send them to get ingredients, keep Sachiko and Frog Face here.’

‘Your suggestion is noted.’

Entering the kitchen properly, Himiko poured out two cups of green tea and then sipped from one of them. Chef Amo seemed unsure about what to do in response, so he returned to the miso soup, mumbling to Aya to hurry up with the ginger as he walked past.

From that point on, things were quieter.

And borderline pointless as only two guests bothered to come down for breakfast - the painter and her male model from the previous day - and all they had was a bowl of miso soup and a cup of green tea. To share between them both.

Chef Amo’s reaction to this was to hit the counter with the ladle then storm off outside, leaving Aya and Miho alone to clear everything up.

Pouring out two cups of green tea, Aya handed Miho one and smiled.

‘It’s over?’ he asked, finally free enough to yawn again.

She nodded, sipping through the steam.



‘I don’t know if I can take a month and a half of this.’

‘You get used to it.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘A while.’ She sipped more tea, looking at the broken pieces of the shōchū decanter still scattered on the floor. ‘I’m curious. Did you really get all your coins replaced with a bag of stones?’

Miho sipped his own tea, at first thinking of excuses, then just letting out impromptu laughter in three quick bursts.

‘What?’

‘I suppose I did.’

‘A con man?’

‘That or the purple smoke demon.’

‘Huh?’

‘A joke. To be honest, I don’t know. Last time I remember having them, the coins I mean, I was paying for a chicken bun. Which may not have been chicken.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It was a weird colour, kind of blue and grey and...ah, doesn’t matter. After that, the only person I met was the old woman in the chair, who just said ‘ohayo’ as I walked past, and the belt salesman on the outskirts of Kōfu. But it couldn’t have been him, he was really friendly. He even gave me a free bowl of husked rice.’

Aya stopped the cup just below her lips, staring back at Miho with an expression somewhere between pity and disbelief.

It took a moment for Miho to register it, and another moment or two for him to interpret its meaning.

‘You think it was him?’ he asked, frowning.

‘Did he make you try on a belt?’

‘Yes. Several.’

‘And did he hold your original belt while you did that?’

‘For a little bit. Yeah.’

‘Then it was him.’

‘But he was so...’ Miho paused, the cup almost tipping over as his brain caught up. ‘Gods on fatter gods. I’m a complete idiot.’

‘To an impressive degree.’

‘All my coins...gone. To a trick that simple. *Kuso*.’

Aya drank more green tea, looking at all the leftover chopped vegetables...

‘I didn’t even want a new belt either.’

...and then shot the tea back out, with Miho protesting, ‘hey, my uniform’ as she bent forward and tried to stop herself laughing.

‘I’m sorry,’ she repeated a few times, turning the laughs into a coughing fit.

‘No need to apologise,’ replied Miho, wiping the tea from his sleeve. ‘It’s probably deserved.’

‘It is. But I need to stop laughing before Chef Amo comes back in or he’ll throw another decanter at us.’

‘At me.’

‘Or something worse.’

‘There’s worse?’

‘The knife rack. If he’s in a really bad mood.’

Miho gave up on the tea stain and stared at the seven blades sticking out of the rack near the sink. Then sipped more tea. Aya eventually stayed crouched by the floor long enough to regain her composure, then straightened up, checking on the kitchen entrance just in case.

*Why do you stay here* crossed Miho’s mind several times as he watched her go back to vegetable duty, but he didn’t say it out loud. Instead, he slotted in next to her by the counter and started cutting more ginger.

She probably wouldn’t answer truthfully anyway, he thought.

Not to a stranger like him.

[illegible]

A fresh barrage of sunlight struck the balcony and lit up the room inside, making a passing wasp think, ah, maybe it's worth investigating after all.

Buzzing through a gap too tiny for humans to care about, the bold, little insect went beyond the sliding panel and, sticking to the parts of the room that were lit up by the sun, eventually landed on the yellow part of a painting.

*Not a flower* was its last thought as, out of nowhere, the tip of a long, curved blade burst through its body and pinned it to the wall.

'Kuso,' spat Akira, forehead drenched in sweat yet his katana hand impressively stable.

Pulling back the blade [with half the wasp's body still impaled on the tip], he looked around the rest of the room, checking for larger intruders or potential assassins.

Seems to be clear, he thought, sheathing the katana. For now. Though I suspect that weird boy with a girl's name is around here somewhere. Waiting to be reimbursed for his *generosity*.

‘Kuso,’ he said again, this time with a bitter cough.

He bent down next to the futon and picked the cup off the floor. There was still some of the medicine left, not much, but it was better than not having it.

‘To not being dead.’

Wiping the yukata sleeve across his forehead, he downed the dregs. The taste was repulsive, which probably meant it was effective. Slowly effective. He was still a bit wobbly on his feet. And his head too. Felt like there was a mini-typhoon swirling around up there, constantly flinging furniture at the walls of his skull-fort.

If those two ashigaru dogs burst in then, right at that moment, looking for him...

He wiped more sweat off his head and moved out onto the balcony. There was no sign of them outside. No sign of anyone. The whole area, the courtyard with both real and fake chickens, the crooked bridge, the forests on the mountain slope...looked more like a painting than an actual, real place.

A breeze of early winter air cruised down from the heavens and made him cough again.

*Deserted and chilly, perfect place for a murder,* crossed his addled mind, and sent him back inside to the futon. Putting on his dōbuku over the yukata, he picked up the katana cord, started tying it

to his waist...then changed his mind and headed straight for the door, keeping the only form of viable defence tight in his better hand.

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‘Are you certain I can’t persuade you to stay longer?’

‘No, thank you. It is decided.’

‘Ten per cent off on all meals?’

‘We are expected back in Nagano, and must get moving before winter sets in.’

‘It’s March.’

‘Her parents get irritated if we’re late. They may even try to separate us, gods forbid.’

‘Okay. Fine. Fifteen per cent, including the room price.’

‘I’m sorry, but we really must leave. Now. Goodbye.’

The man with the dark red scarf tied around his neck, who had been posing by the tree topless the previous day, and his female companion in the pale blue yukata, who had been painting him, picked up a case each and walked side by side to the door.

Himiko watched them go, too annoyed to even laugh as the man struggled to slide the door panel across, then tripped over his girlfriend’s foot when he finally got out.

She’d offered fifteen per cent off and they’d still fled. Fifteen per cent. The first time she’d ever gone that low. Not that she could blame

them really. They'd both been harassed by those two thugs the day before, and then leered at during lunch. And, even though she'd assured them the ashigaru dogs had signed out that morning, they still wanted to get the hell out of there.

Which meant the ryokan now had a total of three guests: the injured ashigaru, the idiot boy who somehow managed to get suckered by a belt merchant, and the quiet gentleman trying to write his Yuki Onna story.

She staggered out a long sigh and walked over to the entrance, sliding the door panel open a little bit more to let in some mountain air.

Gonna be a windy afternoon, she thought, feeling the slight breeze against her neck. Sachiko and Frog Face might get cold on the way back if they've forgotten to take their dōbuku again.

Silly little girls, always prancing about as if it were permanent summer.

Another breeze ran through the open door, shaking her green necklace.

Behind her, there were footsteps, erratic, as if someone with no rhythm was attempting a tap dance.

Turning back to the lobby and producing her best attempt at a sympathetic nurse face, she asked Akira if he was feeling better.

'The two men...ashigaru...where?'

‘You mean your friends?’

‘Are they here?’

Himiko looked at the diagonal slant of Akira’s standing position, the beads of sweat on his forehead and the katana in his hand that, if it hadn’t been sheathed, would’ve been stabbing a hole in her tatami. ‘If you put away your weapon, I will tell you.’

Akira gave a grunt then took his hand away from the guard, letting the katana [and scabbard] drop to the floor.

‘I believe they left this morning,’ replied Himiko, pulling her yukata in tighter around the shoulders.

‘Believe? Don’t you run this place?’

‘Co-run.’

‘So they’re gone then?’

‘Yes.’

Akira started to sway on the spot, and put a hand out towards the wall to steady himself. Unfortunately, he didn’t see what he was putting his hand on, and ripped right through the canvas of a painting of Lake Suwa.

‘I’ll add that to your expenses,’ said Himiko, her nurse face slipping for an instant before swiftly reasserting itself.

‘Which direction did they go? Kōfu or Suwa?’

Himiko took a circular route back round to the reception desk, ducking down for a moment then reappearing with a patterned cup.

‘Did you actually see them leave?’

Walking closer to him, she reached out a hand towards his shoulder, but was pushed away with surprisingly deft skill for someone in such a weakened state. Straightening up to full height, she held out the cup and gestured towards the futon sofa nearby.

‘I think you should rest for a while.’

‘No time.’

‘Drink some more natural remedy.’

‘I have to leave, get out of this place before...’ He paused, rubbing his head and falling back against the wall. As before, the painting took the brunt of it. ‘I can’t stay here.’

Himiko set herself down on the futon and stared at the damaged art. ‘In that case, you will need to settle the bill.’

‘Take it up with the boy, he brought me here.’

‘I’m afraid the boy has no coin.’

‘What?’

‘He is working off his part of the debt, here in the ryokan.’

‘Why the hell would he check in if-...wait, he didn’t have any money?’

‘It is a sad tale. And quite humiliating. I think it is not my place to tell it.’

Akira hit his head again, looking over at the window as some random chickens danced around one of the fake ones in the courtyard outside, making annoyingly loud clucking noises.

‘So, your part of the bill...’

‘I’m not paying.’

‘Well...in that case-

‘He signed in, not me. I was unconscious, zonked, completely out of it. Not my responsibility.’

‘That is irrelevant.’

The tone in her voice was colder that time and, despite his weakened state, Akira picked up on it. He crouched down and lifted up the katana, placing it carefully on the table. Just a warning. Didn’t have to be more than that.

Outside, the chickens stopped clucking.

Himiko stood up, looking down at the contents within the cup, the little white swirls cascading on the surface.

‘Is there a problem here?’ broke in a new voice, apparently from the figure in the dark green yukata standing by the entrance, but, based solely on the sound itself, more like half a mile away.

‘A guest refusing to pay the bill,’ replied Himiko, keeping her eyes fixed on Akira.

‘Is that so?’

‘Don’t worry, he’s too unwell to cause any real trouble.’

The man in the green yukata turned his face towards the torn painting. It was hard to tell how he felt about it as his whole form was almost completely covered in shadow.

‘Who the hell are you?’ asked Akira, putting one hand on the scabbard of his katana, wiping his forehead with the other.

‘Co-manager.’

‘That means co-owner?’

‘If you like.’

Akira pushed his head forward, squinting like an elderly person. ‘Why are there six of you?’

The man in the green yukata stared back, maybe smiling, maybe not.

‘No, eight,’ added Akira, his hand dropping from the scabbard of his katana and the rest of him tumbling forward onto the floor. Luckily, he missed the edge of the low table by the width of a mosquito’s wing, which meant at some point he would probably wake up again.

‘Looks like the drink is working,’ said Himiko, walking over and nudging Akira’s head with her foot.

‘Should be ripe in a couple of days,’ replied the man in the green yukata, stepping deeper into the lobby yet, somehow, still maintaining a vague shadowy appearance around his face.

‘Extremely deserved, too, this one. Rude as it gets.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Almost as bad as those other two.’

‘Yes. Perhaps.’

Himiko moved over to the wall and poked at what was left of Lake Suwa. It wasn’t her favourite painting in the whole ryokan, but it definitely made the top three. And this barbarian had just mauled it to death.

‘Ashigaru dog,’ she whispered, stroking the tiny, golden shrine in the painting, her voice just loud enough to carry through the wall and to the ears of the person hiding on the other side.

Don’t rock the boat, don’t rock the boat, don’t rock the boat, Aya told herself over and over, trying not to breathe or cough, and praying to all the gods that Miho didn’t walk in and say, ‘hey Aya, why are you pinned to that wall?’

She’d only known him for half a day, but it seemed exactly like the kind of thing he’d do.

And then they'd both be in trouble.

She pictured the green yukata man's shadowed face, the few times she'd seen him, and shuddered.

Big trouble.

~~~~

Sniffing a trail along the forest floor, the black-tailed fox rejected everything in its path until it finally got to something that looked like a crooked worm.

Ah, lunch at long last, it thought, pouncing on the poor creature teeth-first.

Then spitting it out when it realised the *poor creature* was actually a weirdly-shaped twig.

Before it could start cursing, another twig dropped from above and landed on its head.

Nearby, a human shouted something.

The fox froze on the spot, sniffing the air erratically. It couldn't be a human, their scent was unmissable, but then its eyes captured the figure of-

A streak of purple whizzed past the fox, slashing its side and forcing it into a wild sprint out of there.

The purple circled round and chased it as far as the second tree, swirled in a mini-loop then returned to its original position and shape;

an incredibly bored, and quite tired, Japanese woman in a bone-white yukata.

Can't even be bothered killing anything, Atta Noe complained to herself internally, staring down onto the clearing below.

Apart from that ashigaru.

And the idiot boy.

And those two incompetent box carriers who were probably sitting in a gutter somewhere, too drunk to recognise their own legs.

Leaving her out in the middle of nowhere like this, for almost a whole day. Not being around to put the lid back on her box so she could recharge properly without fear of some bandit passing by and-

Atta Noe's thoughts stopped abruptly, her head phasing to its purple state and then back again.

Gods, this was intolerable.

She couldn't function this way.

Even if those two useless louts had gone astray, Shingen should've sent back up men to fetch her. Unless...

She checked the trees behind her, lowering the noise of her natural internal swirling.

Would Atta Ka Yukio really do something that bold? That paranoid?

A bureaucrat like him?

The faint sound of human voices flowed up from the path below, making Atta Noe's head turn so fast that any observer would've called it the devil's work.

'Ah, finally,' she said, soft as the breeze lifting her up onto her feet.

Intensifying the swirls inside, she stepped forward and threw herself face first down the slope. Normally, she would've cushioned the blows from each rock she hit on the way down with purple suppression pockets, but she couldn't risk the two humans catching sight of that. And she didn't want to make the same mistake she'd made with the boy; walking down with a sad face and a whimper, relying on his chivalric code.

No, this time she would make it impossible not to help.

Reaching the bottom of the slope, she tumbled an extra metre then dragged herself to her feet, staggered as close as she could to the edge of the path without bothering the barrier and then collapsed again.

It was an impressive performance, especially the dazed *walking lost* routine at the end, and the two young women in brown yukatas walking along the nearby path had no choice but to stop and say, 'wah.'

'Attacked...' slurred Atta Noe, holding out an arm to them then drawing back in pain.



‘It’s okay, we’re coming,’ said the shorter of the two women, nicknamed Frog Face, who dropped her basket and rushed forward.

‘Wait,’ cautioned Sachiko, grabbing her friend’s arm and pulling it back with just enough force not to dislodge anything.

‘Sachi-chan, she’s hurt.’

‘Is she?’

Frog face shrugged off the sleeve-grip and pointed both hands at the bedraggled form of Atta Noe, shaking them dramatically.

‘How do we know she didn’t do it herself?’

‘You’re crazy! She just fell down that slope. We both saw it.’

‘Could be a trick. A bandit trick. She might be one of them, luring us in.’

‘Bandits...’ repeated Atta Noe, followed by a series of whimpering noises. ‘Yes, up there...beat me...touched me.’

Frog Face shot a fierce look to Sachiko that screamed *SEE!* then evaded a second attempt by her friend at a sleeve-grip as she ran over to the injured woman. Falling on both knees, she took Atta Noe’s hand and asked her where exactly she was hurt.

‘In my chest,’ she replied, turning the hand that wasn’t being squeezed to purple and spearing a hole through the young woman’s brown yukata.

The action was so fast that Frog Face didn't know what had happened to her, and opened her mouth to say which part of your chest? However, instead of words, there was a huge glob of blood.

‘... ..’ screamed Atta Noe in her native tongue, taking half of it on her face.

‘What’s going on, Frog?’ asked Sachiko, taking two steps closer.

‘She’s sick, get her off me,’ said Atta Noe, keeping the corpse of Frog Face propped up with her purple spear hand.

‘Frog?’

‘Quickly, her face is turning blue.’

Still sceptical, Sachiko looked up towards the top of the slope, checking for random bandit faces peeking out from behind rocks or trees, then came back to the injured woman.

A bird screeched somewhere in the distance, forcing her hand onto a small blade tucked in the belt of her yukata.

‘Frog,’ she tried again, taking a wide approach towards her friend. ‘Say something.’

‘That will be difficult,’ answered Atta Noe, finally letting go of the body and wiping the blood off her face.

‘You witch!’ shouted Sachiko, taking out her blade. ‘What did you do to her?’

‘Killed her. Obviously.’

Sachiko's eyes went supernova and rage carried her forward, the knife lowered into a slashing position.

It didn't matter.

One swipe of purple and she was on the ground, staring at an unsympathetic blade of grass, the dark of her own blood staining its side.

'You are truly a heartless wretch,' said Atta Noe, swirling into a kneeling position by Sachiko's ear. 'Letting a poor woman of virtue lie injured on the ground and not rushing to help.'

Sachiko made a croaking noise, her left hand edging forward millimetre by millimetre towards her blade.

'Still, I must admit, yours does appear to be the more capable body.'

Sachiko groaned again and feigned a twitch of her right hand, hoping it would be enough to distract the witch from the knife grab. Just a few more millimetres and she'd be able to-

'Uh-uh, field slut,' said Atta Noe with a tutting sound, putting her foot down on the girl's hand as it reached the blade handle. 'You're mine now.'

Another swish of purple and the struggle was over.

In the distance, another bird screeched.

The corpses of Sachiko and Frog Face lay still for a few seconds, basking in the almost midday sunlight. Then, the fresher of the two, and apparently more capable, jerked her right arm. Then her left arm. Then the rest of her limbs. Satisfied, she pressed both palms into the dirt and pushed herself up onto her knees. With eyes glowing purple, Atta Noe, in the guise of the heartless Sachiko wretch, scanned the path in both directions, ahead and back.

The rational choice is to return to Shingen, she thought, examining the wounds on her new body. Alert him, send more men, retrieve the box. That's what Atta Ka Yukio would suggest.

The same Atta Ka Yukio who'd probably stranded her out here.

Her fingers stretched out, the purple inside unable to evacuate and swirl in annoyance.

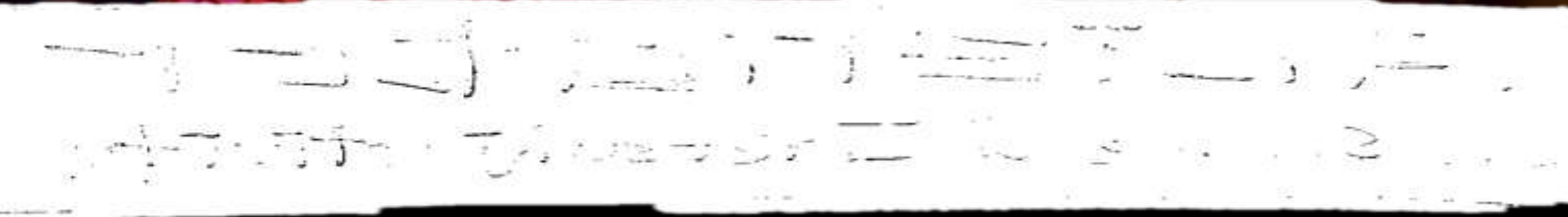
No, that traitor could wait.

This body was relatively durable, not too damaged. Should be more than enough to make it to the ryokan and then back to Kōfu. Hopefully with two quick stabbings in between.

The bird screeched again, this time slightly off key.

Taking it as a cue, Atta Noe directed her new vessel onto its feet, picked up the blade the girl had dropped and started off along the path to the right.

A quick revenge, she told herself, covering the neck wound with the collar of the girl's yukata. Then back to Shingen.



## CHAPTER 9

### NOT A VERY CONVINCING HUMAN

For the seventh time in twenty minutes, Himiko got up and slid the door panel across, the skin of her feet shivering slightly as the draught increased its desperation to get in.

‘Every single day,’ she muttered, returning to her chair at the side and picking up the stack of rice paper.

‘It’s from the mountain?’ asked Miho from a table nearby, turning a small ornament in his hand and poking a dusting brush into its little crevices.

‘Hell is more likely. For some reason, it seems to accumulate just outside the front of this place and then rushes in. Always at this time of day. When I’m sitting here, trying to relax with my late morning green tea.’

‘Why don’t you use some kind of latch?’ Miho glanced over at Aya, who was wiping the table surfaces in the reception area with a scrunched up cloth. She looked up and, almost imperceptibly, shook her head. ‘On the door, I mean...’

‘Oh, I’d never thought of that,’ said Himiko, eyes on the rice paper. ‘A latch for the door. What an incredible mind you have.’

‘It would keep the wind out. Might make the door rattle a bit, but-’

‘Just focus on the dusting, pebble boy.’

‘Err...yes, sensei.’

‘I told you, don’t call me that.’

‘Okay...boss.’

‘Meishin will do. Or Himiko if it’s off hours. And there are no guests around.’

Miho bowed slightly and continued with his chores, while Himiko went back to her own toil; the ryokan accounts. Judging by the range of facial expressions she was cycling through, they weren’t in very good shape.

After dusting the other ornaments laid out on the window-side bench, Miho moved across the reception to the same table Aya was wiping. He noticed the scrunched up cloth and lack of bubbles in her bucket, but didn’t say anything. For all he knew, her technique was the superior one...though she was taking quite a long time to do it.

‘It’s bad luck,’ she whispered to the cloth in her hand.

‘Sorry?’

‘To put a latch on a ryokan entrance. Creates an unwelcoming aura. Not good for business.’

Miho stopped dusting the green bottle in his hand and looked around the reception area. Him, Aya and Himiko. No sign of any other life.

‘I know. It’s her belief, not mine. Safer just to keep your head down, do your chores.’

Aya finished wiping her table, put the cloth in the vaguely soapy water and dragged the bucket over to the next one.

Miho quickly dusted the remaining ornaments and plant pots and followed after her. Before he could get out his next question [why doesn’t she put up more promotional signs?], the door panel slid open again and a fresh burst of chilled mountain air forced its way in.

‘Not even two minutes,’ whined Himiko, grabbing the panel and yanking it back across. ‘You’d think it’d take a rest at some point.’

Miho opened his mouth to respond but a quick kick to the shin from Aya stopped him from saying anything.

‘Work,’ she said, about as far under her breath as she could make it without losing the word.

‘Yes, meishin,’ he replied, picking up a ceremonial tea pot and dusting the bottom.

‘I have to admit,’ said Himiko, observing them from her seat. ‘Despite obvious flaws, the two of you do make quite an effective team.’



‘We’re doing two separate chores,’ Miho answered, confused as he received another kick to the shin.

‘Diligent, too. Unlike those two flighty bubble-heads.’ Himiko looked down at the rice paper accounts, running her finger along the staff salary column. ‘It seems to me that you could probably handle all the chores yourself, the two of you together.’

‘All of them?’ Aya burst out, then instantly kicked her own shin. ‘I mean...it’s not impossible, but-’

‘For instance, if I sent you, Aya, out now to pick vegetables for dinner, I’m certain you’d be back within the hour. If I asked you, Miho, to clean all the rooms and tend to the plants outside, you’d probably have it done within two.’

‘Err...I think four might be more realistic.’

‘Those two silly girls, on the other hand. I send them out to Nirasaki first thing this morning, with the simple task of buying vegetables for dinner, and they still have yet to return.’

‘That is odd,’ muttered Aya, moving a step closer to the front window and peering out.

‘Not odd, Aya, it’s a pattern of behaviour. Admittedly, they’ve never been this late before, but their general attitude and performance...leaves much to be desired.’

‘Should I go and look for them?’

‘You?’

‘They may have been attacked by bandits.’

‘I just said, your duty is to go out and pick reserve vegetables for tonight’s meal. *Fuki, shungiku*, mountain asparagus, anything else you can find. Miho, you will stay and dust the rest of the ryokan. And wipe the surfaces too.’

Hearing his own name along with *wipe the surfaces* led Miho to instant puzzlement, mostly because he’d been so busy dusting the ceremonial tea pot that he’d missed the talk of Aya going out to pick vegetables, and when he turned to gauge her reaction to it, his foot clipped the side of the bucket and slapstick ensued.

The ceremonial tea pot slipped out of his hand...he tried to adjust and catch it with his other foot...and ended up kicking it with surprising force at the welcome board behind the reception desk.

Somehow, it survived that impact unscathed, but not the collision with the stone floor. Which was impressive in itself as that was the only part of the reception that wasn’t covered in fitted tatami.

The sound of shattering enamel was excruciating.

As was the wait for Himiko’s reaction.

‘Don’t say anything,’ whispered Aya, her eyes closed.

Fortunately, the draught saved the day, blowing the door panel open yet again. Getting up to deal with it, Himiko looked out at the bridge indicating the start of the ryokan grounds and shook her head.

‘Change of plans. Miho, you go with Aya to pick vegetables.’

‘Err...’

‘Understood,’ interjected Aya quickly.

‘I expect you both back within the hour. And don’t go too far up the mountains.’

‘Yes, Meishin.’

Aya nudged Miho, who was standing like a stuffed bear, staring at the mess he’d just made. He blinked back to life and turned to Himiko, his left hand pointing at the piece of tea pot on the floor.

‘Don’t bother,’ she replied, sitting back down and picking up the accounts nightmare. ‘You’ll probably break something else while clearing it up.’

‘I’ll pay for the damage.’

‘With what?’

‘Err...’

‘Ah, more days of work. Good idea.’ She twisted the string of the green necklace, eyes lighting up. ‘Off you go then. I’ll stay here a while, try to remember how much that tea pot cost.’

‘Yes, Meishin,’ said Aya, throwing the cloth in the bucket and dragging Miho by the arm out into the courtyard.

~~~

A little while later, on the sparsely forested slopes not far from the ryokan, Aya and Miho stood slightly bent, picking *fuki* out from its native soil.

It wasn't hard work, the roots were relatively loose, and all the stalks they'd got so far were completely undamaged, which meant Miho had plenty of time to talk endlessly about the tea pot debacle.

'Why did I try to catch it with my foot? What part of my brain thought that would be helpful? Wah...doesn't make sense. Reflexes are fast, but they shouldn't be that stupid. Kuso. Still can't believe it actually happened. Never been that clumsy before. Apart from the time I broke the pot back home. But that was only cos I'd slipped on the dog.'

'Here, take this,' Aya said, clearly not listening to a word he was saying.

Miho took the *fuki* by the end of its stalk and dropped it in the basket with the others.

'What do you think?' he continued, pulling up a *fuki* of his own. 'Will Himiko add another week to my total?'

'If she does, you can count yourself lucky. Another boss would've fired you on the spot. Or given you a beating.'

'I wouldn't mind being fired...'

'At least with Himiko you've got a chance.'

‘...then I could be free. But she was quite calm, when the tea pot broke. Weirdly calm.’

‘That’s her style.’

‘Ah, it’s probably because of that green necklace she wears. Must have a soothing effect or something.’

‘Sure, a soothing necklace.’

‘Or that tattoo she has on her breas-...near her collarbone. It’s very distinctive, very green. I wonder where she got it from.’

Aya threw another *fuki* directly into the basket then picked it up and moved along the slope.

‘Do you know?’ Miho asked, trailing her.

‘About Himiko’s past? Nope. Only that she’s managed this ryokan for the last four years.’

‘And before that?’

‘No idea.’

‘She’s never talked about it?’

Aya stopped, kneeling down to inspect a bush of extremely ripe-looking red berries. She picked one off and held it to her nose.

‘Not those,’ said Miho, swatting it out of her hand. ‘They’re poisonous.’

‘How do you know?’

‘My sister ate some when she was young. Barely survived.’

Aya looked back at the berry bush, tilting her head slightly as if that would confirm what Miho was saying to her. It must’ve worked as she nodded, picked up the basket and moved on.

The rest of the slope was close to desolate, in terms of edible vegetation at least, so they headed back down into the denser part of the forest. Miho asked again what Aya knew about Himiko’s past and got the same blank response.

‘Aren’t you curious about what she did before this?’

‘Not enough to get fired.’

‘You think it’s that bad?’

Aya put a hand in the basket and shuffled the *fuki* around, looking for the other vegetables they’d picked. ‘We need more *shungiku*.’

‘Should be closer to the stream.’

Aya didn’t bother nodding, she just moved past Miho and followed a dirt trail through a thick clump of trees. He caught up with her quickly and restated his previous question.

‘She’s too old for you,’ Aya replied, casually tagging each tree trunk with her hand as she passed.

‘What?’

‘And you’re too young to interest her.’

‘I’m not-...I have a girlfriend already. Or I did.’

‘If you say so.’

‘It’s true, her name’s Yuki. I’m looking for her and...I mean, I was looking for her before I ended up working here. That’s why I don’t mind if Himiko fires me. I need to get back on the road and-’

‘Wah, she’s back.’

‘Huh? Who?’

Aya hurried ahead, jumping over a little stream in one bound, and coming to a stop in front of the tired-looking figure of Sachiko, who quickly wrapped the yukata tighter around her chest.

‘Hey, where the hell have you been? Himiko’s been looking for you.’

Sachiko stared at Aya’s face, as if she were seeing it for the first time.

‘Did you not even get the ingredients?’ Aya asked, looking at the tall woman’s empty hands, the complete lack of a basket or grocery bag. ‘Ah, doesn’t matter, I guess. We’ve almost picked enough now anyway.’

‘How far is it to the ryokan?’ asked Sachiko, her eyes briefly flashing the tiniest glint of purple as Miho appeared behind Aya, carrying the basket of vegetables.

‘Err...as far as it usually is.’

‘Weren’t there two of you?’ added Miho, scanning the path behind.

Sachiko stared forward, at Miho’s neck, her head bobbing like it was out in Suruga Bay. ‘The other one...left.’

‘Other one? You mean Frog Face?’

‘She met a young man at the market. Went off to copulate with him. Indefinitely. Not coming back.’

Both Aya and Miho stared gormlessly forward at Sachiko’s face until Aya managed to shuffle out some words. ‘Are you serious?’

‘It is normal behaviour for young girls without brains.’

‘She just went off, no message for Himiko or-’

‘I just told you, it is normal for young girls without brains. She will cling to him until he tires of her body and then most likely turn to alley way prostitution. Another two years and she’ll be dust in the ground.’

‘I’m sorry...you are talking about Frog Face, your best friend...right?’

‘Yes, that one. Her.’

‘That one?’

‘I was quite sad at the time. Obviously. But now it is done. She has abandoned me.’ Sachiko looked at Miho’s face, and then the

basket in his hand. 'Your load is still small. I will help you pick more.'

'I think you better go back and see Himiko first,' said Aya, shaking her head. 'She's pretty mad.'

'No. I will pick vegetables. With the boy.'

'Me?' asked Miho, checking behind for other man shapes.

'Obviously.'

'You wanna pick together?'

'That is what I said.'

Aya glanced at Miho, who shrugged, inadvertently tipping the basket to the side and almost dropping half the *fuki* onto the ground.

'You go back, tell Himiko I am here,' continued Sachiko, gesturing with her hand in the wrong direction. 'Tell her I am making amends.'

'And Frog Face?'

'That too.'

'Okay...if that's what you want?'

Sachiko nodded, allowing her yukata to spill open a bit and the dried blood stain on her undershirt to be revealed. Or it would've been if Aya hadn't been looking at the path back to the ryokan, and Miho at the basket. Realising her lapse, Sachiko pulled the right side of the

yukata tight and then, as Miho's attention returned, grabbed him by the forearm and led him off down the side of the stream.

‘What exactly do I tell Himiko?’ shouted Aya after them, but they either didn't hear or didn't care as there was no reply.

‘Fine,’ she mumbled, turning back to the path. ‘Go fuck each other, see who cares? Not like there's tons and tons of work to do around here or anything.’

CHAPTER 10

COLD DEAD HANDS



After putting at least twenty trees between them and Aya, Miho wrestled back control of his arm and asked what was going on.

Sachiko checked behind again, making sure there was no one watching, then slipped her right hand inside her yukata. As she did so, the muscle in her arm twinged, followed by her leg as she stepped back awkwardly onto an uneven mound of dirt.

‘Wah, it’s tight,’ she said, wincing from the pain.

‘Probably from walking so much.’

‘This stupid leg...is not working properly.’

Miho knelt down and put his hand near her calf. ‘May I?’

‘What are you doing?’

‘My mum used to do this for me when I got cramp. It’s a massage technique.’ He moved his palm up the back of her calf, then ran his knuckles the other way. ‘Wah, your skin is really cold. Are you feeling okay?’

‘Get off me.’

‘You might have caught something from being outside so long in the cold air.’

Sachiko turned her face away from Miho and raged full purple, shooting sparks down the veins and bones of the host body, unintentionally producing a reflex in the leg that kicked Miho onto the bank of the stream.

‘Looks like it’s better,’ he said, propping himself up on his elbows and looking at what he’d almost hit to the right. ‘Ah, *shungiku*, I found it. Sort of.’

‘How dare you touch my leg,’ said Sachiko, stretching out both her calf and right arm at the same time.

‘Sorry, I was just trying to help.’ Miho stood back up and peeled off his *dōbuku*, making a move to drape it round her shoulders.

‘You’re still way too cold though.’

‘I do not want your clothing.’

‘It’s very warm.’

‘Take it off.’

Miho let go and took a step back, evaluating the placement. ‘It actually looks quite good on you.’

‘Do your ears not work?’

‘Of course, it’s better if you tie it up. I’ll let you do that part yourself.’

Sachiko grabbed part of the *dōbuku* and squeezed it tight, but didn't take it off. Turning her eyes to the crop of *shungiku* on the bank of the stream, she pointed and said, quite sharply, 'pick.'

'Right, I almost forgot about those,' replied Miho, getting back on his knees and pulling the basket to within dropping range. 'Too busy admiring you in my jacket.'

He added a chuckle at the end, but it didn't matter as Sachiko wasn't listening. She was too focused on pulling the dagger from her blood-spotted yukata and figuring out the best area to stab. Back of the neck seemed the easiest. One swift strike downwards. But could she rely on this host body's wrist strength to get it done? Maybe not. The legs were already falling apart, other parts could be in decay too. In which case, slicing the throat would be the wiser course. Grab his hair, pull the head back tight and cut. Carve if she had to.

Going with the second option, she moved forward, using the denser patches of grass to disguise her approach. A bird screeched in the branches above, perhaps a warning to her prey.

It went unheeded, the idiot boy jabbering about the quality of the *shungiku* he was picking.

Yes, keep jabbering, she thought, creeping closer. Jabber, jabber, jabber while I drain your blood, every last drop, with these pitiful human hands.

The bird screeched again, determined.

And once again, it was ignored.

Ha, foolish child...completely oblivious to everything around you.

Getting within stabbing range, Sachiko held the dagger out and tilted it right, putting her other hand right next to the largest clump of hair that she could locate.

‘For defying a god,’ she whispered, counting to four.

In one fluid, purple-assisted motion, she closed her left hand around the hair, slid the dagger to the side and watched in sheer panic as a bunch of *shungiku* appeared out of nowhere, the hand attached to it clumsily batting the blade out of her grip and down into the stream.

‘See how healthy they look,’ started Miho, before hearing the splash in the water and then seeing Sachiko clutching her hand in a mix of pain and anger. ‘Wah, are you okay? Did I hit you?’

‘... ..,’ she screamed, falling to her knees and scrambling towards the stream.

‘Hey, where are you going? Did something fall in the river?’

‘Can’t see it, where is it?’

Miho shuffled across the grass and put his hands on the crazed girl’s shoulders, pulling her back from the edge. ‘Careful, it’s freezing in there.’

‘It’s gone...’

‘What did you drop?’

Sachiko stopped struggling and buried her face in the grass. She stayed that way for about two minutes as Miho gently patted her shoulders, telling her that whatever it was that dropped in, he would buy her another one.

‘Just stab yourself,’ she said, in a barely audible voice.

‘What?’

‘Or let me crawl up and bite you to death.’

‘Sorry, I can’t hear you well, your face is in the grass.’

Rolling herself over onto her back, she pushed away his hands and glared up at his throat, the rays from the sun forcing her to squint like a drunkard. ‘Wah, these puny eyes...’

‘You shouldn’t look directly at the sun, it’s dangerous.’

‘... ..’

‘Sorry?’

Sachiko put a hand up to shield her malfunctioning human eyes. ‘I said, get back over there and pick more vegetables.’

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

‘I will be once I find a particularly large rock.’

‘Err...okay then. I’ll get back to the *shungiku* picking. Let you lie here and recover for a while.’

~~~



Quickly putting the dagger incident behind her, Sachiko forced herself up and went for a stroll farther down the stream, scanning the less grassy patches for usable rocks.

In the background, Miho kept talking at a higher volume as he picked more *shungiku*, asking if she'd seen anyone on the way back from Nirasaki.

‘No.’

Sachiko stopped, kneeling down next to a larger than usual pebble. She picked it up and gripped it in her hand, then turned and tried to imagine the kind of crater it might make on the back of Miho's skull.

‘You didn't come across a woman in a white yukata?’

‘I did not.’

She dropped the pebble back into the dirt, then picked it up again and threw it in the stream. Her pupils lit up indigo, making her right arm spasm. A whole stream bank and no rocks big enough to even wound an ant.

‘Wah, you're really lucky then. I met a woman like that a couple of days ago, on the same path.’

‘Really...’

Her eyes turned away from the stream and towards the trees on the other side. Ah, if it couldn't be a rock...

‘She said the guy on the path...the guy I’d just walked into and found, unconscious...was her friend. Then she offered me sex to bring him to her.’

‘And you turned her down,’ said Sachiko, picking up a twig nearly the same size as her dagger and picking at the tip with her fingernail.

‘It was a bit weird. Yeah, I refused cos I already have a girlfriend. Though, to be honest, she was quite pretty.’

‘Quite?’

‘Okay, she was really pretty. It’s true. But then her body turned into purple mist and she threatened to kill me for not helping her.’

‘... ..’ cursed Sachiko in her native tongue as the twig snapped in two.

‘At least, I think that’s what happened. It may have been a hallucination. See, there was this chicken I’d eaten before all that, Kumamoto style chicken, but it was blue so I’m not sure...maybe it poisoned me a bit. Made me see weird things.’

Giving up on the weapon search, Sachiko squeezed her two hands together, shaking them slightly as more purple energy flowed inside.

‘Do you know what I would have done, if I were you?’

‘About the purple mist woman?’

‘If such an interesting, unique being had approached me in that way?’

‘I don’t know. Run away?’

‘No.’

‘Had sex with her?’

Sachiko walked back to the edge of the stream and along the dirt to where Miho was still picking *shungiku*, his back turned. Knocking her fists together, she unfolded and placed the palms of her hands on both sides of Miho’s neck.

‘I would’ve assisted the pretty woman,’ she whispered, tightening her grip.

‘Wah...’ replied Miho, his shoulders giving out an upwards reflex, trying to twist the hands off.

‘That’s it...turn around.’

‘Stop...’

‘Show me the throat, wretch.’

‘No, stop, I can’t...’

Miho twisted the whole left side of his body then raised up an arm and shrugged her off. She came straight back at him, aiming for the windpipe and failing completely as he seized hold of her wrists.

‘Get off me,’ she screamed, the voice faltering on the last word.

‘I’m sorry but your hands...felt way too good. If Yuki knew I let another girl do that...’

‘Felt good?!’

There was noise from the trees, not a bird.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Aya, walking out from between two trunks, adding another cough at the end, just in case.

‘Err...nothing.’ Miho grabbed the basket and sprang to his feet, almost losing his balance and toppling down into the stream. ‘We were picking *shungiku*. Just finished actually. Right?’

He looked down at the cramped-up figure of Sachiko, who simply muttered, ‘I hate this body.’

‘You came back fast,’ continued Miho, moving over to Aya. ‘What did Himiko say?’

‘That we should all come back immediately.’

‘Right, good idea. We definitely have enough *shungiku* now. Are you ready, Sachiko?’

Miho and Aya both turned to their despondent colleague, who had recovered enough of her mind to say she would stay back a while, look for more vegetables.

‘I don’t think that’s such a good idea,’ said Miho.

‘Me neither,’ added Aya, frowning at the mess on Sachiko’s yukata, ‘she may fire you if you don’t turn up soon.’

‘I’m fine. Go.’

‘Err...okay. If you’re certain that’s what you want?’

‘You can give the dōbuku back later,’ added Miho, rubbing his neck and wincing a bit. ‘Or keep it for a while. I don’t mind really.’

‘Stop talking and leave.’

Looking at the contents of the basket, Miho and Aya raised eyebrows at each other in the universal symbol of *what the fuck’s up with her*, then headed a little stiffly back along the path.

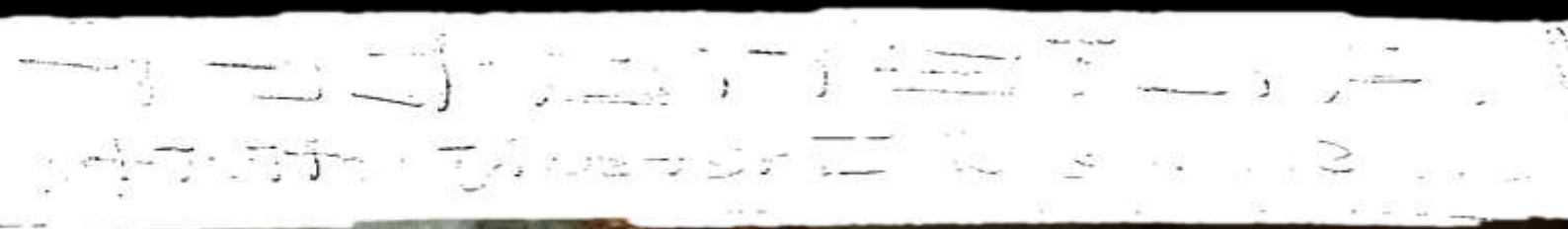
A mountain eagle-hawk swooped low over the canopy to signal their departure, completely messing up its attempt to snare an idling hawfinch.

Smirking at the hawk’s failure, Sachiko turned and looked at the now distant, ant-like forms of the two humans.

‘Yes, leave, little wretches,’ she muttered, scanning the path for a new twig. ‘Let me get some strength back...so I can come visit you tonight. Both of you.’

# CHAPTER 11

## HIMIKO'S MARVELLOUS MEDICINE



Mistaking the light emanating from the ryokan window for an especially large [and out of season] firefly, the tree frog leapt up onto the wooden balcony and stuck its tongue out.

It held it there for a few seconds, hoping a stray mosquito didn't cruise by.

Nothing worse than one of those.

When it was younger, sure, they were fun, their little bodies vibrating even when they'd been swallowed down into the stomach, but as an adult...nope. Too likely to give you indigestion. Or worst case scenario, diarrhoea.

A cold gust of wind blew past, bringing dirt particles up from the courtyard below.

Feeling the chill, the frog reeled its tongue back in and, with a confused sense of direction, jumped forward through the gap in the door panel.

The wisteria bonsai tree on the desk only confused it further, as the rest of the space seemed to be a snugly-lit cave.

Ah, it thought, not a bad place to settle down. Assuming no one else is occupying it. Doesn't look like they are.

Intercepting the frog's thought, a groaning sound emanated from the nearby futon, followed by a gigantic arm swinging around and hitting the yukata-covered body it was attached to.

The frog's *drunk human nearby* alarm blared loud and internal, prompting the panicked creature to leap quickly back through the gap and out into the forest beyond.

Groaning again, Akira raised his head and looked around the room. From his blurred perspective, there were twelve walls, five paintings of Mt Fuji and a beautiful collection of okiandon that someone had lit on fire.

‘Wahhhh...’

He pulled himself up higher and tried to re-focus, but when he did, his head started to ache and he was forced back down again. Groaning a third time, he looked towards the balcony, the slight gap between the wall and the panel showing something oddly green and shiny.

Pushing his head forward an inch along the pillow, he squinted and narrowed it down to two floating balls of glowing, green light.

Fireflies? he wondered, squinting so hard his eyes hurt.

On the other side of the room, the door panel slid open and, following the drawn-out shuffling sound of zori being removed, Miho's haggard face appeared.



‘Temporary break,’ he said, walking over to the balcony door panel and sliding it shut. ‘Five minutes then back down to the kitchen.’

‘Not like that...’ mumbled Akira, pointing at the wisteria bonsai tree on the desk, his whole arm shaking. ‘Fireflies...watching me...’

Frowning, Miho came back over and bent down next to Akira’s slumped form. Gently lowering the samurai’s arm with an accompanying *hush* sound, he put his hand on Akira’s forehead and muttered, ‘wah, like a volcano.’

‘Thought there were two, sure of it, but...who would the other one be? Can’t be Kenji, not after the bridge thing, but who then?’

‘Okay, try to sleep again,’ said Miho, reaching over for the face towel on the other futon. ‘I’ll wet this a little bit, cool you down.’

‘No, have to open...they’re out there, guarding me...greenest little fireflies you ever-’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.’

Miho got up to moisten the towel, but was pulled straight back down by Akira, who rose up from the pillow with a manic look in his eyes. An equally manic arm attempted to jab at the door panel, but got as far as Miho’s shoulder before acting out a spasm and dropping.

Then the eyelids fluttered, closed up shop and he was out again.



‘What exactly did she say?’

‘I told you.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘No.’

‘An apology? Some better excuses?’

‘No.’

Himiko looked at the chopping knife sticking out from the end of her right hand and Aya’s position backed up tight against the kitchen wall, realised the optics, and placed the blade gently back down on the surface.

‘Sorry, I didn’t know I was holding that.’

‘For nearly five minutes,’ replied Aya, relaxing slightly as Himiko followed up her apology by moving back to the soup station and folding her arms.

‘I just don’t understand what she’s playing at. It’s been over four hours. Did you tell her I was angry with her?’

‘Not really. Or maybe I did. I don’t know, it’s all a little hazy now.’

‘Did she seem scared?’

‘Err...the opposite, actually.’

‘Not scared?’

‘More like annoyed. It was a bit strange. She told us to leave in quite a sharp tone. Actually, a really sharp tone...as if we’d done something wrong and she was...’

Himiko waited for the key word to slide out, but Aya was too busy running a fingertip over her lip. ‘She was what?’

‘Well...you. As if she were in your position, the boss of the ryokan.’

Himiko glanced at Chef Amo, who was over on the other side of the kitchen, chopping the head off a chicken that had an unusually resigned look on its face. As if it had known all along that this is where it would end up.

‘Do you have any idea where she might be?’

‘One or two. Here, let me finish with this chicken then I’ll go out and look for her.’

‘No, no time...we have to finish serving dinner first. Guests take priority above all else. Golden rule of ryokan hospitality.’

Chef Amo paused his chopping and looked through the hole in the wall, into the dining area. Apart from Miho walking round the side and almost knocking a painting off the wall with his shoulder, there was no one.

‘Don’t say guest, singular, I’m not in the mood.’

‘I wasn’t going to,’ replied Chef Amo, resuming chicken duty.

The panel to the kitchen slid open and Miho walked in, rubbing his shoulder. He nodded at Aya then walked over to Himiko, slouching slightly so he would appear smaller than her. Then straightened up again when he saw her shaking her head.

‘I don’t suppose you have news about our runaway staff, do you?’

‘Who?’

‘The one you picked vegetables with and didn’t drag back here by the fucking hair.’

‘Ah, Sachiko, sorry, no. Not since the stream.’

‘What’s with the action face then?’

Miho frowned at the description, turning to try and spot his reflection in the pan nearby. Then gave up and just assumed she meant he looked purposeful. ‘I’ve just been up to see Akira...my travelling friend...or not really my friend, just the guy I helped. Though maybe he would call me a friend now as I did save him from that purple-...from that difficult situation back in the clearing. Wah, that seems like weeks ago now. Time really glides when you have to work every day.’

‘The point, Miho. Find it.’

Chef Amo laughed in the background, almost chopping his own finger off by accident.

‘The point, right. Sorry. I’m just-...I mean, I was just up there, in our room, and...he seems really sick.’ Miho paused, giving an irritated look towards Chef Amo, who was still laughing. ‘Really sick, like, his head is still volcano hot, and he was rambling some nonsense about green fireflies protecting him. Then he passed out again.’

‘Sounds like a typical ashigaru drunk,’ said Chef Amo, resuming his chopping.

Miho shifted left, putting his back to the heckler, and his face towards the real boss. ‘I don’t know, I think the drink we’re giving him might not be working.’

‘No need for alarm,’ answered Himiko, scratching the side of her neck. ‘The medicine takes a few days, I told you that.’

‘But he’s getting worse, his head-’

‘Perhaps even a week. Miho, calm down, deep breaths. Focus on your duties and I’ll focus on helping your pet ashigaru.’

‘By giving him more of that drink?’

‘Yes.’

Miho looked around the kitchen, at all the vegetables and herbs laid out for dinner. ‘Do you have any other medicine you can give him?’

‘This isn’t a clinic. I have the same stuff my parents gave me when I was a child and I’m not dead. Therefore, he can take it too.’

‘Did you hallucinate after you took it?’

Himiko put her fingers on the green necklace and slowly flipped it over onto the reverse side. ‘No.’

‘Akira is. Those green fireflies watching him. Says he can see them.’

‘Green?’ asked Aya, half turning from the bowl of mountain asparagus she was peeling.

‘That’s what he said.’

‘He’s fine, stop being so dramatic.’ Himiko left her necklace and started scratching its colour twin, the green tattoo etched on the upper slope of her breast. ‘The night is always darkest just before sunset.’

‘Sunset?’

‘Sunrise. Which means he’s just expelling the sickness from his system and he’ll be up and swinging his katana brainlessly at my staff before you know it.’

‘Or drunkenly falling in the river outside,’ muttered Chef Amo, his words nowhere near quiet enough to be undetected.

Miho waved the mountain asparagus he’d just picked up vaguely in the air around him, missing Aya’s cheek by an inch. ‘Hey, he’s injured, leave him alone.’

‘Just saying facts. And don’t you dare yell *hey* at me in my own kitchen.’ Chef Amo caught Himiko’s raised eyebrow and edited. ‘*Her*

kitchen. Technically. But my domain right now. And that means *I'm* your boss and *you* will show some fucking respect.'

Miho half opened his mouth to say *hey* again, but he could see Aya shaking her head at him out of the corner of his eye so he bit his tongue, and then bit it again when his brain tried to force him to say sorry.

'Silence, good. Now stop playing the worried nurse and start boiling those *fuki*.'

Miho looked at Himiko for confirmation, but she was zoned out, fingers still tracing the outline of her tattoo. Apparently, she didn't mind if others saw the top of her chest in the kitchen. Which was quite similar to Yuki, now that he thought about it. She had often walked about the village with her yukata loosely tied, making the men drop things in front of her and hope she'd bend down to pick them up.

'What are you waiting for boy? Dinner's in thirty minutes.'

'Huh?'

'The *fuki*...boil them.'

Miho looked out half-dazed at the empty dining room, shrugged and moved next to Aya, who was still wrestling with the mountain asparagus. The *fuki* was in the basket, so he grabbed some and put them on the surface, then reached for the jar of salt.

'What are you doing?' whispered Aya, glowering at Miho's outstretched hand.

‘Salting them,’ he replied.

‘That’s not the way Chef Amo does it.’

‘How does he do it?’

‘Boils them.’

‘Without salting?’

‘Yes.’

‘But...what about the bitterness?’

‘Irrelevant.’

‘But-’

‘Just do it his way, it’s safer.’

Miho looked at the *fuki*, looked at Chef Amo chopping up the chicken with an amateur’s technique, looked at Aya pulling the jar of salt away from him, and thought, okay, whatever. Boiled *fuki*. No salt.

As he began chopping, Himiko came out of her trance and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. ‘I have a compromise. If your ashigaru friend is still feverish tomorrow, I’ll let you move to Room 28.’

‘The one with the weird light?’

‘Weird? It’s our premium cabin. What are you talking about?’

‘Sorry, but...there was a green glow in the windows last night. I wasn’t saying it was a bad cabin.’



Himiko looked past Miho, into the bare nothingness of the wall. ‘Ah, the green glow. Yes. That comes from the luminous rock, found on the slopes of Mount Kinpu. It’s quite therapeutic...according to certain monks...in certain shrines.’

‘It is?’

‘Yes, now that I think of it, your friend should be moved there tomorrow. It will really help with his recovery, I’m certain of it.’

Himiko patted him on the shoulder, pulled her necklace straight and then strolled out into the dining area. The sole guest must’ve been out there too, as she started giving the traditional greeting spiel.

Miho listened to the faint sounds, then returned to the basket of *fuki. Luminous rock from Mount Kinpu*. He’d never heard of that, but he was just a simple village boy, or simple village man now, and there were thousands of things he didn’t know. Aya, on the other hand...

Turning to the side, he waited for her to finish peeling the final asparagus then asked if she knew anything about this luminous rock.

‘No,’ she replied curtly, then picked up the green asparagus layers and hurried over to the boiling station.

Miho stared at the asparagus left behind, until Aya rushed back and carried them away too, waiting a minute before returning a second time and dropping the peeled layers in to the waste bin.

Maybe later then, he thought, casting a forlorn look at the salt jar.



# CHAPTER 12

## TROUBLE IN A GREEN YUKATA

The brown-freckled hare sniffed the mound of dirt several times before concluding that, once again, she had stopped at the wrong place.

Too minty, not crumbled enough.

And a slight gravelly texture.

She lifted her head and re-scanned the area.

Lines of tree trunks that all looked the same, surrounded by grass and dirt with no distinguishing features.

Gods with paws, why had she come this far out again?

Just to avoid Blacknose and his nonsensical territorial claims, not to mention his weird sexual advances? Probably. It was annoying. Pretending to be stuck in that hole. Trying to get close and lick her paws at 3<sup>rd</sup> Junction, Level Five. Didn't he know she was dating Glad Eyes?

Scurrying forward, she sniffed another patch of dirt, then moved left towards the stream. If she followed that down far enough then there was a chance she would be able to make it back in time for-

Her thoughts ended instantly as a spear descended out of the black sky and pierced the top of her head.

Atta Noe watched through Sachiko's eyes as the blood flowed out from beneath the hare's chin then, grunting in semi-satisfaction, pulled the sharpened twig back out.

'Not ideal,' she said, using her native tongue instead of Japanese, 'but should suffice.'

Pushing herself back up into a standing position, she rotated her neck in slow circles and stretched out her right leg, determined not to fall victim to cramp again.

Human bodies are so ridiculous, she thought, finishing her mini-exercises and walking with tentative steps away from the stream.

Capable of perishing from a single mosquito bite, yet also getting stabbed a dozen times and, somehow, surviving.

That was another thing.

From the assailant's perspective, how could you stab someone a dozen times and not kill them? The odds of not hitting a single vital organ were astronomical. Though the best way to ensure that never happened was to do what she did. Slice them into pieces and eat the tasty parts.

She looked down at the body she was trapped in, at the wound peeking out from under the idiot boy's dōbuku.

Or perform a perfectly executed, clinical kill, on a moving target.

The other girl popped into her head, leaning down to help a play-acting demon in distress. The look of complete bafflement as she

realised she'd been stabbed. Followed by blankness as the life drained out of her.

‘Naive fools,’ Atta Noe said, fierce, gripping the twig tight. ‘I did you both a favour. Wouldn’t have lasted a day under Shingen’s rule.’

The picture of the more sympathetic girl’s vacant face morphed into the dopey, overly-sincere stare of the boy as he’d handed her his dōbuku.

‘And you...the irritating man-child.’

There was a shout in the distance. A male human’s voice.

She looked ahead and saw a large, well-rounded figure jogging across a short wooden bridge, then stopping at the end and leaning like a drunk on the railings.

‘Who’s this fat fool?’ she whispered, hiding the twig behind her back as the man caught a second wind and jogged over to her. As he got closer, she could see he was wearing the uniform of a chef. And his physique was even larger than she’d thought, possibly big enough to pose a real threat.

‘Sachi-bag,’ he said, reaching her and immediately grabbing her hand. ‘You crazy, mad, sexy fucking fool.’

‘What did you call me?’

‘You’re in some serious shit though. Himiko’s been folding her arms all afternoon, and you know what that means?’

‘Ah, you work there too.’

‘Err...no, I just hang out in a kitchen. Unpaid. Shouting at Aya and the new kid. What’s got into you?’

Sachiko shrugged off Chef Amo’s hand and looked towards the bridge. ‘Take me to the ryokan.’

‘Wah, easy, you can’t go there yet. Gotta come up with a cover story first.’

‘Cover what?’

‘Your ass, of course. She’ll fire you if we don’t come up with something good.’

‘I do not care about work or ass. The ashigaru and the boy are my only priority. Where are they now? Inside?’

‘Who?’

‘The boy who picked vegetables with me.’

‘What, that little runt, Miho? What do you wanna know about him for?’ Chef Amo stepped back and tilted his head, noticing the dōbuku she was wearing. ‘Did you two do something together?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Why do you have his dōbuku on?’

‘This body felt cold. Yet I feel spritely again now. Lead me to the boy and I may overlook your annoying behaviour.’

‘How about we focus on placating Himiko first?’

‘She is irrelevant.’

‘*Kuso*...you really have lost it, haven’t you? Okay, doesn’t matter, Amo-kun will do the thinking for both of us.’ He took her hand again, this time too firmly for her to shake him off. ‘But first, I need a little encouragement. A bit of warming up.’

Before she could robotically command him to take her to the ryokan again, he was pulling her backwards into the forest. She tried to wriggle out of his grip, but in her current body, it was impossible. He was physically too large, and even worse, sexually aroused.

Pinning her up against a tree, Chef Amo checked back once to see if any predators or bandits were watching, then proceeded to fondle and grope various parts of her body, muttering, ‘baby, I missed you,’ alongside ragged breathing noises.

It was an odd experience, and a time-consuming one, so, as the fat human was busy licking her neck, Atta Noe gripped him by the hair, pulled the sharpened twig out from her skirt and stabbed him four times in the throat.

His eyes doubled in size, and the hand that was still clamped to her left breast spasmed, flicking the host body’s nipple and giving her an annoying ticklish sensation.

She was so annoyed that she stabbed him again.

This time it was more final.

His hand released her breast, blood flowed out from the neck and, after a few more death spasms, his body dropped onto a mound of dirt with such a loud thud that the hare family having dinner in its burrow below all looked up and said [in hare language], ‘shut the fuck up, human shit.’

Adjusting her yukata, and putting the boy’s dōbuku back on over it, Atta Noe glanced over at the bridge again and started walking. She managed three steps before her limbs started to ache, and another five after that before her lower back gave up.

Gods, this body...

Impossible.

Returning to the large, almost-dead figure on the ground, she bent down, jammed a finger into the largest of the throat wounds and wriggled it around until the big oaf stopped breathing. Then, with both eyes closed, she made the transfer.

Purple mist leaked out from Sachiko and funnelled itself into the ears, eye sockets and mouth of the dead man.

Opening his eyes, Chef Amo instantly understood everything. He patted his arms and chest, then used the corpse of Sachiko, his ex-lover, as leverage to pull himself up onto his feet.

‘Won’t miss you,’ he said, giving her a kick to the waist, then started off towards the bridge. In a sign of comradeship, patches of faint grey mist rolled down from the mountain slopes, along with a



trail of hares sneaking around in the nearby bushes. Possibly relatives of the one she'd killed ten minutes earlier.

Ah, let them follow, Chef Amo thought, dipping a finger in one of her new vessel's throat holes and licking blood off the nail. I have a bigger list to deal with.

The idiot boy, the annoying girl, the ashigaru, the bossy tyrant named Himiko. Possibly some guests as well, though they would most likely be in their rooms at this hour.

Ah, irrelevant. If they were there, either ignore or kill. With this larger body, it shouldn't be much of a hassle.

The ashigaru, on the other hand...assuming he was back to a relative degree of health...and had close access to his katana...that would require some strategy. The *syk anvaa ek* gambit perhaps?

Chef Amo walked onto the wooden boards of the bridge, running the palm of his right hand along the railings until it was stopped by a splinter.

Gods, another way to get hurt, he thought, swatting away mist to find the offending piece of tiny wood.

'What are you doing here?' droned a voice, seemingly from within the air itself.

Chef Amo looked up, reaching back for the twig then realising he'd left it with the girl's corpse. Ah, not a huge mistake. The man ahead wasn't too imposing. Tall, yes, in good shape, yes, but the way

he was standing there on the bridge seemed far too limp to qualify as an actual threat. And his outfit...

‘This is claimed territory,’ said the man in the green yukata, placing a hand on both sides of the bridge railings. ‘Leave.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Turn around. Walk. Do not try to circle back.’

‘I work here, idiot,’ tried the purple demon, but it was a half-hearted attempt and, judging by the flinch of the man blocking the way, a misplaced use of *idiot*.

‘You are not the chef.’

‘Are you blind? Look at my uniform.’

‘It is stained with blood.’

‘Yeah...cos I fell over...onto a sharp rock. All this mist floating around, makes it very hard to see where you’re going.’

‘There are several holes in your throat.’

‘What?’

‘Leaking.’

Chef Amo put a finger on each of the wounds that he’d completely forgotten about, even though he’d just been dipping into one of them a minute earlier, and, with the emerging sound of air leaking out, tried to come up with some quick excuses. *It’s not as deep as it looks* was the only one that had any kind of weight to it, so

he opened his mouth and...said *fuck* in his native language as an extra reservoir of blood spurted out.

‘Go home.’

The tone of the man’s voice was so patronising, so sure of itself, so *not human* that Chef Amo couldn’t help but flash both pupils purple in response.

‘Ah, it’s one of you,’ said the man in the green yukata.

‘Recognition. Good. This whole façade was starting to grate.’

‘Out for a late night drift?’

‘Now for the obedience. There are two humans I need. An idiot boy and an injured ashigaru. Let me take them and I will not harm you.’

The man took his hands off the side of the railings and advanced, showing no sign of fear or apprehension, even when he got to within a metre of his demon counterpart. The mist too, appeared to bow to him, swirling left, right, up, diagonal, desperate not to get in his way.

‘I will not ask twice,’ said Chef Amo, holding his ground.

‘You appear to be without your box. Is it lost?’

‘The boy and the ashigaru. Now.’

‘Hmm. Typical Atashhka...always leading with your rage.’

Purple mist seeped out of Chef Amo’s nose, and drifted impotently as his right hand formed into an awkward fist.

‘I wouldn’t let out too much of that if I were you.’

In solidarity, the left hand tightened too.

‘Not on my territory.’

Chef Amo picked a part of the man’s face he’d like to rip apart and consigned it to memory. Then loosened up his hands. ‘Your territory. This? A shack in the mountains? Even for your kind, it’s pathetic. Unless...ah, that’s what you are, isn’t it? One of those weird types who lives off grid, directionless, too scared to step out the door. Sucking up tourists and drunks. No ambition. No drive. Ha, I bet even a bird chirping makes you cower back into whatever squalid little cave you’re lurking in.’

‘Is that why you’re here, in that leaking body? Ambition?’

More purple flashes, an instinctive reaction that couldn’t be stopped, but at least this time Chef Amo managed to rein it in a bit. He stared beyond the man in the green yukata - the small-time demon, probably illegal, feeding off a drip of fringe humans - past the end of the bridge, past a second, smaller bridge and focused on the ryokan.

It was only another two hundred metres at most.

Yet utterly unreachable.

For the moment.

‘I think we’ve indulged each other enough for one night,’ the man in the green yukata said, re-drawing Chef Amo’s attention. ‘The path back to Kōfu is behind you.’

‘You’re right, this is becoming pointless.’

‘And please, don’t try to sneak back another way. It would not go well for you in your current state.’

‘No doubt.’ Chef Amo blew dried-up breath into the grey mist, watching it drift back instead of lash out. ‘Very well. I accede to your claim.’

‘A smart choice.’

‘On one condition.’

The man stiffened, the hair around his head emanating a faint shade of green.

‘You make each of them suffer. The ashigaru and the boy, when you make your move.’

‘That...is expected.’

‘No quick kills, no medicinal aids. I want them to feel as much of their end as possible, to truly understand what it is that is happening to them.’

‘Torture...’

‘Can you promise that?’

The man in the green yukata rotated his head round in one, lethargic loop, the green outline slashing out erratic, green wisps.

‘Does that mean yes?’

‘Hmm. We have an agreement.’

‘Then I leave them in your...hopefully...capable hands.’

Chef Amo took one final look at the ryokan in the agonisingly near distance then turned and walked off the bridge, his pupils finally losing the handbrake and igniting in a fiery purple glare.

Dead.

All of you.

Your ramshackle little ryokan, the courtyard, the trees, everything.

It was wild fantasy, of course, but as soon as he made it back to Kōfu and the compound, and out of this leaking body, it would become a lot more realistic.

Though the boy and the ashigaru were probably off the table.

Unless...

No.

Would the *Gos Ussu* really wait that long? A whole day?

If he believed what he’d just heard...if the performance had been convincing enough...

Maybe.

Chef Amo waited for the path to curve right, checked back to confirm that the bridge was almost out of sight, then quickened his pace.

Watching the large [and still bleeding] figure blend into the distant mist, the man in the green yukata stretched out arms on each side, curling up his hands like encroaching spiders around the railings.

One word cruised laps around the inside of his demon head, blinking in huge, neon-lilac capitals.

*TROUBLE.*

# CHAPTER 13

## ANYTHING FOR THE DEMON SOCIOPATH





The castle ledge was uneven stone and impossibly high  
ramparts on one side  
infinite drop on the other  
yet Yuki didn't care  
did not seem to have any problem at all, gliding casually in  
unmeasured steps, arms at Dutch angles  
whereas Miho  
could only look at her back  
didn't dare look down, or even a little bit down  
and each time the hurricane-grade wind blew in from the side  
he thought, this is it  
this is the moment I plummet onto jagged rocks fifty-thousand  
feet down and to the left  
and his dad didn't help  
blue-skinned and jacketless behind him  
whispering into his neck

‘we should build a bigger house, with bigger bedrooms, let Yuki spread out a bit.’

‘She’s happy as is,’ I answered, but he insisted

‘no, she’ll leave if you don’t build it, leave without looking back, just like she is now,’

and when Miho looked again at Yuki’s back

his father was right, she was gone

off the ledge and down

making a whistling noise like the wind as she fell.

‘Told ya,’ said his dad

wrapping a cracked, blue-skinned arm around his neck

‘told ya told ya told ya told ya...’

~~~

The wasp did a quick 180 and buzzed through the gap in the door panel as Miho’s arm shot up air-wards, grasping at nothing.

‘Get your stupid dry blue arm off me,’ he slurred, quite loud, but not at the required volume to wake Akira on the futon next to him.

A breeze blew in from the balcony, bringing with it a Yuki-less reality.

Miho sat up and looked around the barely lit room.

She's not falling, he thought, stretching his arms diagonally both ways. And I'm not standing on a cliff edge. Thank gods. Though I'll have to go down to the kitchen at some point. Maybe quite soon, in fact.

Before Miho could reach the balcony panel and gauge the time, there was a knock at the door.

On the nearby futon, Akira opened his mouth and noisily sucked in dry air.

'Miho,' came Aya's voice from behind the door.

'Putting my uniform on.'

'Quickly. You're wanted in the kitchen.'

'Okay, coming,' he said, pulling himself up and trying to figure out where the entry point of his yukata was.

'For cooking duty,' she added, hitting the door panel again.

'Sorry?'

'Just get out here. Himiko will explain it to you.'

Miho gave out another *okay* and finished getting dressed. 'Forty-eight more days of this,' he muttered as he flattened his hair into what he hoped was a semi-respectable appearance.

On the futon sickbed, Akira hoovered in more dry air, and then let out a hacking cough.

Filling up a new cup with water from the wooden bucket, Miho drank some himself then bent down and poured the rest slowly into Akira's mouth.

Bad idea.

The patient coughed it back up instantly and lashed out with his left hand, clipping Miho on the cheek.

'You want the medicine again?' Miho asked, frowning at the empty cup. 'Cos I don't think that's such a good idea.'

'Water,' said Akira, wiping his mouth.

Ignoring another knock on the door panel, Miho refilled the cup and this time told Akira that the water was right there, next to his lips.

'Water,' the patient repeated, taking the cup with his eyes closed and gulping it down in less than a second. 'More.'

'How about I just bring the bucket over?'

'Water.'

'Okay then. Let's try that.'

He went back over to the bucket and gripped the handle, shouting, 'relax, I'm coming,' again at the seven hundredth knock on the door frame.

'Doesn't feel like it,' replied Aya, pulling the panel open an inch so her voice wasn't so muffled.

'Ten seconds.'

‘What?’

‘I’ll be out in ten seconds.’

‘Sure.’

Miho placed the water bucket next to Akira’s futon, then shifted it back a few inches to avoid any accidental arm swipes.

‘Drink as much as you need. I’ll be back in a few hours with breakfast.’

‘Water,’ murmured Akira.

Miho nodded, tapping the side of the bucket, then shouted, ‘ten more seconds,’ when the inevitable knock on the door returned.

~~~~~

‘Me?’

‘Unless Chef Amo magically appears in the next five minutes then yes, you.’

Miho looked at Himiko’s face, waiting for the wink or giveaway twitch. ‘But...I don’t understand.’

‘It’s quite simple. Chef Amo is not here. Aya can’t cook. Sachiko has either deserted us completely or is still messing about by the stream.’

‘Or run off with Chef Amo,’ added Aya, stirring what was apparently soup, but looked more like flavoured water with green bits on top.

‘Yes, that is also a possibility. Though I’m not sure why they couldn’t just carry on their little trysts here at the ryokan. And get paid for it.’ Himiko scratched her green tattoo, looking at each work station in the kitchen as if it were a physical enemy. ‘Gods, I hope you can actually cook, Miho. Otherwise, I’m gonna have to make an attempt at it myself.’

‘I’m not a trained chef...but I know a little. I think.’

‘Well, we’ve got one guest, so as long as you don’t poison him then we should be safe. I’ll head into Nirasaki first thing tomorrow and find a replacement.’

‘You really think Chef Amo’s gone for good?’ asked Aya, sprinkling some diced ginger into the pot.

‘He better be,’ replied Himiko, her back already turned as she headed into the dining area.

Miho walked after her a few steps, his brain telling him to ask what the breakfast menu was, but then stopped and reassessed, deciding that it would probably be safer to ask Aya instead.

‘Nothing complex,’ she told him, stirring the soup in the pot. ‘Mostly because we don’t have that many ingredients.’

‘I can use the leftover vegetables from yesterday to make a soup.’

‘To go with this?’ She gestured at the pot with an exaggerated flourish, shaking her head. ‘Just focus on the pan. There’s salmon in the ice outside.’

‘Ice?’

‘The box at the end of the courtyard, it’s got ice in it, and salmon.’

‘A box of ice? But how would she-’

‘...keep it so cold? I have no idea. But she does, and that’s where the salmon is.’

‘Wah, an ice box...frozen salmon...okay, I can probably do something with that later. If it’s real. But first I’m gonna have to deal with your soup there. No offence.’

‘You know how to season it?’

‘In the same style as Chef Amo? No. But I can try my way. Might not be perfect, but I’m fairly certain it won’t poison the guest.’

‘I’ll do the rice then,’ Aya said, giving up on the pot and bending down to the giant rice jar under the chopping bench. ‘Take a bit of the pressure off.’

Miho clasped his hands together and scanned the kitchen, taking slow, subtly disguised anxiety breaths. Then grabbed some *fuki* and asparagus from the basket and placed them down on the chopping board.

‘You really know what you’re doing?’ Aya asked, watching him pick up the knife.

He responded by cutting the whole clump of asparagus into thirds, then chopping them so fast that the knife itself was a blur.

‘Right,’ said Aya, stopping just short of a whistling sound. ‘I’ll do the rice then.’

~~~

To say that Chef Amo was missed was an overstatement.

Not only did the sole remaining guest in the ryokan not get poisoned by Miho’s breakfast menu, but he enjoyed it so much that he wandered into the kitchen three times to ask for more of the *zesty forest soup thing*.

‘It’s a special recipe,’ said Miho afterwards, towel wrapped around his forehead like a headscarf, half of it drenched in sweat [which he claimed was just the steam from pan-frying the salmon].

‘Not the regular miso then,’ replied Himiko, picking up another piece of salmon from her own plate and shoving it in her mouth.

‘My mother taught me. And then made me cook it every morning. Said it was payback for all the cooking I wouldn’t have to do when I got married.’

‘Smart woman,’ said Himiko, still chewing.

‘Actually, it’s more like practice. Yuki doesn’t know how to cook, and she never showed much interest in learning so...I suppose it’ll all be on me at some point.’

‘Yuki is your girlfriend?’

‘Wandering girlfriend,’ muttered Aya, dunking one of the dirty bowls into the washing bucket.

‘Yes. I’m looking for her now. Or I was looking for her.’

‘Don’t pull that sad fox face, young man,’ said Himiko, hitting him with her chopsticks...then frowning and washing them in Aya’s cup of water. ‘Fifty-eight more days and you can go off and find this great beauty. Then persuade her to come back here so I can hire you as our new chef.’

‘Seriously?’ asked Aya, almost dropping the soaking wet bowl.

‘Why not? Chef Amo’s food never had any guests coming into the kitchen for more helpings. Miho’s a definite upgrade. A fortuitous accident.’

‘Forty-eight more days,’ Miho said, his voice a little low.

‘What’s that?’

‘I have forty-eight more days left to work here.’

‘Ah, what did I say?’

‘Fifty-eight.’

‘Sorry, slip of the tongue.’ Himiko smiled unconvincingly and picked up the final piece of salmon, holding it up high so she could see the char lines underneath. ‘Really impressive frying on this.’

‘He’s going to be cooking for the next forty-eight days?’ cut in Aya, squeezing the dish cloth tight in her hands.

‘Well it’s not going to be me or you.’ Himiko laughed, accidentally dropping the salmon onto the floor, then kicking it under the chopping station table.

As her laughter died out, the necklace started to glow a faint green. She turned to the dining area hatch, stabbing her chopsticks into a chunk of salmon when she spotted the man in the green yukata watching her, his expression as impassive as a bored shark.

‘I need to talk to you,’ he whispered, not loud enough for anyone else to hear.

Himiko nodded, saying *good job* again to her two wonder staff, then left the impaled salmon and walked with slight hesitation out into the dining area.

Turning back to the washing station, Aya resumed her duties, muttering something that Miho couldn’t quite catch. Curious, he moved beside her and asked what exactly that guy’s role was at the ryokan.

‘Don’t ask, don’t wonder,’ she replied, sharply.

‘I’ve seen him a few times. He just seems to wander around aimlessly. Is he Himiko’s husband?’

‘Miho...’

‘Sorry, I’m just used to knowing what’s going on. Village habit, I guess.’

‘Just focus on your work.’

Miho nodded, watching Aya scrub a tough bit of rice off the edge of a bowl. ‘Do you need a hand?’

‘I’m almost done.’

‘Did you like my breakfast?’

‘Yes. It was great.’

‘Really? Which part was the best?’

Aya finished the bowl and let out a dramatic breath. ‘I was being polite. To be honest, it was pretty bland. Food where I come from is...different.’

‘Where do you come from?’

‘Me?’

‘Err...yeah. Is it nearby? Kai Province?’

‘Kyushu.’

‘Ah, the south.’

‘Don’t ask which town, you won’t know it.’

‘Kumamoto?’

‘Wah...*kuso*. I said don’t ask.’

She washed another bowl quickly then threw the cloth down and headed to the door.

‘You don’t have blue chicken in your hometown by any chance?’ tried Miho, getting a pitying shake of the head in return.

~~~

Outside the ryokan, under a much greyer sky than the day before, Himiko sat down on the wooden box stamped with *HAPPY CHICKEN GRAIN* and stared at the ground.

‘It is unavoidable,’ said the man in the green yukata, standing in an oddly upright posture that made him look like an action figure who’d been placed there by some child god in the clouds.

‘Are you certain?’

‘There will be visitors and I need to be at full strength.’

Himiko glanced over at the front entrance to the ryokan and then up at the rooms above. The sole guest had gone out for a hike, and the ashigaru would be zonked out from the medicine, so it was safe enough. Still, she didn’t like what she was hearing.

‘I can give you the ashigaru, that’s already been set up...but the others.’

‘It is not for discussion.’

Himiko clenched her fist, looking up with the same ferocity she used to have in her younger days...then wiping it completely as she looked into the eyes of a demon sociopath.

Her demon sociopath.

‘The boy is a good worker, and an excellent chef. It’s a big waste to get rid of him. How about the ashigaru and the guest? Or I can go out this afternoon, pick up a stranger in Nirasaki...’

‘I require the ashigaru, the boy and the guest. The girl will be placed on standby, in case my strength is insufficient.’

‘Aya? But she’s-’

‘Follow what I say. No counter-points.’

Himiko looked down at the ground again, turning the necklace round in her fingers. A stream of ants marched over and around the man’s feet, without any kind of fear. Without any kind of awe. Then kept going, aiming roughly for the slope next to the end cabin.

‘I won’t give you Aya,’ she said, finally, gripping the necklace tight.

The man in the green yukata didn’t respond for almost a minute. Didn’t make any breathing sounds. Didn’t move his hands or adjust his standing position.

The wind was the only active force, and it was cold, forcing her to tighten the dōbuku around her shoulders.

‘If you do not do this, I will perish,’ the man said, his voice without feeling.

Himiko turned the grip on the necklace into a massage, trying to remember all the annoying things Aya had done, all the clumsy accidents.

‘The ryokan...our home...won’t have any staff left,’ she mumbled, eyes on the faraway ants.

‘We will re-hire. Or move location.’

‘It’s that serious?’

The man in the green yukata bent down and took Himiko’s hand, making no attempt to separate it from the necklace.

‘Atashhka are notorious for their pettiness,’ he said, using his other hand to stroke the side of her hair. ‘And this one seemed especially petty. If she brings a large enough force, and her box, she could end both of us.’

‘You can’t fight her?’

‘Not at my current strength.’

Himiko closed her eyes, blacking out the ryokan and the courtyard and the ants which were out of sight anyway. In their place, she pictured Aya. Obscured by shadow, without expression. Neither willing or unwilling to do anything. Like one of the replica chicken statues she’d made to quell courtyard dissent...when the knife came out.

She opened up to the ryokan again, kicking a curious chicken away from her feet.

‘I will bring them to you tonight.’

‘And the spare on standby...’

‘Yes.’

‘Good girl,’ the man in the green yukata replied, taking his hands away from her hair and walking off without another word, light flakes of snow starting to fall on the courtyard around him.



**CHAPTER 14**  
**A RE-ANIMATED CORPSE IN THE**  
**COURT OF SHINGEN**



‘That belt looks a bit simple, how about a new one?’

‘Mystical rocks, blessed by ancient monks, two for four mon.’

‘Haircut?’

‘Bit flabby around the waist there. What you need is a personal trainer. Mentored at the most prestigious shugendo training centre in this here Kai Province.’

‘Magical rocks, bargain price, can make any woman your slave.’

Pushing her way through the mass of schemers and scam artists, Atta Noe, who was still costumed in the increasingly pale skin of Chef Amo, focused on the gate just ahead.

Shingen’s compound. The prettiest place in all of Kōfu. In all of Kai Province too, if you ignored the mountain scenery.

‘Come on, big man,’ tried the rock seller again, following behind, ‘three magical rocks, one whole year of nightly sexual conquests, guaranteed.’

‘Go away, cockroach.’

‘Cheap as it gets, no hidden pockets.’

Her hand flinched as the scam artist touched skin, trying to pull her back...or pull Chef Amo back...but her vessel’s large size made it easy to shrug him off.

*Compound gate. Compound gate. Compound gate.*

Of course, the urge to murder every human that spoke to her, offered her ridiculous things, tutted audibly when she refused was incredibly strong, but that would be a distraction and she couldn't afford any more of those.

Not on this level of energy.

She stopped by a stall selling bamboo shoots and slowed down her vessel's already laboured breaths.

Part of her regretted not taking a detour to her box, recharging for a couple of hours. That would've made her less likely to collapse on the street, which she felt was pretty close to happening already.

Gods, it'd been a long walk.

Almost forty kilometres. Twenty if she hadn't been in the mood for extreme hyperbole. In smoke form, she could've made it in less than half an hour. In this lump of a body, running on fumes of reserve power, it had taken all night and half the morning.

'Bamboo shoot?' asked the elderly stall woman, holding out a sample in her hand.

Chef Amo glared at her, then softened a little when he saw the bamboo shoots being offered were actually quite good quality.

'I may come back later,' he said, nodding at the stall woman, who responded by putting the shoots in her hand safely to the side.

Shouts came from further down the street.

The guards at the gate to the path that would lead him back into the haven of Shingen's residential complex were doing what guards liked to do; abuse commoners. Which in this case meant kicking a drunk who'd wandered too close.

He was fairly certain that was the reason as they were shouting while kicking, 'don't wander so close.'

Pushing his decaying wreck of a body away from the stall, Chef Amo swatted away another magical rock seller, straightened up to almost full height and presented himself in front of the guards, who were now ordering bystanders to take away the guy they'd just kicked into a coma.

'What do you want?' barked the fatter of the two.

'I'm here to see Shingen. Let me through.'

'Another drunk, huh?' The slimmer guard stepped up to Chef Amo and breathed morning swamp right into his face. 'Did you not see what just happened?'

'Shingen. Call him. Now.'

'Wah, look at this one. Too special to bother with full sentences.'

'Thinks he's better than us,' added the fatter one.

'Maybe we should give him a lesson in etikut.'

Chef Amo closed his pink, watery eyes, too tired to even glare at them. Instead, he counted to four then re-opened and...promptly fell to the ground.

‘... ..’ he slurred, lifting up his arm, willing it into smoke form.

It did not obey.

The street behind was sideways, and the people were vibrating out of their own skins, and the sky...was a spiral becoming a nebula that was eating up the entire-

‘How’s the view down there?’ shouted the slimmer guard, giving him a kick to the gut.

Chef Amo took it as best he could then rotated slowly onto his back.

‘Gods in heat! What’s that on your throat?’

‘Looks like a hole.’

‘Several holes. Blood too. Kuso.’

The two guards retreated to the wall of the gate, as Chef Amo completed the epic struggle back to his feet and stared past them. The collar of his dōbuku had clearly fallen down and the wound was visible...but that didn’t really matter anymore.

All he cared about was getting past these idiots and inside the gate.

‘What’s going on here?’ slurred a familiar female voice from the street behind.

The two guards perked up a bit, pointing at the swaying figure of Chef Amo. Or, from their new perspective, the swaying, re-animated corpse of Chef Amo.

‘Dead...’ one of them stammered.

The owner of the voice, a tall woman in a Shingen-issue ash grey yukata, eyes glazed, hair chaotic, walked round the side of Chef Amo, holding back a yawn for about half a second then just running with it. After looking her target up and down, back and front, she grabbed his chin and asked within a second yawn, ‘drunk?’

Still running on the last sparks of adrenaline, Atta Noe filtered some light into Chef Amo’s eyes and replied, ‘annoyed.’

The woman let go of his chin and stepped back, tilting her head and doing a second examination. ‘Wah...Noe?’

‘Stop gawping, Miso, and take me inside.’

‘Where’s your box?’

‘In my side pocket.’

Misora glanced down at the yukata, then closed her eyes in embarrassment. ‘You mean you lost it?’

Chef Amo looked at the two guards, who were so bewildered that their hands were reaching to the wrong side of their waists for their katanas, then stretched out a finger towards Misora's face.

With an almost fox-like reflex, Misora blocked the initial grab...then messed up completely when she tried to seize his wrist.

'Hungover again, Miso?' Chef Amo asked, taking hold of her comrade's cheeks and studying her pupil status.

'Work fatigue,' Misora replied, shrugging off the cheek seizure and giving a hand signal to the guards. Then repeating it when they gazed back at her like a pair of constipated koi. Finally, they pulled their hands away from their belts, shifted to the side, and gave the signal to open the gate.

Draping an arm around Chef Amo's shoulder, Misora used her spare hand to poke him in the stomach. 'You're telling me this was the best one you could find?'

'... ..' Atta Noe cursed back in her own language.

Misora laughed. 'I accept your praise.'

~~~

Unlike those of the weaker, *pat-down-every-guest* warlords, Takeda Shingen's base of operations wasn't a mountain castle, or a moat castle, or even a little *mound of earth next to a village* castle; it was an old-fashioned mansion complex on the fringes of Kōfu, the capital of Kai Province.

Of course, it was still fortified to some extent, and guarded by thugs who liked to kick random drunks into comas, but if you really wanted to attack, it wouldn't be a hard thing to do. And perhaps even less so now, since the new leader of the clan, Shingen, was a twenty-one year old upstart who'd had the temerity to usurp his own father.

Fortunately, the neighbouring warlords in Shinano Province remained both cautious and intimidated by the Takeda name, and had decided not to dip their toes into the muddy waters of aggression...yet.

But that wouldn't last forever.

Especially if there were blood in that water.

~~~

A moderately grand chamber, panels drawn, eight strategically placed okiandon the only source of light.

Standing before a giant, hinoki-carved table, both hands palm down on the map of Shinano Province laid upon it, the lithe and lightly dressed figure of Takeda Shingen cleared his throat with a hacking cough and asked if there were any more seaweed strips.

'Another bowl is imminent,' replied the totem pole disguised as a man slightly to his rear, stroking the white beard growth on his left cheek.

'Tell them to hurry, Yukio. My poor father looks hungry.'

Atta Ka Yukio glanced over at the man in the corner of the room, sitting on what looked like a child's throne. On the wall to his right, a wide canvas depicting the *Battle of Un No Kuchi*, his son's greatest success. To his left, nothing. In truth, he didn't resemble Shingen in most aspects, with the notable exception of the eyes; they had the same tigerish ferocity as his youngest son. Or they did. Now that he'd been deposed, the middle-aged man's pupils looked smaller, tamed, as if the tiger inside had found a vending machine with unlimited refills and growled, 'okay, nice.'

'Back to the Shinano issue,' continued Shingen, running his hand along the edge of the table as he moved left. 'In my estimation, none of the northern clans have the courage or political will to attack. They will wait to see how I act first. Which, in turn, gives me a clear advantage.'

'I suggest the Suwa as the first target,' replied Atta Ka Yukio, floating a vague finger towards a lake on the map close to the border of Kai.

'Agreed.'

'Diplomacy to begin with, an alliance perhaps...use them to get a foothold in the province. Then, when our base is secure, we move down the highway here and into the Ina Valley.'

'And by the time we take the whole province, my hip won't function and my teeth will be falling out. No, no, far too slow. What



we need to do is attack. Find an excuse, and annihilate those superstitious fools.'

'That would undoubtedly provoke the other clans, the Murakami, possibly even the Nagao up in Echigo.'

'Good. Then they will know my name.'

Atta Ka Yukio pulled his hands behind his back and dug nails into the skin. The young man with dark green hair to his left, who had been kneeling and staring at the floor for some time, looked over at his twin on the right hand side and nodded. That young man took a tissue from his sleeve and wiped the yellow liquid seeping out of Atta Ka Yukio's hand, as well as the residue stains still on his nail.

On the far side of the room, the door panel slid open and a guard came in, swiftly followed by an utterly wrecked-looking Chef Amo.

'What is it?'

'This man insists on seeing you, daimyō.' The guard looked back beyond the door, grimacing when he saw Misora [hair still a mess] miming a clapping motion with her hands. 'On the word of Ōsugi Misora, Kunoichi 1<sup>st</sup> rank.'

Shingen squinted at Chef Amo, and then switched instantly to tiger mode when the man marched with no fear whatsoever to the other side of the map table.

‘Name!’ Shingen shouted, eyes half on the bizarre figure of the melting oaf, half on the guard, whose right arm was now visibly trembling.

‘Your most loyal advisor, Atta Noe’, replied Chef Amo, scanning the map and then putting a finger down hard on a forested area about fifteen kilometres from Kōfu. ‘Whose box is stuck right here.’

Shingen leaned across the map and grabbed the intruder by the collar, staring with great concentration into the corpse’s eyes.

‘You’re fingering one of my stab holes,’ said Chef Amo, monotone.

Shingen frowned in confusion then looked down at his hand. The aggressiveness of his action had dislodged a pocket reserve of blood in Chef Amo’s throat, and now it was all over his fingers.

‘Kuso,’ he yelled, letting go and wiping the blood on the intruder’s dōbuku.

‘You have been gone a long while,’ said Atta Ka Yukio, stepping forward to the map table, with both green-haired twins immediately filling the space behind. ‘We were growing concerned.’

‘I’m sure you were.’ The purple spiral in Chef Amo’s eyes intensified, for a brief moment, then powered back down into coy, little dots. ‘The two ashigaru you sent to retrieve the box never turned up.’

‘That is odd.’

‘And one of the six slabs of meat fled to a nearby ryokan. Along with an idiot boy who helped him escape.’

‘You were not successful in your mission?’ asked Shingen, glaring at the guard still standing near the door. Taking the hint, the man retreated fast, the door sliding shut with a loud knock behind him.

‘They were out of range, I couldn’t get to them. Until I found a reserve body.’

‘You killed this...man?’

‘No, a different one, some ditzy kitchen girl. Ah, it’s too much to go into. The key point is, I’m very frustrated, and tired, and the only way to fix it is for me to go back to that ryokan, along with my box, and eviscerate them.’

‘The ashigaru and the idiot boy?’

‘And a few other degenerates. But we’ll have to leave immediately, before they move on. Six soldiers to carry the box and assist, Ōsugi Misora to entertain me on the way there and the way back. That should be sufficient.’

Chef Amo turned to the door panel, taking a few steps forward before spinning back and performing the most basic of bowing motions. As he did so, some more blood spilled out of his neck wound.

‘Your plan is not satisfactory,’ said Shingen, waiting for Chef Amo to lift his head back up.

‘Which part?’

‘Which part, *daimyō*,’ corrected Atta Ka Yukio, tone austere, eyes glowing a cold shade of yellow.

Chef Amo glanced at him, then at the two green-haired twins at the sides, his right hand making a triangle shape that, in Atta Noe’s natural form, would’ve enacted a seamless transition to purple mist.

‘Yukio is right, your manner is disturbingly informal today.’

‘Sorry, *daimyō*, it is just...difficult...in this body.’

‘Excuses are irrelevant. You will stay here, in your chambers, to rest. In the meantime, I will send four men to retrieve your box, and four in addition to that to deal with the ryokan situation.’

‘I’m sorry, but that will not be adequate...*daimyō*.’

‘Nonsense. Four is more than enough.’

‘Not in this case. There is another presence, at the ryokan. A *Gos Ussu*.’

‘*Gos* who?’

‘A demon, *daimyō*. A notoriously itinerant one.’

‘Territorial?’ interrupted Atta Ka Yukio, giving a quick apologetic bow to Shingen, who waved the insult away with a swish of his hand.

‘In this case, yes. It will expect attack.’

‘Does it have a talisman?’ asked Shingen, trailing a fingernail along his own throat. ‘Something my men can destroy?’

The tall advisor coughed, breaking in ahead of Chef. ‘This kind of demon, *Gos Ussu*, typically choose jewellery as their talisman, daimyō. A ring or necklace perhaps.’

‘Breakable?’

‘On the spot, no, but here in this complex, with the right tools...’

‘Your men will die before they get a foot inside the front door,’ interrupted Chef Amo, wiping off some of the new blood that was still dribbling down his neck. ‘Daimyō.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Atta Ka Yukio took a pale blue rock from one of the apparently telepathic green-haired twins and held it out for Shingen to inspect. ‘This will offer temporary protection.’

‘A lump of rock?’ asked Shingen, confused.

‘It is a symbol of my kind. The *Gos Ussu* will respect it.’

‘But it won’t kill the beast?’

‘In my experience, it is better not to make enemies if it can be avoided, daimyō. I’m sure this demon has no personal enmity towards you.’

Chef Amo swished his right arm through the air and laughed, but lost glee quickly when he remembered it was a human arm and not the mist show he was used to.

‘It is settled then. Four men to the ryokan, four to the box. And they will all dress as merchants, with limited arms.’

‘I will see to it promptly, daimyō.’

‘... ..’ muttered Chef Amo, watching Atta Ka Yukio and his two little disciples slide over to the door panel.

As one of the twins reached for the frame, the panel drew open abruptly and another guard entered with a bowl of seaweed strips in both hands.

‘Over there,’ said Shingen, gesturing towards his father, who was still upright on his little throne, staring at the creases on his left hand.

The guard walked carefully over, clearly terrified of dropping the bowl, and stopped in front of his ex-boss. Hand shaking, he picked up one of the longer seaweed strips and held it out over his lap.

‘Wretch...’ the ex-daimyō shouted and struck the guard with the back of his right hand, deftly using his other hand to retrieve the bowl before it dropped onto the floor.

Observing the scene with blank indifference, Atta Noe checked that the door panel was closed and then moved round to the other side of the map table.

Shingen was concentrating on shrine activity in Shinano province again, so she crept up behind and placed her vessel’s big clumsy paws on the daimyō’s shoulders. Feeling confident, she ran them in firm strokes down his back and then curved back outwards to his waist.

‘Not in that wreck,’ Shingen said curtly, refusing to look up from the map.

‘I can go and change,’ said the purple demon, ‘into something younger.’

‘No, leave it. I don’t have time for workmanlike massages. Go and rest. Wait for your box to come back.’

‘... ..’ she cursed, pupils on fire.

‘What was that?’

‘Of course, Lord Shingen,’ replied Atta Noe, shifting back to Japanese, the roughness of Chef Amo’s voice incongruous with her attempt at being polite. ‘I will go and rest.’

‘Hmm. I’ll have to get a translator for that language of yours one day. From Yukio, perhaps.’

Retracting the seduction hands before they turned into murder hands, Atta Noe looked again at Shingen’s father in the corner. He had just finished licking both sides of a seaweed strip and was now lowering it slowly into his mouth, his boot doing little jab kicks at the guard on the floor.

The former lord of Kai Province.

Existing.

As his usurper son’s pet.

Too disgusted to even shake her host body's head, Atta Noe walked back over to the door panel and knocked on it until a guard opened up.

'Too slow,' she barked, clipping him on the ear as she passed, and then outright growling at Misora, who was leaning against the wall, a strip of seaweed hanging out of her mouth.

'What?' she mumbled, just managing to catch the strip before it dropped to the floor.

'Human idiocy.' Atta Noe continued on down the corridor, using some of the last remaining strength in Chef Amo's sturdy legs to kick the guard at the end in the knee. 'Abject, no brain, human idiocy.'

'Where?'

There was no answer, except for a grumbled *kuso* from the guard.





Miho's head swayed slowly from side to side, matching the slightly dazed warrior-patient chewing the bun on the futon opposite.

His chances of praise were fairly good as it was well known that people who'd been sick had a limited sense of taste...though that could also work against him too, as he might say it was too bland.

Aware he was being observed, Akira finished chewing, made a sour expression like he'd just downed a whole jar of salt, then took another bite.

'It's edible?' asked Miho, leaning forward from the futon, a lilac bonsai plant gripped in his hands as a makeshift good luck charm.

'Better than that blue shit.'

'Sorry?'

'On the path, coming here. The blue chicken bun.'

'Ah, I thought you didn't remember.'

Akira shook his head, putting the rest of the bun Miho had rustled up as an impromptu breakfast into his mouth.

‘Sorry about that. The man who sold it to me said it was Kumamoto style chicken.’

‘It was pale blue.’

‘Yeah, the salesman didn’t mention that part. And I’ve never been to Kumamoto so I wasn’t sure. Actually, to tell the truth, I’ve never been out of Kai Province.’

Akira finished chewing and grabbed the cup of water. ‘What about your money?’

Miho looked down at the bonsai plant. If it had possessed ears, he would’ve covered them.

‘Still got some left, don’t you?’

‘Not exactly. See, there was this belt merchant, just outside of Kōfu. He seemed really kind and welcoming and...’

Akira managed to halt the initial spit of water, but couldn’t stop a little bit dribbling out of the side of his mouth.

‘...basically, he tricked me. I know, everyone finds it very funny, but...I didn’t know there were these kinds of people out here.’ Miho paused, seeing Akira’s eyebrows shoot up. ‘I mean, I knew there were bad guys, cheats, people like this. But I didn’t know they’d be posing as belt merchants. And chicken bun sellers. It’s a bit depressing, actually.’

‘Lesson number one on the road. Never trust a stranger.’

‘No, not just a bit, it’s very depressing.’

‘Or merchants selling niche products.’

‘Makes me feel sad about-...what, merchants? Yeah, of course, I know that now. Since all my money’s gone.’

Akira coughed, then took more of the water. ‘Lesson two. Trust people who smile even less. Same with compliment-givers. And pretty women in loose yukatas.’

‘Hang on...did you say smile less?’

‘Pretty women in tight yukatas too, for that matter.’

‘Wah, that can’t be right. How can you ever meet people if you think smiling is-’

‘Lesson three,’ continued Akira, coughing again. ‘Don’t go out of your way to help people in distress.’

‘Don’t?’

‘Correction. Don’t even look at them. Unless they’re clearly dead. Then you can scavenge their things.’

Miho shot out a hand to gesticulate dramatically, almost dropping his good-luck bonsai plant. ‘This is crazy. Don’t help people? Scavenge?’

‘Lesson four. Never agree to work off debt.’

‘What?’

‘Especially in a ryokan that you’re still lodging in.’

‘Wah...you mean me? That’s not fair, I’m-...I didn’t have any coins to pay her with. Of course I need to work off the debt. You too, as soon as you’re fully recovered. That’s the samurai code that you-’

‘Ashigaru.’

‘Sorry...the ashigaru code...that you live by. Right?’

‘If you mean, do I have a katana, then yes.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Akira laughed, putting down the cup and stretching out his arms in a rising curve. ‘Have you ever seen an ashigaru working in a ryokan?’

Miho opened his mouth and kept it like that, looking for and finding no inspiration from the pink-hued Mt Aino fixed to the wall.

‘If you’re gonna survive out here, Miho, then you’ve gotta toughen up. No more trusting people.’

‘I don’t know...’

‘No, you *do* know. Stop trusting other people. They are not your friends. They do not care about your wellbeing. They will stab you and leave you in a ditch if they think it will benefit them in even a small way.’

‘Does that include you?’

‘Yes, that’s better. Cynicism. Granted, I do partially owe you my life, even if I do still feel like shit physically...and mentally...but I’m telling you now, the next time you come across someone unconscious in the middle of a forest, keep walking...cos they’re probably a bandit. Or a psychopathic purple mist demon, which is a new addition to my list, but still...strangers bad, minding your own business good.’

Miho got up and placed the bonsai plant carefully back on the table, checking its little leaves for any damage he may have caused. Seemed relatively intact. Apart from one or two crumpled branches. And there was a high probability they were supposed to bend like that, according to his brain’s recently opened probability centre.

‘I hope you’re reflecting on what I just said.’

‘You’re right,’ replied Miho, staying near the table, scratching his neck. ‘I will try to become more sceptical after I’ve completed my forty-eight days here. No more helping strangers.’

Akira smiled, waiting for the punchline, but when it didn’t arrive he turned it into a laugh.

‘Isn’t that what you said to do?’ asked Miho, puzzled again.

‘I’m gonna do you a favour...Miho. When I get enough energy back to leave this scam hole, I’m bringing you along too.’

‘But-’

‘For a little while, at least.’

Before Miho could expand on his *but*, there was a knock at the door. Out of instinct, Akira reached for the guard of his katana, gesturing to Miho to grab the cup.

Obviously, the newly sceptical village kid didn't have a clue what the hand signals meant and just slid open the door panel normally, without any defensive posture or weaponry at all.

'Ito-dono,' Miho said, opening the door a little wider.

'I told you, don't call me that,' replied Aya, peeking past Miho's shoulder into the room.

'Wah...sorry, I thought it was Himiko who told me that.'

'She doesn't like it either.'

'Ah, that makes sense, I suppose. What are you doing here?'

Hearing a female voice, Akira kept hold of the blade and poked his face round the side of the wall. 'Yes, what are you doing here?'

Aya pulled back a step when she saw the ashigaru's face, then edged left until most of her body was blocked by Miho.

'I came to tell you something,' she whispered into his neck hair.

'About dinner service?'

'No, different.'

'Aren't you the girl who got kicked by those two ashigaru outside?' asked Akira, rising to his feet and scratching his head

wound with a casual right hand; the other one still gripped onto the guard of his katana.

Aya ignored the remark and moved in closer to Miho's ear. 'I don't think you should go to Room 28.'

'What? Why not?'

'I can't explain. Just don't go. Stay in this room. Okay?'

Miho looked at Aya's forehead and saw little droplets of sweat forming. Not rolling down, just sticking there like stubborn limpets. 'Does this have anything to do with that green light I saw?'

'I have to go, it's getting late. Just keep in mind what I just said, okay?'

'Don't go into Room 28,' Miho repeated, nodding.

'Not under any condition.'

'Err...can I ask why not again?'

'No time, I have to go.'

'Why can't we go into Room 28?' asked Akira, popping up so suddenly beside Miho's shoulder that Aya thought at first that he'd crawled out of it.

'Really no time,' she repeated, and wiped her forehead dry with her yukata sleeve before turning and hurrying off down the corridor.

'That was weird,' said Miho, keeping a hand on the door panel.



‘Puzzling words from a pretty face,’ muttered Akira.

‘What’s that?’

‘Rule number five: truthful women never approach you first.’

Miho frowned, conjuring up the obvious rejoinder in his head; what if they’re a decent person and really do like you? But he didn’t say it. Instead, he slid the door panel back across and headed over to the other one, stepping out onto the balcony. He didn’t have his jacket on so it was a bit cold, but that wasn’t important, and neither was the river frog investigating his bare foot.

He just wanted to see the green light cabin.

‘That’s Room 28?’ asked Akira, following him out, also without his dōbuku, and kicking the frog away. ‘The one that was lit up?’

‘Himiko said it was a luminous green rock causing it. To make guests feel relaxed.’

‘Well, I guess it’s switched off now.’

Akira stretched out his arms again, doing a full scan of the ryokan and its surrounding environment. He wasn’t one for nature, too slow-moving, too unpredictable, but he had to admit that this location was pretty special. Close to the mountains, but not close enough to get attention from bandits, a river that didn’t have drunk ashigaru pissing in it, chickens that apparently knew when to be quiet. The only real pity was that it wasn’t farther away from Kōfu.

‘Wah...there it is. The light again.’

Akira turned along with his outstretched arm, making one of his trademark poor whistling noises as he took in the bright green glow in the cabin across the courtyard.

‘That’s a lot of rock,’ he said, checking back inside the room for his katana.

‘Whoever’s in there must be feeling very relaxed.’

‘Or fucking terrified.’

‘Yeah...’

‘They’re definitely not asleep, that’s for sure.’

Miho added another *yeah* under his breath and continued watching the mildly ethereal light show, Aya’s words riding a chilly breeze down from the mountain and along the balcony railings directly into his brain.

*Don’t go in there.*

*Not under any condition.*

*Can’t explain why.*

*Bye.*

~~~

‘It is a strange thing to say, but in the light of this pregnant moon, you remind me of a woman I once met...many winters past, in the poverty of a fisherman’s shack.’

Tracing the words with her index finger, Himiko blocked out the muffled sounds in the onsen room and continued reading out loud.

‘Turning to her husband of four years, face the colour of mountain ice, the snow woman replied in stark monotone, ‘I warned you not to tell anyone about me.’’

Himiko’s finger stumbled as the muffled sound came closer to the wall before turning into a brief, almost bird-like screech.

She took a breath, looking down at the little creases on the rice paper in her hand, trying not to picture what was happening in the onsen room.

It wasn’t the first time she’d been present for the feeding ritual. That had happened years ago, in Uedara. An ashigaru who’d followed her home and tried to “spear” her in her own rock garden. No pity for that one, or the wretches who came after. They had all had it coming in some way. But this one...

Another bird-like squeal. No, a series of them, the last one answered by a real bird in the trees outside. Then a short respite. Then a cracking noise...like something was being chiselled into.

Letting out a loud breath to cover the din, Himiko went back to the rice paper and instantly felt ten times worse. The guest’s story, a soft romantic fantasy about Yuki Onna coming into the real world and falling for a simple Japanese poet...was so incredibly naïve. And sincere. And the man himself, his general attitude around the

ryokan...incredibly polite, praising Miho's food, asking if she needed help collecting ingredients for meals, offering to go and look for Sachiko when she didn't come back.

All that goodwill and compassion and kindness leading to this end point: evisceration in Room 28. Assisted by her. The devil's accomplice.

She closed her eyes, editing his story into her own black void.

A shy Japanese pervert, lusting after Yuki Onna, overruling her headache complaints and seeking constant sex, reading interminable poetry to her face, slowly, inevitably pushing her into the kitchen and demanding the same soup his mother used to make, night after night after night after-

'It is done,' came a voice, forcing her out of her cope hole and back onto the tatami floor space of Room 28.

The man in the green yukata was standing in the doorway to the onsen room, the skin of the kind poet guest hanging loose from his left hand.

Somehow, she didn't vomit. Not even the rehearsal of it.

'How was his poetry?'

'What?'

'Or was it a novel?'

‘Ah, you mean this.’ Himiko raised the rice paper up an inch, barely qualifying as a gesture. ‘Nonsense. Perverted drivel. Overwritten.’

‘Good. A small mercy for you, at least.’

‘For both of us.’

The man in the green yukata dropped the skin on the floor and put six fingertips against his forehead. Making something akin to ragged breath noises, he started to move his face in tiny circles.

‘Bring the other two in one hour,’ he said, finally. ‘Another two hours after that, the girl.’

Himiko glanced down at the story, the skin of its writer still visible from the corner of her eye. ‘Are you sure you need her too?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know, you look quite satiated. Radiant eyes, no creases...’

The man removed the fingertips from his forehead and stretched them forward, the fingers themselves seeming to grow an extra inch. ‘If you understood what was coming, you would not hesitate in this fashion.’

‘What exactly is coming again?’ asked Himiko, staring at his fingertips.

‘Atashhka. An unusually wild type.’

‘Just one?’

‘Coming this far, without her box. Inexperience perhaps.’

‘Okay, but...she’s still a demon...that you can potentially defeat.
Right?’

Pulling back elongated fingers, the man bobbed his head rhythmically, the outline of his shape glowing diluted green. ‘On a full stomach. With certain tools. Yes.’

‘Without destroying our ryokan?’

‘Certainly. My love.’



CHAPTER 16

FEEDING TIME IN ROOM 28

With the sun dipping down below the mountain to the west, and the sky phasing into a hazy pink, the Jewel of Kai Ryokan looked almost magical.

That's what Miho thought as he walked across the courtyard, luggage sack slung over his shoulder, with Akira doing a fairly good impression of a wounded soldier two yards ahead of him.

'Hope you've got enough energy for the steps,' Himiko said back to them, cleverly avoiding the danger of addressing the ashigaru directly.

'Might need a shoulder to lean on,' replied Akira, blowing out his cheeks.

'Shoulder?'

'Or a firm waist to grip onto.'

Himiko stopped a little higher up, and looked down at Miho. 'You want to carry your friend?'

'I was thinking of a more feminine touch,' countered the ashigaru.

'What?'

'Feminine. Moody-looking. Name beginning with H.'

Himiko muttered under her breath and turned back to the steps. Catching up to Akira, who was starting to lose the feigned hobble, Miho tapped him on the shoulder and whispered, 'I don't think she's available.'

'You mean she's fucking that guy in the green yukata?'

'Err...who?'

'Doesn't matter. I don't like her much anyway. Tried to poison me with that garbage medicine. Con artist too...saying I had to work off some imaginary debt. And forcing you to actually do it.'

Miho shot back, 'not forced,' and kept moving, wiping his hand against the side of his luggage sack.

'Does have a nice shape to her though,' added Akira to the hawfinch sitting on a branch nearby.

~~~

The door panel to Room 28 was a little different from the one in their old room.

Instead of a blank sheet of rice paper, there were green swirls stencilled on, and something that looked like a giant red spider lily dancing in flames.

'Pretty,' said Miho, hand paused on the frame.

‘Artistic wank,’ replied Akira as he shuffled past, looking left through a tiny gap into the onsen room then coming to a stop between Himiko and the bigger of the two futons.

‘You can leave the panel open,’ said Himiko to Miho, who pulled his hand off the frame and continued on into the main room.

‘Well, this is it then,’ said Akira, doing a full rotation plus appraisal, while also making another weak attempt at a whistling noise. ‘The luxurious Room 28.’

‘We don’t use such grand words,’ replied Himiko, moving away from Akira and back towards the panel guarding the onsen room.

‘Don’t blame you. Definitely not the biggest room I’ve ever seen.’ He stepped on the futon, pressing down hard with his feet. ‘Not the softest bed either.’

‘You’ll get used to it.’

‘Actually, we don’t mind going back to the other room,’ said Miho, still holding on tight to his luggage.

‘Don’t be silly, this is an upgrade. For our talented new chef.’

‘Our luggage isn’t unpacked yet, it’s no problem.’

‘Then unpack it. And get comfortable, for gods’ sake.’

‘Listen to the woman, little chef,’ said Akira, putting his feet back on the tatami. ‘Put your luggage down, warm up the onsen, enjoy yourself.’

‘But-’

‘Appreciate the moment.’ Akira walked up to Miho’s shoulder, and whispered as soft as he could manage into his ear. ‘Because we’ll be gone by tomorrow morning.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Of course I am. I’m an experienced samurai.’

‘Ashigaru,’ Himiko mumbled, adding a fake smile when Akira picked up on it.

Moving over to the futon that hadn’t been trampled on, Miho dropped his luggage sack on the tatami beside it and performed his own scan. It had pretty much the same theme as their room; painting of a snowy mountain, water bucket, an *okiandon* that wasn’t yet lit and a wisteria bonsai tree on the desk. No sign of any luminous green rocks.

Maybe they were stored in the other room?

Akira seemed to be thinking the same thing as he walked over to the balcony and checked both corners outside. ‘Now, where are all these green rocks I’ve been hearing about?’

‘Storage,’ Himiko replied in a brusque tone, giving Miho a puzzled look as he edged closer to the onsen room

‘There’s a hissing noise,’ he said, putting an ear closer to the shoji screen.

‘Comes from the spring. Underground.’

‘It’s quite loud.’

‘Not really.’

Miho put a hand on the frame of the door panel and was about to pull it across when someone beat him to it. In one smooth motion, the screen slid to the other side of the wall, stopping about a hundredth of a millimetre from hitting it.

‘Err...hello,’ stuttered Miho.

Standing in the newly revealed space was a strange figure; ostensibly the same tall man in a green yukata he’d spotted around the ryokan a few times, but close up, as Miho was then, he appeared more like a golem that had yet to be coloured in. Eyes buried somewhere in cavernous sockets, neck waxy-looking, hair with the faintest tint of green dye.

And when his mouth opened, it looked almost abstract, his teeth scattered about as separate blocks instead of part of a functioning human jaw.

‘Ah, you *are* real,’ said Akira from the other side of the room, tapping his temple. ‘Thought you were a hallucination.’

‘You can leave now, Himiko,’ the mouth said, as the hands slid the door to the onsen room back across.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked, glancing at Miho, then at Akira, who surprisingly was not edging a hand towards his katana guard.

‘It is late and you have other duties to perform. I will show them around.’

‘Around what?’ asked Akira, gesturing to the walls. ‘We’re already here.’

The hissing noise that was apparently a spring underground grew louder, providing a nuisance to no one except Miho, who backed away from the onsen room and the odd-looking man next to it, and said, ‘can you not hear that?’

‘Perhaps I was too hasty,’ said the man in the green yukata, turning his back on the ashigaru and flashing his pupils shock-green at Himiko. ‘You may stay.’

Himiko blinked and looked down, startled to see her hand clutching the green necklace. In the background, the hissing noise changed pitch, morphing into something akin to a squeal.

‘It is, of course, your choice.’

She rubbed the stone in the necklace between her fingers, raising her head three separate times to look at Miho, before finally giving up and closing her eyes completely.

‘How about you both leave?’ said Akira, moving closer, still not concerned enough to reach for his weapon. ‘Or you leave and she can stay. As long as she stops glaring at me like a fanatic.’

‘Think of it as a gift,’ the man in the green yukata continued, moving in close to Himiko, running a green-tinged finger down the string of her necklace.

‘The boy,’ she muttered back, eyes remaining shut.

‘Annoyingly curious.’

‘He’s-’

In the onsen room, the hissing-squealing noise ceased abruptly, allowing Miho to finally let his shoulders drop in relief.

It lasted about three seconds.

Taking his hand away from what looked like Himiko’s chest, the man in the green yukata turned in a sliding motion and glided as if on the back of an invisible hawk over to Akira.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’

‘Magick.’

‘Kuso! Get back to your own-’

The man held his palm up in front of Akira’s eyes and, with *Ebisu* knows what power, mesmerised him into silence with a dose of green light.

‘Hey,’ said Miho, taking a step forward.

A few more seconds and the green faded out, leaving the ashigaru swaying lethargically from side to side.

‘What did you do?’

Ignoring the boy, the man in the green yukata clamped a hand down on the ashigaru’s shoulder, steadying his rocking motion, as the hissing noise restarted in the background.

That seemed to spark something in Akira’s brain, his hand reflexively swatting away the pinch and putting his own grip on the attacker’s throat.

‘What the...’ he slurred as the man stared back at him, the outline of the hair, the eyes, the eye sockets, all translucent green.

‘Akira,’ muttered Miho, hand rising up slowly as if he were asking permission to speak.

‘Fucking hand...’ Akira managed, as the man’s neck became moist, impossible to grip onto, and, after another sharp flash of green light, he pushed Akira’s hand away, clamping his own luminous paw back down on the ashigaru’s shoulder.

This time it was stronger, more assertive, like a whole mountain castle was weighing down on him and he had no choice but to drop to the floor and-

‘Himiko,’ shouted Miho, waving frenzied arms at her.

‘No, no, no, no,’ she mumbled, putting her forehead against the painting of the snow-covered Mt. Togakushi, eyes shut tight.

‘What’s happening?’

‘Attack...’ slurred Akira, trying to rotate his shoulder back into shape.

‘What?’

‘Hit him...fight...’

‘How?’

‘Gods on a-’

Sliding one knee back, Akira reached for his katana guard, but the green man read the move and intercepted, gripping his wrist and twisting.

The snap of Akira’s bone and his muffled scream were both lost to the intensifying hissing noise from the onsen room. Turning again to Himiko, Miho opened his mouth to say *help*...and closed it almost apologetically when he saw she still had her eyes closed.

Weapon, he thought. Break the man’s grip before he-

Miho glanced over at the green man’s current status and regretted it instantly. What he’d initially, and correctly, doubted to be a human mouth was now stretching to twice its normal size and lowering itself gently onto the top of Akira’s skull, the fringes of it spewing out yet more green, glowy shit.

‘Stop,’ Miho protested, rooted to the spot in confusion.

Either oblivious or uninterested, the green *thing* continued, pinning down Akira by the shoulder, gripping his non-broken wrist to



prevent the ashigaru from going for his katana again, trying out different spots on the skull before, finally, chomping down for the opening bite.

Surprisingly, there was no scream from Akira, just muffled groans, as the demon...did *something* to his head. It wasn't clear what, but there was a thin stream of blood crawling down Akira's forehead, and strips of green, flashing aurora bursting out from in and around his hair.

'Stop,' shouted Miho, finally snapping out of his funk and flinging a pillow at the green man's head.

It connected...and changed absolutely nothing.

The biting of Akira's skull continued, his muffled groans turning into wails as a second stream of blood flowed down past his ear.

Moving round the perimeter of the attack, Miho grabbed the only thing grabbable, the wisteria bonsai tree, and threw it at the green man's head.

This was slightly more promising, as the demon paused for a moment...glanced down at the bonsai tree...then shrugged and went back to feeding.

Reviving a little, Akira tried again to draw his katana, but the green man once more swatted his hand away. 'Shall I break this one too?' he said, the Japanese speech barely recognisable as human.

Before Akira could answer, a flying *okiandon* hit the green man on the side of his head and, for the first time in the struggle, affected him in a tangible way.

He rubbed his head, woundless, then turned on Miho. ‘Request granted.’

‘Get off him,’ Miho shouted, then added a ‘sorry, what?’ on the end when he heard the green man’s line.

He soon understood.

Climbing back onto his invisible hawk, the green man slid directly across the tatami to Miho’s cheek and latched on like a keelback, instantly beginning the process of excavation.

Abstract teeth, thought Miho, as an intense, suffocating pain hit the left side of his face, not sharp and stinging, more like a giant clamp slowly crushing his skull.

‘No, you fucking don’t,’ said Akira, the tip of his katana bursting through the green man’s stomach and missing Miho’s chest by a millimetre.

‘Off me,’ was all Miho could sputter as the green man released his cheek and stared down at the blade sticking out.

On the other side of the room, Himiko opened one eye and let out a feral *RAAARRR*.

The hissing noise, which had been rhythmic for a while, stopped.

‘Okay, now let’s try the head,’ said Akira, drawing his katana back out, darting back a step then swinging.

This time the green man was ready for him; closing the distance in one quick glide and seizing the katana by its guard, then picking up Akira by the neck and throwing him against the wall.

Either due to shoddy workmanship or the general thinness of the material used, the wooden panels of the wall collapsed and a splashing noise followed as Akira landed in the onsen tub next door.

‘Kuso,’ sounded out almost immediately, along with more splashing sounds and, ‘it’s fucking boiling in here.’

Checking his cheek for giant bite holes, Miho held out his other arm in makeshift defence as the green man staggered towards him...then dropped it a little when he started coughing.

‘... ..’ came out in some alien language, along with several shots of bile.

The stomach wound, thought Miho, looking at the dark stain on the green man’s yukata. It worked?

More splashing from the onsen, another yell of, ‘too fucking hot,’ and then Akira’s face appeared at the new hole in the wall. ‘Is he dead yet?’

The green man responded by cough-gliding over to Himiko and collapsing against her chest. In another time, it would’ve been

vaguely erotic, but the demon was still vomiting up bile, as well as emitting more-erratic-than-usual jets of green light.

‘Your stomach,’ Himiko said, reaching a hand down to touch it.

The demon swatted her hand away and seized the necklace, snapping the string in two. Coughing onto her chest a final time, he reeled backwards into the edge of the shoji screen, then vanished without even a ‘pfft’ sound into the mist of the onsen room.

# CHAPTER 17

## BEYOND THE RABBIT HOLE



for some reason we're hysterical

‘Katana,’ shouted Akira, poking a dripping wet yukata sleeve through the hole in the wall and jabbing wildly at the floor.

Pulling back the hand from his cheek, Miho wiped away the already smeared blood on the door frame and then went for the blade. It was odd, there was a pale, slightly viscous kind of green residue coated on its surface, which had to be the green man’s blood.

What else could it be?

Stomach bile?

‘Faster, faster,’ shouted Akira, waving his arm frantically.

‘Coming.’

Miho hurried past Himiko’s statue impersonation and then stopped, for some reason turning back to say, ‘sorry about the damage.’ This appeared to be the correct code word as the hostel owner instantly re-activated, shoving Miho into the door panel as she rushed into the onsen room, screaming, ‘don’t leave me, wait, not yet, don’t go.’

The sound of her ranting got fainter, and less whiny, and quickly developed an echo effect, which didn’t make any sense at all...until

Miho made it through to the steam-tinted room and saw one of the panels on the far wall slid to the side.

‘I’m going in,’ said Akira, taking the katana from Miho with his right hand and instantly dropping it like a hot lump of coal on the floor. ‘Kuso!’

‘The green gooey stuff?’

‘My wrist...gonna have to use the left.’ Akira bent down and stopped a moment, waiting for the floor to stop spinning, then picked up the katana guard with his unbroken hand. ‘What the hell’s all this green slime shit?’

‘That’s what I said, the green gooey stuff.’

‘Looks like it’s come out of an ogre’s ass. Kuso.’

‘Must be the green man’s blood.’

Akira put a hand against Miho’s calf and used it as leverage to pull himself up, then went over to the boiling onsen pool and dipped in his blade. He held it there for at least three seconds then pulled it back out and said *kuso* again.

‘Why is not coming off?’ he moaned, dipping it in once more, this time for ten, fifteen seconds before extracting.

Didn’t matter, the result was still the same.

‘Gods, I’m gonna eviscerate that slidey, green fucker,’ he said, spitting in the pool and turning back to the secret wall panel.

‘We’re still going in there?’ asked Miho, picking up a face towel from the floor and handing it to Akira, who swatted it away in favour of poking his pale green katana into the darkness of the apparent cave passage.

‘Obviously.’

‘But your yukata, it’s soaking wet...and your wrist is hurt.’

‘It’ll dry. And I’ve still got my left hand.’

‘Can you fight with that?’

‘Against a trained opponent, no. Against a gravely wounded, green thing...no problem. Besides, he almost bit my head off...can’t let that go without some kind of rebuttal.’

‘And Himiko?’

‘Kuso...this isn’t an interview, come on. Before they get too far.’

‘Too far to where?’

Akira shook his head as if the answer were obvious then vanished into the darkness, giving Miho a simple choice to make. Run after a demon who’d just tried to eat his entire face, weapon-less, or walk out the door over there and get the hell out of this nightmare.

Or at the very least, go back to the ryokan lobby and wait for the results to come in.



Logically, there was only one option...leave...but if he did that then Akira would be enraged when he came back. And call him a coward. Maybe stab him in the leg too.

If he came back at all...

Miho rubbed his cheek again, the even more distant sounds of Himiko shouting, 'wait, wait,' drowning out the hissing noise, which he now realised was coming from the onsen water itself, and...wait, on the side, wasn't that a gigantic spoon?

He stepped across to the tub, investigating.

It was. A pretty sturdy-looking spoon too. Could do some damage if the other guy wasn't expecting anything...

Another faint shout from beyond the wall, Himiko requesting a biscuit on the other side.

Biscuit?

Ah, probably misheard.

Picking up the spoon and slashing it through the air like he'd seen other kids in the village do, Miho took a deep breath of mostly onsen steam and headed into the secret passage.

It was dark instantly, the light from Room 28 a fading dot as he advanced in a very rough straight line.

'Which way is it? Where are you?' he shouted into the darkness ahead, getting a closer than expected grunt from the ashigaru.

‘Wah, I thought you were running.’

‘Stop yelling, you’ll alert them,’ he whispered, taking Miho by his yukata sleeve and pulling him forward, accompanied by sounds of suppressed pain as his wrist started to throb.

‘It’s okay, I can hold onto your sleeve,’ said Miho, giving space for confirmation before making the switch.

Akira grunted, then continued his update. ‘They’re up ahead, maybe a hundred, two hundred metres. Hard to say exactly. One of them must know the way through this place...or there’s only one tunnel. Not sure. But it’s gonna be tough to attack in this level of darkness.’

‘I found a big spoon in the onsen room,’ said Miho, redundantly holding up his makeshift weapon.

‘To eat him with?’

‘No...it was the only thing I could see in there.’

‘Fine. A spoon. Just stay close behind me.’

‘Okay.’

‘Unless I’m pinned down, then you get the fucker off me.’

‘Like just now.’

‘Yeah, but faster. None of that pillow throwing shit, okay?’

‘Sorry, I was still in shock, I didn’t-’

Akira put his hand over Miho's mouth and pulled them both back against the cave wall. Then groaned once more in pain and let go.

'Fucking wrist...'

'You should stop using it so much.'

'Yeah. Nice idea.'

'At least until we get it in a bandage.'

'Over there,' said Akira, clearly getting tired of injury talk.

Miho pushed his face forward an inch and squinted.

Up ahead was a faint green glow, seemingly indicating a turn in the path. And possibly the green man himself.

'Let's go,' whispered Akira, tugging lightly on Miho's sleeve.

Edging forward with their backs tight to the wall, and grumbling quietly every time they scraped against a jagged shelf, they quickly reached the corner, which was, in fact, more of gradual curve, and breathed out in relief.

The green light wasn't a whole group of demons prepping for a ryokan massacre, it was just a random series of mineral-type fragments embedded within the cave wall.

'Got a bit of light now, good,' said Akira, moving ahead.

'All this is really inside the mountain?'

‘Looks like it. Probably leads out somewhere...though I’m guessing our demon friend won’t be there yet.’

‘Maybe Himiko’s carrying him?’

‘Yeah, Miss Honey Trap. Fucking traitor.’

Miho looked left at one of the luminous green fragments and pictured it hanging round Himiko’s neck. *It’s not her fault* was the default response in his head, but then he remembered how she’d just stood there, closing her eyes tight as both he and Akira were being devoured.

Or bitten into.

*Devoured* implied one huge chomp, and they hadn’t-

‘Come on, I can hear voices,’ cut in Akira, sparing Miho’s sleeve this time and offering instead a brief hand beckoning gesture.

Miho left the green rock slice, plus his Himiko defence, and followed a few feet behind the soaking wet guy with the green-stained katana and broken wrist. The newly-discovered light source helped a lot as they didn’t need to worry about tripping over any rocks or getting their zori stuck in a crack, or the worst case scenario, slipping down a crevice and falling into a lost land of dinosaurs.

Ha, that was River Bitch’s theory. A lost paradise of herbivores and reformed meat eaters who wouldn’t bother humans if we didn’t bother them. Of course, no one in the village ever believed it, but,

now that he'd seen two demons in less than a week, maybe it wasn't too far-fetched.

‘Are you daydreaming?’

Miho blinked, seeing an empty cave in front of him.

‘Over here.’

He adjusted to the voice and turned right, just in time to see Akira ducking behind a huge rock jutting out from the wall. Beyond that were voices; Himiko begging someone to take her with him, and the other replying in gibberish.

‘He’s delirious,’ said Akira, as Miho crouched down beside him. ‘I looked round and he was fondling the green bits on the wall.’

‘What about Himiko?’

‘Pulling on his yukata, whining a lot. Gods, if she weren’t so sultry-looking, I’d stab her first, just for being such a pushover.’

Miho flinched, scratching his cheek with his onsen spoon. Did that mean Akira wasn’t going to kill her? Or that he wasn’t going to kill her first?

‘Okay, I think we’ve done enough surveillance.’

Akira moved out from the rock and shook some of the onsen drops off the left sleeve of his yukata as he honed in on his prey.

Sending the signal for his legs to move, some other part of Miho disobeyed as he stayed precisely where he was, switching the spoon to his neck for further scratching.

There was about to be two murders.

In cold blood.

One of them a woman who'd said his cooking was good.

He closed his eyes and pretended he was back in the kitchen, asking Aya why Chef Amo was angry all the time. Then he went back further, back home, to the bank of the river where he first met Yuki...the hem of her yukata pulled up to her knees as she waded suicidally through the icy water.

*Would you like to join me for a swim?*

A noise from up ahead, a whoosh sound as if a waterfall had just crashed through the cave walls, chased quickly by a feral scream from Himiko.

'Don't leave me here,' she wailed, the *here* part eaten up by sobbing sounds.

There was no blocking that out, and Miho didn't even try, pulling his spoon close to his side and pushing out from behind the rock.

*If I die, kuso.*

*If I live, get out of here, find Yuki asap.*

*If I suffer an injury of some sort...improvise.*

Rounding the corner at jogging monk speed, he bumped straight into Akira's frozen twin and reflexively whacked him on the neck with his onsen spoon.

'What are you doing?' he asked, noticing the tip of the ashigaru's katana was pushed down into the cave floor.

Akira didn't answer, he just stared zombie-like, dead ahead.

Miho followed his line of sight, putting an arm up to mitigate the bright light streaming hardcore at his eyes, and was just about able to make out Himiko's arm and face disintegrating into tiny flecks of human dust.

'What-'

'Dead,' replied Akira, barely above a murmur. 'Both of them.'

The light started to dim, giving them a clearer view as the remaining half of Himiko – the part still planted to the cave floor - was sucked into the same thing that had been painted onto the door panel of Room 28; a giant, luminous red spider lily.

'That's...' Miho mumbled, vaguely lifting his arm.

Before he could add any kind of description, even a basic caveman grunt of *big, red thing*, the glowing portal flashed out five bright pulses then folded in on itself and vanished.

In its place, a generic cave interior appeared. Or returned. And from the tunnel to the left, an echoed growling noise that sounded like an annoyed bear.

‘Time to leave,’ said Akira, tucking the green-blood katana back into his belt.

‘What was that red-’

‘Right now.’





**CHAPTER 18**  
**MIGHT AS WELL CUT OFF**  
**MY OWN HEAD**

Stepping back through the hidden panel into the onsen room, Akira went straight to the tub and, using his non-injured hand, splashed water on his face.

‘Kuso...it’s still boiling.’

Miho appeared a couple of seconds behind him, brain clearly stuck with the glowing red spider lily madness in the cave as he replied monotone, ‘try washing your face.’

‘Snap out of it, the lunacy happened five minutes ago.’

‘Sorry...’

‘Don’t say sorry, just get your bag and go.’

‘Back to our old room?’

Akira stared at Miho as if he were one of those *Lost Land of Dinosaurs Under The Earth* nuts, then shifted his gaze to the onsen spoon hanging loosely from his hand.

‘Honestly, I don’t know if I can sleep after that. I mean, Himiko, she just-’

‘Got exactly what she deserved,’ barked Akira, grabbing Miho by the yukata sleeve and pulling him through to the main room.

‘Standing like a fucking statue while that psycho green thing tried to

bite my head off. Kuso...scalp still feels weird. Itchy. Infected maybe.'

Miho touched the wound on his cheek, vaguely aware that a luggage sack was being shoved into his arms by Akira.

'We'll go down to the lobby, see what we can salvage. Make a splint for this messed up wrist here. Then...' Akira paused at the door panel, looking back at the ashigaru-shaped hole in the wall. 'Ah, no choice now. We need to get out of Kai province fast, both of us. Head up to Suwa.'

'Salvage?' asked Miho, standing in the middle of the room, staring past Akira at the red spider lily sketch on the shoji screen.

'Okay, we'll leave that part until you're conscious again. For now, the lobby. Brain on, move.'

Scratching at his scalp again, Akira hurried off towards the steps outside...then ten seconds later popped his head back round the side of the door panel.

'Faster than that. And please...drop the fucking spoon.'

Confused, Miho looked down at the hand with the luggage, then the other hand, and slowly pieced together what he was being asked.

It was tough. His boss had just disintegrated inside a glowing flower hole. And a green demon had tried to bite his cheek off. And no matter how many times he'd blinked on the journey back through the cave, the dream hadn't ended.

This was the real world.

With demons of varying colour.

Dishonest belt merchants.

Samurai who were actually ashigaru, saying the word *salvage* instead of *steal*.

Girlfriend missing gods knows where.

Miho blinked again, dropped the spoon.

Okay then.

Reality.

This ryokan horror show.

For Yuki's sake.

~~~

The courtyard was lit pleasantly by the moon and completely ignored as Akira and Miho hurried across its well-manicured, snow-flecked dirt, through the open entrance of the ryokan lobby.

As expected, the place was deserted, though Himiko had made the effort to light the various okiandon dotted around before leading them into the death trap of Room 28.

Keeping the non-broken hand on his katana guard, Akira took the fastest route to the main desk and immediately disappeared beneath it.

Rummaging sounds could be heard as Miho sat down on the nearest rolled-futon and again pictured Himiko's face breaking into dust-like pieces. In some of the recreations, he tried to reach out and save her, but then his arm disintegrated too, so he stopped doing that and instead stood at a safe distance, hand raised a little bit, mouth letting out a whimpered, 'Himiko, look out.'

Finally, the scene changed itself entirely, with Himiko morphing into Aya and the muteness of the glowing spider lily becoming the sounds of someone rifling through drawers, looking for *salvage*.

Re-initialising the lobby environment, Miho took a moment to adjust then stood up and started walking to the cabin rooms. 'We should find Aya,' he said, vaguely in the direction of the main desk, 'let her know what's happened.'

A grunting noise came back in return.

'Actually, she could be hurt herself. I mean, she did try to warn us. Maybe the green demon found out and-'

'Forget about the sponge.' Akira shot back up from behind the desk, holding a wooden box in his hand. 'She's probably in on it too.'

'No, she tried to warn us, she came to our-'

'Which means she knew what was going on. And did nothing.'

'I don't think that's what-'

'Fucking silent accomplice. The worst kind of coward. She's lucky I don't go up there and cut her legs off.'

‘She’s not an accomplice. And I *am* going to find her. You can stay here and fiddle with your *salvage*.’

Akira put the box down on the table and tilted his head at Miho. ‘Ah, the rabbit found his teeth. Okay, fine, you go and fetch her, see what she’s got to say for herself.’

‘I’ll be back in a few minutes.’

‘And grab a pillowcase for my splint while you’re there. Rope too.’

‘You can make a splint out of that?’

‘My grandma’s very own recipe. Go, go.’

‘What if there’s no rope?’

‘Rope substitute. Anything.’

Miho nodded despite not really understanding and walked to the corridor leading out to the first block of cabins, then stopped abruptly and put his hand on the wall frame. ‘You’ll definitely still be here?’

It was a futile question as Akira was now loudly shoving a pin into the lock of the wooden box, his face coloured with the same lunatic determination that the green demon had shown when biting into the ashigaru’s skull.

Probably won’t answer a second time either, Miho thought, facing the corridor and moving forward, relieved that it wasn’t quite

as dark as the tunnel that had led to Himiko's face and arm crumbling off.

No, stop thinking about it, he ordered himself.

It's done.

And Akira's half right, she did deserve it.

Kind of.

To a degree.

As long as he held tight to the image of Himiko with her back turned, listening to their death screams.

Yeah, she deserved it.

Mostly.

~~~~~

Unlike the box containing the sadistic purple psycho either posing as or existing as Atta Noe, the ryokan money safe was sealed airtight.

Akira had broken three pins in four minutes trying to jimmy it open and the fourth wasn't faring much better.

It's like it wasn't even a lock.

Or it wasn't acting like a normal lock should be acting.

He stopped, looking around the lobby. Maybe the money wasn't in the box at all. Maybe it was hidden behind one of those generic

mountain landscape paintings. Or some other place that regular people wouldn't notice.

Walking back around the desk, Akira sized up the lobby as one big theatre set then started ticking off all the names on his internal list.

Futons? No.

Floorboards? Too awkward.

Under the doormat? Too obvious.

He paused, glancing at a painting of Lake Suwa with a giant tear along the side of the shore [the same one he'd damaged two days earlier].

But what if it isn't obvious, he counter-thought.

That cold...quite good-looking...psycho could have known thieves would dismiss the easier places, spots that only amateurs would check, and hid the money there on purpose.

Or was that overthinking it?

He ran his finger along the rip in the painting, wondering which clumsy oaf had caused such improbable damage. Then switched back to Himiko, making an attempt at evaluating her psyche, what kind of thinker she was, whether she matched her cold exterior internally or put it up as a façade.

It was difficult, he'd only known her a short while, and, unlike Miho, she was very guarded. Very austere. Even asking if they had



enough energy to get up those steps to Room 28 had felt like a judgment.

His finger went under the tear, digging up more of the well-painted slope.

Outside, something crashed to the ground.

Probably a sign knocked over by the wind, he thought, still lost in his Himiko assessment.

Ah, Himiko...

There was one emotional aspect. When she ran after the green demon, she'd called out a Japanese name. No, not called...wailed it. Then got ground up into dust for him. Fed guests from her own ryokan to an inhuman sociopath. Not a good way to build up a business. Which meant she couldn't have really cared about the business, only the guy pretending to run it with-

He stopped, the crash from a few moments earlier knocking on the walls of his brain.

Wait, what wind?

There wasn't even a slight breeze when he'd-

Footsteps on the creaky floorboard by the entrance told him he was an idiot. Spinning quickly, left hand reaching for his katana guard, he modified instantly to *dead idiot*.

Three samurai, definitely not ashigaru, were stood opposite, two of them already edging shiftily round the side of the lobby to cage him in.

He recognised the shifter on the left, but couldn't recall his name. Hopefully that fogginess was mutual. The other two must've been transfers, brought in after the Imagawa alliance.

'Kotoku-dono?' the one by the entrance said, dusting absolutely nothing off the sleeves of his yellow-patterned dōbuku but performing the act anyway.

Akira did his best squint, then smiled and moved his injured hand up to his belt. 'Wah, for a minute there I thought I was in trouble.'

'Name?'

'Ōsugi-dono. Travelling in from Uedara...getting a bit of fresh mountain air away from all those annoying town folk.'

The yellow-patterned samurai finished dusting and pulled down the ends of his sleeves. Then removed his dōbuku completely and placed it carefully on the futon to his left.

'You're a talented liar,' said the samurai he half recognised, now perched by the main desk, glancing at the wooden box laying on its side, plus the four slightly bent pins next to it. 'If I didn't know you by sight, I may have believed you.'

‘Well then...for that compliment, I shall kill you last,’ replied Akira, side-eyeing the door to the cabins and muttering *kuso* as another samurai appeared, his katana already half out of the scabbard.

‘No attempt to deny it?’

‘To four cowards pinning down one guy? Nope. Besides, I kinda fancy my chances, to be honest.’

‘Shabby ashigaru,’ the yellow-patterned samurai said, virtually spitting it out.

Keeping his injured hand near the katana guard, Akira smirked like a tree god for the crowd and mapped out his options. Drained from the green demon attack, sprained wrist on his fighting arm, no back-up. Survival was unlikely, but if he could confuse them, keep them off guard then perhaps...

Outside, a bird made a whistling sound, better than any Akira had ever done.

Using it as a signal from *above*, he launched into action, gripping the tear in the painting next to him, ripping off the shore section and throwing it roughly towards the samurai blocking the corridor exit.

Then, with the injured hand stuck to his guard, he charged across the middle of the lobby, aiming about three feet to the left of the complimentary samurai, and pointed forward like a lunatic at the desk and saying, ‘now, press it, press it.’

It was complete nonsense, yet it almost worked.

Altering course at the very last millisecond, he bit down on the pain, drew the katana with his bad wrist and swiped upwards at the complimentary samurai's neck...connecting with the smallest of scratches as his opponent pulled back, falling onto the table behind him.

If it had been one on one, or even one on two, Akira would've had him, but the other two at the sides had already closed the distance and any move he made to finish off the scratched samurai would leave him wide open. And if they'd guessed by his sloppy stroke that his wrist was sprained...then he might as well cut his own head off and roll into a box cos he'd be done.

Unless...

Could that work?

He played out the scenarios, trying to kill off his own hope.

Nah, it was futile. Impossible. Worth a shot.

Reaching back, he picked up the wooden safe box with his non-sprained hand and flung it at the samurai closing in on the left. Out of pure luck, it hit him with only a slight deflection on the temple, and that was enough.

Akira leapt two deft steps in the same direction and poked his green-tinged blade down into the complimenting samurai's stomach, grimacing in unison as his wrist folded over.

Ride it through, he told himself, turning the moan into a battle cry and extracting his katana.

As expected, there was movement, an attack.

He darted back into open space and turned on the right-side samurai, who had no choice but to halt his own charge forward and adopt a defensive posture.

‘Hold back, hold,’ said the yellow-patterned samurai, closing the distance from the middle. ‘He’s desperate, don’t fall for his tricks. Protect the kitchen exit.’

Both samurai nodded, as the fallen one clutched his stomach wound and made groaning sounds.

Kuso...stalemate again, thought Akira, the throbbing pain in his wrist making it harder and harder to keep his katana steady.

Which in this case meant death.

Cos there’s no way I’m beating three of them.

Not in this state.

‘You’re done for, ashigaru,’ said the yellow-coated samurai, flicking a hand at the other two and moving forward. ‘You and your weird green blade.’

‘Still got the gods,’ replied Akira, his katana finally giving up and dropping.

‘Do you now?’

‘Some of them.’

‘How about you introduce them to us then?’

‘Yeah.’

Akira tried to raise the katana back up, but it wouldn’t budge.

‘We’re waiting.’

‘Give it a few seconds.’

‘For what, *Ebisu* on a nine-tailed *kitsune*?’

The question wasn’t left hanging long as the samurai to the right let out a shriek and then plunged face-first onto the tatami. In the space behind him stood Miho, staring in shock at the portable lantern in his own hand.

‘Fucking madman,’ Akira blurted out, his voice almost cracking in elation.

‘Couldn’t find Aya,’ Miho mumbled, for some reason addressing the yellow-patterned samurai.

‘Who are you, boy?’

It was said in such a genuine, sharp tone that Akira almost didn’t notice the slight flicker of the yellow-patterned samurai’s left thumb.

*Almost.*

Pivoting left, raising the green katana up in vague defence, Akira knew straight away he was done. The samurai to the left had moved

too fast, swatting away Akira's katana then jabbing forward. Somehow, with almost preternatural instinct, Akira managed to dodge the blow, swerving to the right...but his opponent seemed to half-expect this as he ditched his sword and hit Akira with a left hand to the gut, and then a swift follow up to the back of the skull.

Miho was still glaring at the portable lantern he'd just used to crack the invader over the head, and when the yellow-patterned samurai walked over to him, he held it up again and mumbled a genuine, 'sorry.'

'You're with him? The ashigaru?'

'What? No, I was just-'

The yellow-patterned samurai let Miho get as far as the *no* then kicked him in the shin.

Miho dropped the lantern and bent over, rubbing his leg and saying, 'why there?' as the samurai brought his katana guard down on the side of his temple.

The tatami welcomed Miho into unconsciousness, his head landing on the samurai's foot before being quickly shaken off.

Satisfied, the yellow-patterned samurai moved over to his fallen comrade, who was still busy acting out his death throes, and told him to die with honour.

Nodding, the injured man reduced his groaning to muffled grunts.

‘Is he out?’ the yellow-patterned samurai asked, joining his other comrade, who had his foot pressed down hard on Akira’s sword hand.

‘I think he’s pretending.’

‘Agreed.’

Pointing the tip of his katana at Akira’s neck, he waited for the ashigaru’s eyes to open. And they did. Along with a groaned slur of ‘nice signalling.’

‘A practised skill.’

‘Lucky one too.’

‘How so?’

‘If you’d killed me outright, you wouldn’t have known about the money.’ Akira raised a trembling left hand and tried to point it across the lobby. ‘The box...’

‘Has about twenty *mon* inside,’ the yellow-patterned samurai finished, making a small cut on Akira’s neck. ‘If you haven’t stolen it already.’

‘No, no, much more than twenty...the owner of this place, she was rich, really, the daughter of-’

‘Is there anything honourable you wish to say, before your end?’

Akira opened his mouth, but an abrupt wailing noise from the dying samurai nearby took the words out of his head.



Doesn't matter, he thought, staring up at the two wobbly faces. This yellow guy looks like he hates money anyway. And ashigaru too. Probably better if I just close my eyes.

Akira let out a long breath and closed his eyes. Pictured Himiko's arm disintegrating, the green demon biting into his skull, his dear Asami doing her salt merchant impression, Miho holding that spoon. Then opened them again and told the yellow samurai to go fuck himself.

'Typical ashigaru,' the yellow-patterned samurai said back, slapping his neck in annoyance, swaying a little...then stumbling backwards like a drunk herbalist into the desk two feet behind him.

Channelling Miho's performance in the onsen room, Akira stared forward in a gormless state, watching as the yellow-patterned samurai slid lethargically down the side of the desk, then passed out with his neck at [what had to be] a very uncomfortable angle.

Turning to the last remaining enemy, Akira flicked the lights back on and scrambled for a plan of attack. His hand was still pinned down, the green katana out of reach, too far to the-

Akira stopped, feeling the weight on his wrist vanish as the samurai who'd knocked him down went through the same routine as his comrade. Slapping his neck, stumbling backwards, and flailing around awkwardly as he lost consciousness with his face in the dying samurai's gut wound.

‘This cannot be...’

Akira forgot the word *real* as he pulled himself partially up and crawled over to his katana. Barely able to grip it with his mangled wrist, he straightened up and staggered back to the yellow-patterned samurai.

‘Tell it to the gods, comrade,’ he said, checking that the other three were really all down, then sliding his stained blade neatly into the man’s heart.

A sudden arm spasm from the samurai made Akira jump a little, but that was probably down to adrenaline, and he was careful not to repeat it as he made the rounds to finish off the other three.

‘What a night,’ he said, finally, dropping his katana next to the last guy’s legs and collapsing on the futon near the door.

Something buzzed near his neck, forcing him to slap at the nick the yellow-patterned samurai had made. Not as bad as it could’ve been though. The green demon and these bastards....with their obvious, overly-rehearsed moves and-

His whole body folded.

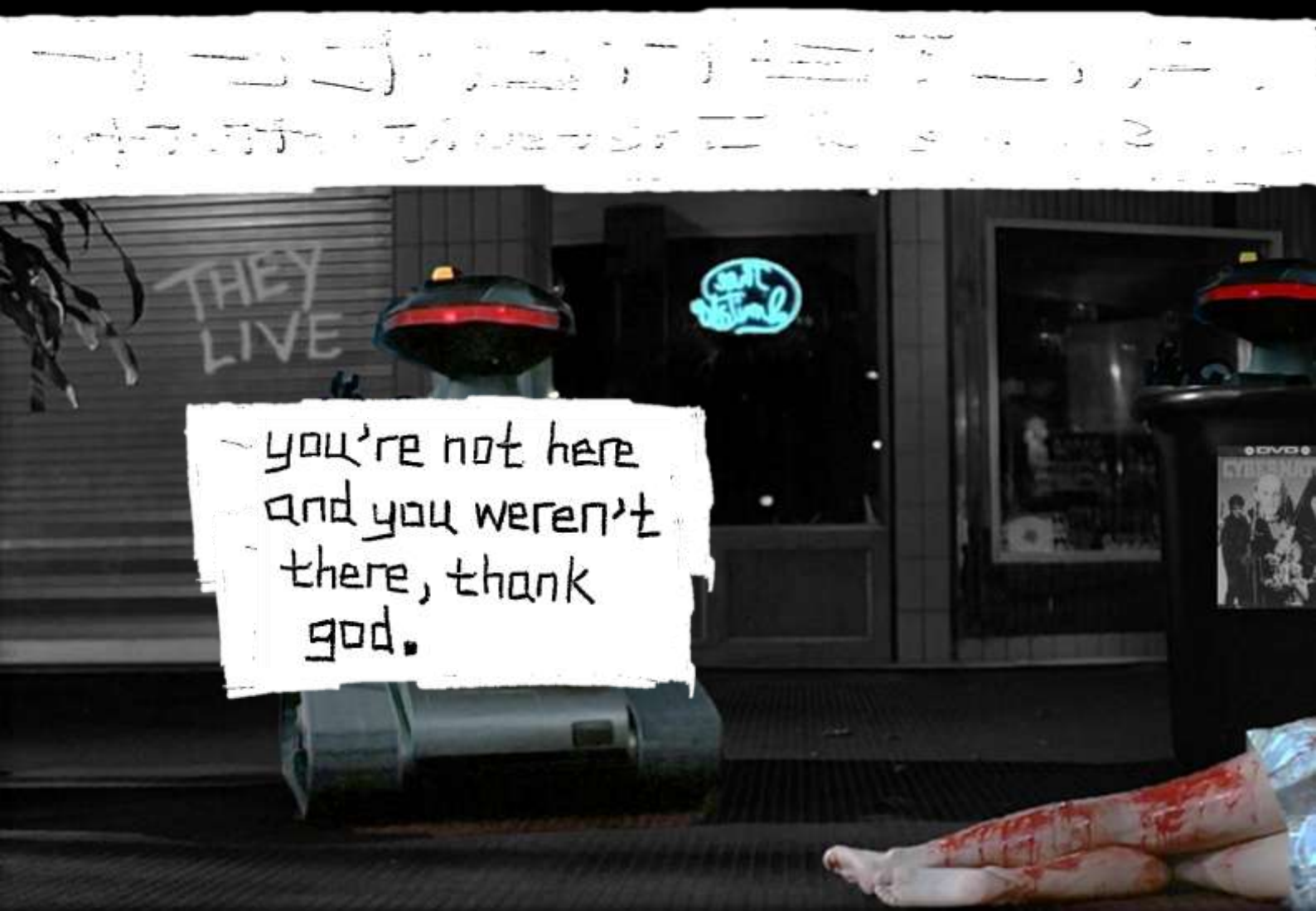
Energy gone in a flash.

Like a skin of nothing but air and alarm, he fumbled sideways, forwards, falling frantically down onto a stained patch of tatami.

‘Kuso,’ he managed, eyes and brain blinking out.

# CHAPTER 19

## PICKING UP THE PIECES [AND ROBBING THE DEAD]



Following a stream of blood up the steps and into the ryokan, a bold mosquito buzzed aimlessly around the ceiling beams then, when certain there lay no trap, made a spiral dive towards the leg of the nearest corpse.

Amazed at its own good fortune, the little pest gorged briefly on the all-you-can-eat-leftovers before spying a fresher leg and shifting there, its small body [and wings] in blood heaven...before being crushed, out of nowhere, by a descending God hand.

‘Wake up,’ said Aya, wiping the mosquito stain on her yukata as she bent down to shake Miho.

‘Garrrr...’ came from his lips and little else.

‘Not garrrr, open your eyes, you lazy-’

‘How long?’ said another, deeper voice, prompting her to spin round and point the katana she’d taken from one of the dead samurai at the new arrival.

*Wah* escaped from the thin line gap between her frozen lips.

‘Yeah, *wah* to you too.’ Akira looked briefly at the tip of the blade about a metre from his face then continued rubbing his wrist.

‘You’re alive,’ Aya muttered, lowering the sword a little.

‘What time is it?’

‘...and they’re all dead.’

Finishing with the wrist massage, Akira used his good hand to pull himself up onto his feet, grabbed his green-stained katana and surveyed the scene. Just as he remembered, everyone dead. Apart from him. Somehow. Blind luck? An inebriated Ebisu mistaking him for someone else, someone better?

‘...fourteen of them, watch out, knives,’ rambled Miho suddenly, his whole body shooting up and scaring Aya so much that she clipped the side of his forearm with her blade.

‘Wah!’ she yelled, dropping the katana, rushing forward to the wound.

‘Knife,’ mumbled Miho, dabbing the tiny line of blood with his finger.

‘Are you okay? I didn’t mean to-...you scared me, thought you were half dead. Kuso. Does it hurt?’

Miho closed his eyes, swayed a little, then let the light back in and looked up. Akira was staring down at him, head tilted either in disapproval or annoyed bafflement.

‘How the hell did you survive that?’ the ashigaru asked.

‘The fight?’

‘Thought for sure you got stabbed.’

‘No. Just fell over...I think.’ Miho checked the rest of his yukata for damage, finding only a few tears and zygote holes. ‘Not stabbed anywhere.’

‘Survive what?’ shouted Aya, ripping a bit of cloth from a nearby cleaning rag and tying it round Miho’s cut. ‘What happened down here? Where’s Himiko?’

Akira swatted away the questions and moved towards the nearest corpse, Bending down, he rummaged through the man’s dōbuku, then his yukata underneath, and came back out with a small bag of coins.

‘Magical,’ he said, spilling them out onto the floor. ‘Enough here to get half a cup of flavoured water pretending to be tea.’

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ asked Aya, standing up, the cleaning rag still in her hand.

‘Spoils of war.’

‘What? There’s only four of them.’

‘War. Skirmish. Survival chaos.’ Akira put the coins back in the small bag and carried on to the next corpse. ‘Judging by your face, and the lack of vomit, I reckon these are not the first dead bodies you’ve seen.’

Aya gripped the cleaning rag tight and watched as Akira went through the pockets of the dead samurai who’d complimented his lying skills the previous night.

‘It’s okay, he didn’t start it,’ said Miho, using the table as leverage to pull himself up next to her. ‘They came in, attacked us. Said Akira was a dead man for...some reason. I can’t remember exactly.’

‘For being a thief?’

‘Watch your words, little one,’ said Akira, already onto the next corpse.

Aya squeezed another Newton out of the cleaning rag in her hand, glancing down at the katana she’d dropped. Kuso. Why wasn’t she holding that?

‘No, no...it really wasn’t his fault,’ continued Miho. ‘There was a demon in that luxury room, it tried to kill us. Tried to eat my cheek. He was just protecting himself.’

‘By killing all four of them?’

‘I...can’t remember. There was one he slashed in the stomach...after that...I’m not sure.’

‘Actually, the last two dropped of their own accord,’ said Akira, taking a silver ring off the third samurai. ‘Just passed out on the spot. Very strange.’

‘You didn’t kill them?’

‘Same thing happened to me too, I guess. No, I did. Managed to stab them before I faded out. Luckily for us.’

‘But...’ Miho stammered, running his still slightly blurred vision over the four corpses, the last of which - the one with the yellow-patterned dōbuku - was now being defiled by Akira’s busy hands. Or his busy left hand. ‘They were knocked out already.’

‘Yes, definitely my favourite type of opponent. Second favourite, drunkards.’

Another *but* formed on Miho’s lips, but it didn’t get any further than that as Aya pulled on his yukata sleeve and asked again where Himiko was.

‘Err...the ryokan owner?’

‘Wah, how hard did you get hit? Yes, Himiko. Our boss. The woman who’s going to kill all of us for this mess.’

‘I doubt that,’ said Akira, rising back to his feet with a long strip of belt cord, and then spitting on the samurai who’d just donated it.

‘What do you mean? Where is she?’

‘Scattered about.’

Aya backed up into Miho, dropping the rag and gripping both his sleeves. ‘He killed her too?’ she asked, as hushed as she could make it.

‘Err...not exactly. It’s quite hard to explain.’

‘Forget about that traitorous nut, she’s gone,’ continued Akira, stretching out the cord, nodding at its length. ‘The most important



thing now is finding the coins she tucked away. And then getting the fuck out of here before more competent samurai arrive.'

'Gone where?'

'Though...if back-up hasn't arrived yet...that probably means there was no auxiliary support. In which case...a day for their absence to become suspicious, less if it was an urgent mission, half a day to send more men.' Akira clapped his hands together, wincing in pain as his right wrist folded a little. 'I believe, girls and boys, we might just have time for some light breakfast.'

'Miho, where has she gone?' Aya asked again, eyes alternating between Miho and Akira.

'I told you...it's hard to explain.'

'Try.'

'She...was in the cabin up there...and there was a swirling light circle thing...and she tried to go through, like the green demon guy did, but-'

Akira laughed, ripping the case off one of the larger futon sofa cushions. 'Fuck explanations, just show her. The arm should still be up there, if my memory's working right.'

'Her what?'

'Or a fairly large piece of it.'

Aya turned to Miho, her head swaying. ‘What is he talking about?’

‘Err...’

‘Just go up there, show her.’ Akira threw the samurai belt cord on the table then sat down and started folding the cushion case. ‘Give me some peace while I fix this splint on.’

‘Show me what?’ asked Aya, watching Akira do his nurse impression.

‘Go, go. Quickly. Stop gawping.’

‘To where?’

~~~

A short while later, Miho stood pointing like one of those lunatic forest prophets at a chunk of cave wall, the same spot where the red spider lily, and most of Himiko, had evaporated right in front of his eyes.

‘That’s where she vanished,’ he said, turning back to Aya, hoping his facial expression was as sincere as his brain claimed.

‘Vanished?’

‘Yeah. Sort of.’

‘That ashigaru thug said her arm was here.’

‘Err...bits of it. Maybe.’

Aya touched her own forearm, the puzzle clearly being pieced together internally without the need for *what* or *huh* or *you mean it disintegrated?*

‘I’m not sure, really. It all happened really fast. I ran in and...the red spiral light thing was already closing. Then Himiko just...went with it...vanished.’

‘What was it, this red light thing?’

‘No idea. It just...sort of functioned like a door or something...or a tunnel leading somewhere.’

‘How did it open?’

‘I don’t know. It just-...’ Miho stepped forward and placed his palm flat on the wall face. ‘It was right here, swirling.’

‘A red light door thing?’

Miho opened his mouth to say *yeah*, but was interrupted by a sudden rush of wind through the cave tunnel, followed swiftly by a vibration on the cave rock.

He drew his hand back, accidentally clipping Aya on her hip, and then stumbled a few more steps as the cave wall morphed once more into a red spiral, spider lily, light thing.

‘What did you do?’ asked Miho to Aya’s hand gripping his wrist.

‘Me? *You* touched it.’

The spiral tripled in size, growing out from the cave wall while also pushing visibly inwards the other way, like a tunnel to somewhere. Vibrant, chaotic noise swirled around it, like wind mixed with static and intermittent panpipe melodies, and something about this sound soothed Miho and loosened his limbs and started to reel him in, silently promising him serenity and boxes of wondrous things he would be unable to comprehend and

it was so relaxing

so gentle

that he gave himself over completely

legs shuffling forward towards the reddish light

eyes squinting at what looked like pale red orbs floating on passageway walls on the other side of the-

‘Back,’ shouted Aya, yanking his yukata sleeve so hard that they both tumbled downwards onto the cave floor.

‘Where you what...’ muttered Miho, running his fingernails through the dirt then turning back to the light.

It was half the size of its siren form now

then a quarter

then nothing more than a particle of air-dust as the red swirls dissipated into nothingness and the cave wall returned to its stable, quotidian state.

‘It was calling to me,’ mumbled Miho, pulling himself up into a sitting position and reaching out towards the wall with one hand, yet, at the same time, allowing Aya’s hand to hold him back by the yukata sleeve.

‘Occult magic,’ she whispered, then repeated the same thing louder.

‘That was it. The thing that pulled in Himiko.’

‘Right next to the ryokan, all this time.’

‘I think it must be a door...of some kind.’

‘A curse more like.’ She shivered, her hand letting go off Miho’s yukata. ‘I can’t stay anymore. Not with this here.’

Miho looked at her, the tear running down her rigidly determined face. Part of him thought of saying, let’s try to open it again, see if we can pass through, but another part, the one who’d been swindled by the belt merchant, slapped him hard and screamed, are you out of your fucking village idiot mind?

The slapping part was probably right, it had sucked in Himiko, dismantled her, and there was a fair chance it was built to do that, to tempt in new flesh, like the voice he felt calling to him, soothing him enough to get him to the light.

A tactic that would’ve worked if Aya hadn’t been there.

‘Are you coming or not?’ she asked, already a few steps down the tunnel, her fingers resting on one of the green mineral fragments.

He stared back at her, vaguely nodding.

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Yes. Coming.’

‘Good.’

~~~

Back in the ryokan, Akira was deep in detective mode.

Perched on the edge of the futon sofa near the front window, a cup of green tea in his freshly splinted hand, he scanned the reception area, going over every single piece of decoration and furniture.

The paintings had seemed like the obvious choices, but he’d pulled them all apart and ripped up the rice paper canvases and...nothing.

Not even a note to say *ha, wrong place*.

Next guess was the floorboards, but they were pinned down too tight to lift up with any kind of regularity.

Of course, the ryokan funds could be somewhere else entirely...in which case, he was just wasting his time.

The follow-up batch of Shingen samurai would be there the next morning, at the earliest, and it would take more than a day to do a complete search.

No, more than that, probably a whole week.

He drank some of his tea, cursing himself for not getting to know Himiko better before her disintegration act. That way he would've had some clues to go on at least.

Outside, there were footsteps on the wooden *welcome* steps, and he had just enough time to take his feet off the table before Aya and Miho came traipsing back in, both looking like they'd just seen a naked pensioner.

'Convincing trip?' he asked, after dismissing the more generic *what happened?*

'It appeared again,' said Miho, stopping at the entrance and resting one hand on top of the okiandon. 'The red light thing.'

'Wah...how?'

'Don't know. I just touched the wall and...it appeared.'

'Well...that's something.' Akira took another sip of tea, flinching in surprise as Aya sat down next to him. 'Though, on the business side of things, a ryokan with a secret light tunnel, that could be a real winner.'

'I'm not staying,' Aya muttered, tugging at the sleeve of her staff-issue yukata.

'That unsettling, huh?'

'Yeah, and creepy too,' replied Miho, toying with the rim of the okiandon. 'There was this voice in my head, calling me to go in...and I would've done, if Aya hadn't dragged me back.'

‘Maybe it heard about your belt merchant adventure?’

‘Yeah, may-...sorry, what?’

‘Or maybe it’s that green fucker who tried to eat your head, lurking on the other side, trying to get back in. Who knows? Bigger point is, we’re all getting out of here, right now.’

‘I’m going alone,’ said Aya, more to her yukata than the others.

‘Sure, if you want to get raped and murdered by bandits, good idea. Luckily, you’re quite cute in a sullen pet kind of way, and I owe this gormless lunatic my life so...gang of three it is.’

‘I think I prefer the bandits.’

Akira smiled, then turned it into a full-throated laugh that made him spill the remains of his tea. ‘Kuso...I was looking forward to drinking that.’

‘You can come with me,’ said Miho, digging a fingernail into the wood of the okiandon. ‘I’m heading north through Shinano.’

‘Don’t be a peasant,’ cut in Akira, standing up and putting his dōbuku back on. ‘The two of you together wouldn’t last an hour.’

‘Okay,’ replied Aya, moving her head left so she could give a small supplementary nod to Miho.

‘Really?’



‘No,’ barked Akira, startling Miho so much that his hand slipped, knocking the okiandon over on its side and making its refill drawer slide out.

‘Wait-’

‘Is that-’

‘Kuso, right next to the front fucking door.’ Akira bent down next to the drawer and picked up the small box that had spilled out. Shook it and smiled at the resulting sound of clinking coins. ‘Himiko, you little tease.’

‘You can’t take that,’ said Aya, edging over from the futon sofa.

‘Relax, I’ll leave you the box.’

‘It’s not yours.’

‘Yet here it is in my hands. Sure you don’t want to come with me?’

‘She’s right,’ said Miho, crouching down a little too close to Akira and instantly getting a reflex hand on his throat.

‘Don’t do that.’

‘What...are you-’ stuttered Miho, trying to get Akira’s claw-like hand off.

‘Sudden movements.’

‘I didn’t-’

‘Get off him, dog,’ said Aya, picking up a katana next to one of the dead samurai.

Akira glanced over, making a tutting sound, then awkwardly pulled his yukata open with his sling hand. ‘Think you can hit an organ?’

‘I mean it.’

Akira smiled and looked down at his chest. ‘Lungs or stomach if you really want me to suffer.’

‘Let him go.’

‘But you’re gonna have to hold the blade up a bit first.’

Aya heard the words, and instantly corrected her pose. Then took a step forward.

‘Okay, okay...on the off chance you’re that petty.’

The smile faded and the ashigaru looked back at Miho, told him to move more carefully in future then let go. And added a little consolation pat on the shoulder.

‘Wah...my throat...’

‘You okay, Miho?’

‘He’s fine,’ grunted Akira, shaking the box drawer. ‘Barely even touched him.’

‘What happened...to owing me...your life?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Huh?’

Akira didn’t bother responding, he was too busy yanking open the box.

‘Can’t trust ashigaru,’ said Aya, finally lowering the blade. ‘All they care about is themselves. And money.’

‘Akira...’

The ashigaru repeated *money* under his breath and stared blankly at the contents of the box. He stayed that way for almost a full minute before picking up the wooden container and throwing it across the lobby floor.

Several pieces of what looked like scrap metal spilled out, making Aya frown and drop the katana back down on to the corpse.

‘Fucking done with this place,’ said Akira, striding over to the main desk and picking up a bag, then coming back for his green katana. ‘Scam money, scam ryokan, scam owners, scam...everything. Last chance to come with me if you’re going.’

‘Serious? You just tried to strangle Miho.’

‘Simple misunderstanding. And nothing compared to what the bandits will do if they get hold of you.’

‘I’m not scared of them.’

‘Only because they’re not standing here right now. Wait until night falls and you don’t know where the hell you are.’

‘We’ll hide from them.’

‘Yeah, how?’

‘In the forest.’

‘Stealth camping? Without a fire, you’ll freeze. Or get eaten by a bear.’

‘Then we’ll stay in the next town we come to. Fujimi.’

‘With what money?’

‘Savings.’

‘How much you got?’

‘Enough.’

Akira walked over to the entrance, stopping next to Miho. ‘She speak for you too?’

‘I suppose...’

‘Really? You’re choosing a pretty face over guaranteed protection?’

Miho looked down at the mess that was the okiandon and mumbled an apologetic *yes*.

‘Ah, useless...the both of you.’

Slinging the bag over his shoulder, and then shifting it back down to his left hand when it felt uncomfortable, Akira kicked the door with his foot and headed out.

A chicken made a clucking noise in the courtyard and was quickly silenced. Then other chickens launched into a chorus and were told to go drown in the fucking river.

Exchanging glances, Aya moved over to Miho and helped him pick up the okiandon.

‘He’s exaggerating about the bandits,’ she said, touching his wrist.

‘If we take the main road, it should be okay.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And there are still two of us.’

‘With katanas.’

Miho nodded, looking at the nearest blade and the four corpses dotted around with dried-up stab wounds.

‘Do you know how to use one?’

‘Err...point and stab?’

‘That’s about my level too.’

She let out a tiny laugh and he mimicked it.

Outside, the chickens started clucking again as a shadow blocked out the doorway and a slightly irritated voice said, 'I'm not joking about those bandits, you will not survive them...'

'You're still here?' asked Miho, squinting at the shape of Akira.

'...and you're picking up that okiandon, for some unknown reason. Come on, get your stuff, if you have any. We're leaving.'

'We're going alone, not...' started Aya, but was checked, briefly, by a raised finger.

'No debate.'

'...with you.'

'Miho's bodyguard has spoken. And as you're clinging to his arm, you fall under the same umbrella. Unless you wander off too far, then you're on your own.'

Aya looked at Miho and then at the four corpses. Then at the ryokan that was ostensibly her home. Then at the corpses again.

'He is a good fighter,' said Miho, putting his hand on hers.

'Cunning fighter,' corrected Akira, tapping the doorframe.

'And I have saved his life twice.'

'You think that means anything to him?' whispered Aya, pulling her hand gently away.

Miho looked at his now lonely fingers, and ran through several different versions of *I don't know*. Finally, he settled for something a little more positive, perhaps undeserved. 'I think so. Yes.'

'Look, are you going to let me save your lives or not?' shouted Akira from the doorway.

'Fine,' said Aya, standing up. 'We'll go with you as far as Fujimi.'

'A sensible choice. Bags?'

Miho stood up, looking over at the entrance to the cabins.

'You've got five minutes. Both of you.' Another clucking noise from outside, making Akira flinch. 'I'll be outside kicking that chicken.'

'Don't,' said Aya, moving to the doorway.

'Kicking, not killing.'

'It's Himiko's pet. Not livestock.'

Akira rested his good arm on his cushion case splint, breathing out loud. 'Okay. I'll be outside cradling that chicken. Better?'



## CHAPTER 20

### ON THE ROAD WITHOUT ACTUALLY BEING ON IT



In stark contrast to the peace and solitude of the ryokan lobby massacre site, the road beyond the Jewel of Kai was annoyingly loud.

Various birds communicating in their private chirp code, elderly couples sitting outside occasional shacks, shouting ‘what?’ at each other every minute or so, travellers and salt merchants singing songs from their home provinces, out of tune songs, lyrically muddled, over focused on the chorus etc.

Of course, it didn’t stay loud for long as Akira took them off-road and onto the lightly snow-dusted slopes of the west-side mountains. Apparently, it was the practice of Shingen the Elder to place a small platoon past an ambush site, in case the initial assault failed and the targets fled. And if the father had done it, the usurper son might too.

‘Why didn’t we go off road sooner then?’ asked Aya, shifting the medium-sized bag with all her belongings onto the other shoulder.

‘Cos my head’s still hurting.’

‘Huh?’

‘And it’s early. Can never think straight until at least lunch time, and that’s without all the bizarro shit that’s happened the last few days.’

‘You mean our self-appointed bodyguard messed up?’

Akira stopped, reaching for the guard of the katana with his splint hand then quickly re-adjusting to his left.

‘It’s okay, she was joking,’ said Miho quickly, but was silenced by a finger [and the splint] to Akira’s lips.

‘Typical ashigaru,’ muttered Aya, trying to walk on ahead and immediately stepping on a twig.

In the nearby bushes, something moved.

Pulling his katana halfway out, Akira breathed out a sharp *kuso* as a fox poked its nose through the leaves...and then quickly retreated back into the greenery when it saw three humans gawping at it with *Yamato Nucleus* face [from the fox’s POV, of course – Miho and Aya would just be gawping in the regular way. Akira, on the other hand...].

‘You’re not gonna chase it down?’ asked Aya, smirking.

Akira re-sheathed his blade, muttering *irritant* under his breath.

Miho pulled close and nudged her in the side.

‘What?’

‘Try to be less aggravating,’ he whispered [poorly].

‘I am.’

‘Try harder.’

‘What, like he is?’

Miho didn’t know what to say to that, so he stared down into his basket instead. It wasn’t anywhere near dinner time yet, or even lunch, but he would have to pick some vegetables at some point. In case they couldn’t find anywhere to stay later. Which was a fair bet considering Akira’s katana and Aya’s hawkish attitude.

‘Okay, children,’ said Akira, itching under his splint. ‘We take a staggered route towards Fujimi, but not too far from the road. Hopefully, there’ll be a house we can find shelter at somewhere on the fringes.’

‘Or we could just take the road and be there in about three hours?’

‘I told you already, it’s too risky.’

‘And this way isn’t?’

Akira stared at her for a long time, fingers hovering near his belt, before finally replying with an almost syllable-less, ‘no.’

~~~

After more than an hour of trekking through dense foliage and the occasional sloped glade, Miho stopped and jangled his basket, telling everyone it was time for lunch.

‘The food’s in our bags,’ said Akira, dropping his sack next to a crooked cedar tree and sliding down the trunk into a sitting position.

‘I know.’

‘Then why are you shaking the basket?’

‘A symbol...for lunch.’

Akira glanced at Aya, who was smirking and dusting something off her yukata sleeve, but stopped instantly when she saw Akira doing the same. Dumping her things on the grass, she sat down with knees raised high, keeping the bag propped up in front as a shield.

Seeing that his motion had passed, Miho found a decent halfway point between the two rivals and planted himself down.

‘How much longer is it to Fujimi?’ he asked, pulling out some bread and a green bottle that looked like it had something exotic, but, in fact, contained only water from the river.

Neither Aya nor Akira answered.

Instead, they chewed on their own bread and leftover fūki, and stared at the scenery just past each other.

Miho tried a few times to fill the silence, but it was tough as the only thing he could really talk about that wasn’t related to the drama of the previous night was his childhood in the village, and his wandering girlfriend, Yuki. And, as soon as he mentioned either one, he could see eyes rolling on both sides.

Finally, he went back to Fujimi, asking Akira what his plan was after that.

‘Suwa,’ was all he got in return.

‘Will you be safe there?’

‘Safer than I was last night.’

Aya drank some water from her bottle, then put the stopper back in. Then pulled it out. Then rubbed it round the rim of the bottle.

‘Last night in Room 28,’ Akira elaborated, keeping his own bottle still at his side.

‘What exactly happened in there?’ Aya asked, her tone quite odd.

‘You’re pretending you don’t know?’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then why did you try to warn us not to go in there?’

‘I warned Miho, not you.’

‘Yeah, great. Why?’

‘Gut feeling.’

‘That’s it?’

Aya drank more from the bottle, spilling some water out as she brought it back down to her lap.

‘And where were you when those four assassins came in? Hiding in your room? Waiting for Himiko to come back?’

‘I have trouble sleeping.’

‘That makes no sense,’ replied Akira, squinting at something in the liquid of his bottle.

‘Does to me. I take a drink before I sleep, puts me out all night.’

‘Wondrous. And where is this magical elixir now?’

‘At the ryokan. I forgot to bring it.’

‘How convenient.’

‘Not really, cos tonight I won’t be able to sleep. Big brain man.’

Miho held up the basket again and looked at Aya. ‘How about we go and collect some vegetables? Seems like a good area for it.’

‘I’m not done yet,’ said Akira, rotating the rim of the bottle with the top of his finger.

‘Come on, she just told you, she was sleeping. Stop being so paranoid about everything.’

Akira started to laugh, performing a mock clapping motion on his sling. ‘Very impressive...’

‘We’re all on the same side here.’

‘...the boy who lost all his money to a belt merchant, lecturing others on the dangers of scepticism.’

Miho looked down at his belt, as if the thing itself were guilty of betraying him, then packed the food scraps into his bag and stood up.

Aya followed suit, keeping her water bottle out.

‘Ah, now it’s a whole afternoon of sulking, is it?’ asked Akira, pushing his back up the trunk until he was fully vertical again.

‘I’m not sulking, I’m annoyed.’ Miho turned and looked Akira dead in the eyes, then shifted to the neck when the ashigaru stared back. ‘The belt thing was a one-off. And balanced out by the fact that I saved your life...twice. And Aya warned us not to go to that room, you know that, you were there, so you can stop picking on her too.’

Akira continued staring at the young lunatic, his expression neither fierce nor friendly, not really anything, before, finally, grunting and traipsing off into the bushes ahead.

‘We should detach,’ said Aya, leaning in to Miho’s shoulder and making sure to keep her voice very low, ‘go down by ourselves to the main road.’

‘We can’t.’

‘He’s becoming unstable.’

‘It’s okay. He won’t do anything.’

Aya coughed, the words *belt merchant* popping up in her head, followed by the image of the four dead samurai back at the ryokan.

‘Just get to Fujimi first,’ said Miho, patting her arm. ‘Decide then.’

‘Okay. Fine. Fujimi first. Then detach.’

‘Come on, he’s getting too far ahead.’

Miho hurried on through the trees, swatting some low-hanging branches out of the way and getting hit by one in revenge.

‘If I end up with my head chopped off,’ Aya muttered, swinging her bag back onto her shoulder and trailing reluctant steps after him.

~~~

The rest of the afternoon went relatively smoothly.

If smoothly were defined as abandoning the staggered approach to Fujimi and heading straight down to the main road seven times...then running back to the cedar trees on the slopes as soon as a random salt merchant passed by.

Then switching back to the original strategy and stopping every five minutes to mistake animals chilling in bushes for murderous bandits.

By the time the sun had sunk beyond the distant mountains, they were all exhausted, and even Akira had no complaints when Aya suggested they knock on the next door they passed and ask nicely for a place to sleep.

Soon enough, on the outskirts of Fujimi, they passed a small shack with a well-kept pond and stone garden outside, as well as an amateur-sculpted shrine right outside the entrance that, to all three of them, looked like a half-melted bear.

‘Seems normal enough,’ said Akira, straightening up and putting the good hand on his belt.



In the trees, an unknown bird launched into something that sounded like a death squeal.

‘Probably a mating call.’

‘Okay, remember,’ cautioned Miho, addressing both Aya and Akira with equal face time. ‘Ask politely, and respect them if they say no.’

‘They won’t say no,’ replied Akira, giving Miho a hard slap on his arm and moving forward towards the front door panel.

‘Hang on, we haven’t-’

It was too late, the ashigaru had already knocked on the frame.

‘This is not good,’ Aya whispered, still gripping the water bottle, which had been empty for most of the afternoon.

It took a while, but finally the panel slid open and a middle-aged woman with herb-dyed red hair grinned back at them. Then, ditching autopilot, she did an actual scan of the three strangers in front of her and made an O shape with her lips.

‘Matsu-Kun,’ she shouted back into the shadows of the shack. ‘Prepare the spare room, we have guests.’

‘I haven’t said anything yet,’ said Akira, bemused, left hand clinging tight to his belt.

‘Come in, come in,’ she replied, grabbing hold of his splint without any fear or trepidation at all, and yanking him forward so

hard that he stumbled into her. 'It must be getting cold out. You two there, don't be shy, come in. Quickly, quickly.'

Miho glanced at Aya, who shrugged and gestured vaguely at the door with her bottle. 'You think it's okay?' he asked, hanging his head back to her as he walked in.

'Better than sleeping outside.'

'She seems very friendly...'

'Yeah, so?'

'...just like that belt merchant.'

Aya frowned, looking ahead at the red-haired woman wrapping her arm around Akira's waist and inspecting his makeshift splint, then the equally good-spirited man stepping out of the shadows to greet her and Miho.

'Ah, and I thought it was going to be a quiet night,' he said, his long arms taking hold of their dōbuku sleeves as if they'd known each other for years. 'I'm Matsu, and this is my wife, Miho.'

Aya laughed, she couldn't help it.

'A funny name?'

'Familiar,' she replied.

'It's my name too,' said Miho, trying not to look at the huge red rash on the man's neck. 'For complicated reasons.'

‘Ah, unorthodox, I like it.’ Matsu pushed away some red chimes hanging low from the ceiling and pulled them both in, placing them next to a stool just past the door. ‘Sit down, take off your dōbuku, your zori...your kosode if you like. Ha, I’m joking, but, please, feel free to relax, there are no formalities here. Miho and I will go and prepare a nice, hot meal, and then you can tell us all about yourselves. You too, young lady. And this fine, strapping warrior-poet over here. Ah, an injury I see, a broken arm perhaps? Well, you must have many interesting tales to tell. Over a bottle of shōchū, of course. Miho, stop fondling the poor man and join me in the kitchen. The rest of you, relax, find a seat, please.’

Matsu held onto Aya’s sleeve a moment longer, then switched to his wife’s yukata and guided her away down the dark passageway to what was either the kitchen or a smoke-filled herb den. Logically, the former, but, going off of the insane level of gregariousness of the two M’s...maybe the latter.

Taking the two stools, Miho and Aya took off their zori, while Akira checked the room nearby, his narrowed eyes shooting back constantly to the passageway.

Satisfied that there was no immediate threat of ambush, he returned to Miho and Aya and crouched down next to the stools.

‘Three possibilities. Sophisticated bandits luring us into a trap. Bored couple looking for group sex. Or a lunatic pair of herb-infused, superstitious types.’

‘Or just normal, friendly people,’ said Aya, glancing at Miho.

‘Yeah,’ he replied, non-committal.

‘If it’s superstition, we say we’re tired and sleep. Bandits, we check the alcohol, make them drink it too. Group sex...well, we’re all adults here.’

Miho and Aya both looked at the zori they’d just removed.

‘Ah, never mind, you two can pair up with each other. Or go take a walk outside. Gods, I hope they’re not superstitious. Those are the worst kind.’

‘Worse than bandits?’

‘Much.’

Without any further elaboration, Akira walked off into the adjoining room, rubbing his hands.

‘I’m not sleeping anywhere near him,’ muttered Aya, picking up her empty water bottle again.

‘Me neither,’ agreed Miho, jumping slightly at the loud whistling noise breaking out from the end of the corridor, which soon evolved into brainless song.

Just two incredibly jovial, ordinary people, he thought.

Nothing suspicious about that.

# CHAPTER 21

## DINNER WITH MYSTERIOUSLY HAPPY TYPES



Despite his apparent glee at what might lay ahead that night, Akira did keep enough of his head about him to do some basic safety checks.

First, he followed the trail of the hosts into the kitchen [not herb den] and pretended to compliment the cedar talismans on the wall as he watched them prepare the food.

Nothing untoward there, just Matsu sprinkling some diced herbs onto a glum-looking fish. And Miho tasting almost a full third of the soup she was boiling.

Second, he took the bottle of shōchū off them at the dinner table and insisted on pouring out drinks for everyone.

Matsu protested a little, but quickly gave up when he saw the first cup had already been done.

Third, he tested both their reflexes by throwing chopsticks at them with his non-sling hand and saying, ‘catch.’

Either they were extremely adept at performance art or they had no fighting instincts, as both responded with a baffled ‘sorry?’ as the chopsticks hit their yukatas and dropped harmlessly onto the dining table.

Satisfied on all levels, Akira took a cushion on the floor between the two Mihos and started to drink.

‘That’s your third cup,’ said Aya, looking at him from the other side of the table, her body slanted diagonal to avoid the roaming hands of Matsu next to her.

‘Fourth,’ he corrected, downing the shot and pouring out another. ‘Miho, Matsu?’

The female Miho finished what was left in her own cup then leaned down close to the surface of the table, watching the bottle with balloon eyes as it rose up and the shōchū trickled out.

At the start of the meal, she’d done a similar thing, and, even though she was clearly naked underneath, Akira had avoided looking down the loose front of her yukata...but now...

It was quite odd.

Her husband was sitting directly opposite, occasionally trying to fondle Aya, and she was next to him, basically advertising her breasts.

What had they stumbled across?

Sexual nihilists?

Putting the bottle back on the table, he turned left to the more conservative [and less fun] Miho and asked if he’d finished his drink yet.

‘Eating,’ he replied, which was the first word he’d said in the last half an hour.

‘You are very focused on it,’ said Matsu, stabbing one of his chopsticks into the body of the fish and laughing as the chunk he pulled out crumbled into pieces. ‘Ah, maybe I should do that too. Or I’ll be going to bed light-headed.’

‘More shōchū?’ asked his wife, holding up the bottle, trying to hold in her laugh.

Matsu frowned back at her, then laughed again, pointing a chopstick across the table. ‘Now I think about it...Miho is an odd name for a boy. How did you manage to attain it?’

‘Clerical error,’ said Akira, flinching a little as the bottle landed hard on the table, and the female Miho blurted out a surprisingly shrill ‘whoops.’

‘Ah, so you’re his father then?’

‘What? No chance. Me?’

‘His uncle?’

‘Brother more like,’ added the female Miho, adjusting the bottle into a standing position even though it was already stable. ‘Tell me, how many men have you fought with that magical green katana of yours? Fifty? A hundred?’

‘You are mistaken,’ replied Akira, glancing at the weapon propped up a little unorthodoxly in the doorway to the kitchen. ‘I’m a travelling merchant.’

‘Wah, a merchant. Not a warrior?’



‘In a former life, perhaps. But in this one, no, I merely transport salt.’

‘And your arm?’

‘Wrist sprain. From carrying too much salt.’

‘Ah, not a break,’ said the female Miho, stroking along the underside of his splint. ‘We may have some cream for that, somewhere around.’

‘Cream?’

‘In the bedroom perhaps.’

‘Would you be his apprentice then?’ asked Matsu, turning all the way round to Aya and reaching a hand out towards her shoulder.

She blocked it with a feigned grab for more fish and said, ‘no, we are not with him.’

‘Yet you appeared at our door together.’

‘Coincidence,’ said Akira quickly, flinching again as he felt the female Miho’s hand slide under his yukata and onto his thigh. ‘We met on the road...an hour before we came here. It was getting dark so...lots of bandits, safety, that kind of thinking.’

‘Ah, I think I understand now.’ Matsu stabbed another piece of fish and this time managed to keep it together all the way to his mouth, where it paused, waiting for him to finish speaking. ‘The two

young ones here are lovers, on their way to a new town. And a new life. In an extremely spacious futon.'

'Lovers? How interesting,' said the female Miho, smiling kindly at Aya as her hand came back up and poured out another two shots; one for herself, the other for the pretend salt merchant.

'It's not like that,' answered Aya, glancing at Miho.

'I already have a girlfriend,' he added, picking up some fish from his bowl and nibbling on it.

'And where is she now?'

'Don't know. Somewhere near Shinano, I think.'

'You think?'

'The Shinano in his head,' interrupted Akira, destroying his new shot of shōchū and then reeling back a bit. 'Wah, I felt that one. About fucking time.'

'Well, if she's not nearby,' said Matsu, nudging with his face to the left, 'and you find that you have other possibilities. Very young, very well-crafted possibilities...'

Aya coughed, put her chopsticks down on the table, turned away from the sleaze who'd allegedly made a marriage commitment at some point in his life and pulled herself up onto her feet.

'Finished already?'

'I'm going for a walk.'

‘Don’t be silly, it’s far too late for that.’

‘And dangerous too,’ added the female Miho, pouring Akira another drink. ‘There are bandits and wild animals that sometimes come down from the mountains.’

‘You’ve had bandits before?’ asked Akira, straightening up a bit.

‘Not here, but close by.’

‘And they don’t try to rob you?’

‘They wouldn’t be that foolish,’ interjected Matsu, tapping his chopstick on the table. ‘It is a protected area, under the jurisdiction of the Suwa Clan. However, the forest and the slopes beyond, the side road...that is another matter. Which is why, young Aya, I insist that you go to your room. Assuming you really have finished with your meal?’

‘Fine. The room then. Where is it?’

‘The other side of the house, past the kitchen. I hope you don’t mind, but there is only one room for guests and only one futon laid out on the tatami.’

‘One futon?’

‘Double-sized, but yes, only one. You will all have to share.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Akira, taking his drink again. ‘Miho can take the floor. Aya and I can snuggle up under the covers.’

‘The hell I will,’ barked Aya, folding her arms.

‘Yeah, only cos you haven’t drunk enough yet.’

‘You’re disgusting.’

‘Half a bottle of shōchū down you and you’ll be dragging me between those pretty long legs of yours.’

‘I’d rather sleep in the river.’

‘Relax, I’m joking. You’re about the same age as one of my daughters. About as annoying too.’

‘You have children?’ asked Miho, coming back from staring at his fish.

‘Probably. In a few places.’

Aya muttered something under her breath that wasn’t as *under* as she thought then stormed off out of the room.

‘Seems a bit unpredictable, that one,’ said Matsu, stabbing another fish.

‘Predictably stropky,’ muttered Akira, lifting up his cup and studying the liquid swirling within.

‘She’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep, I’m sure,’ said the female Miho, rising from the table. ‘Assuming she can find the room. Come, you two strapping men, let me show you the way to your double-sized futon. With a small diversion to my bedroom to check for that cream.’

Akira finished his drink and growled drunkenly, while Miho stared at the outstretched hand of his namesake, then the fixed smile on her face, and thought one clear thing: Himiko.

Himiko and her green demon.

But then the other side of his brain tagged in and it changed to Miho and Matsu, nice, helpful people, a little sleazy, a little odd, but nothing to fret about.

As long as Akira kept his green katana close by.

~~~

A short while later, in a room with a second door panel that opened out onto a charming little stone garden, as well as a larger space beyond, Miho sat with his back against the interior wall, watching Akira use his splint arm to slap his own face.

It was an odd performance – and apparently what the ashigaru did when he was asleep and drunk – but not enough to distract him from the thought of Aya being groped and beaten by bandits.

An hour, maybe two and she still wasn't back from her impromptu walk.

Had she got lost?

Was she that averse to sleeping?

She did say that she needed those pills to put her out all night, but did that mean she couldn't sleep at all without them?

That was hard to believe.

He shifted side on, facing the door panel leading outside. And Akira's moss-like katana propped up next to it.

Should he go out, look for her?

He would have to at some point, but how would he be able to find her? The area was brand new, a complete mystery to him...he could be wandering in the completely wrong direction and get ambushed by bandits himself. Or mauled by an incalcitrant bear.

A sudden snoring noise broke out from Akira's nose, making Miho jump.

The ashigaru briefly opened his eyes and slurred, 'let him watch,' then quickly went back to his personal Id-scape as if nothing had happened.

Miho looked at Akira, now spread like a starfish across the only futon, and said, 'okay.'

Probably not a good idea to leave this guy all alone, but...better than sitting around and doing nothing.

Besides, the other Miho might be in the passage outside, waiting for him to fall asleep too so she could come in and...do something to them.

Or just to him.

After all, Akira was in no shape to do anything. And he felt surprisingly sober, despite having had four cups of shōchū.

Right on cue, there was a noise in the corridor, footsteps coming closer. Miho put both fists on the tatami, ready to spring up if the door panel slid open.

But it didn't.

The footsteps stopped...re-started...then faded out.

Thanks the gods for that. Though, if that was the female Miho coming for covert sex, then where was her husband?

Miho pulled himself up, pulling back scenes from the dinner earlier. He hadn't been a hundred per cent present mentally, but there were images of Aya leaning away from Matsu, swatting his hands as they tried to touch her on the arm or shoulder or other parts. Under the table parts perhaps...

Kuso...

Grabbing the katana, and telling an unconscious Akira he'd bring it back soon, Miho tread quietly to the door panel and slid it open.

The noise was minimal, and once he was in the garden, there were no problems at all; the nocturnal soundtrack covered almost every movement he made, especially the wildlife that constantly rustled the leaves of the bushes.

Thanks little guys, he thought, hoping it wasn't that incalcitrant bear.

Following the stone path out to the left, and then circling back round the main house, he called out ‘Aya?’ in hushed tones towards the trees.

There was no response except more frenzied rustling so he marked out a perimeter in his head and started walking further out.

Two hundred metres was his rough limit, and he kept to it for almost an hour.

After that, he trialled other possibilities.

One: she’d gone, fled, left them completely.

Two: she was back in the room, and he’d somehow missed her on his trails.

Three: her, Matsu and the other Miho were wrapped up together in some sexual free-for-all he didn’t want to imagine.

Four: bandits had bagged her.

Stopping next to the melted bear shrine, he looked at the okiandon sitting by the front door of the house, still glowing.

There were a few others he could think of – including going back to the Jewel of Kai to commune with the ghost of Himiko - but the fourth was the one he was worried about the most as, even with the katana in his hand, what could he do about it?

Bandits would be miles away by now, with no chance of him-

He paused, hearing the sliding crawl of a door opening.

Was that-

The front door panel slid all the way to the side and, luckily for him, Matsu turned and said something back into the house. If he hadn't, Miho wouldn't have had time to run right and hide behind what he assumed was a wood storage shack.

Voices drifted through the night air, the female Miho and Matsu briefly competing with the wildlife in the bushes then overwhelming them as their two shadowy figures stopped next to the same shack Miho was lurking behind.

Kuso stormed through his head seven hundred times as another door opened, this one creaking, and then closed again.

Then silence.

Miho stayed crouched against the rear stone wall of the shack, in slight discomfort, but too confused to move.

Had they just gone inside the wood shack?

Both of them?

A tiny little space like that?

It didn't make much sense, unless...

Gripping the guard of the katana, he poked his head round the side and breathed out another *kuso* when he saw the courtyard was clear.

So they really were inside.

He moved round and put his ear to the door, internally cursing at the sounds from the forest behind that wouldn't shut up.

Okay, no voices that he could discern, no footsteps.

Wait, was that-

The door wasn't latched so he pulled at it tentatively, then rested his head against the frame and stared forward.

Ah, not a wood storage shack then.

On the walls sat candles, every third one lit, and beneath them was a staircase that seemed to curve down in a lethargic spiral, probably going all the way under the main house.

Secret basements were never a good sign, he knew that from his own village – Aiko the Sleaze, Spiritual Chiyo, Old Masa and his skeleton-lengthening experiments on young boys - but he still started down the steps as, if he didn't, Aya could be done for.

Not that it was for certain she was down there, or that the female Miho and Matsu were doing anything malevolent, yet-

He stopped, almost dropping the katana.

Without any visual cue or warning, the staircase had come to an end, and now a small chamber with green rugs hung up on the wall was forcing itself upon him.

Kuso, not green again.

Not this soon.

‘Aya,’ he whispered blankly, his mind trying to decipher what he was seeing.

To the left of him, dressed up in juniper green robes, were Miho and Matsu, throwing some kind of dark powder at a large, jagged rock in the middle of the space. On the ground, were markings that definitely weren’t Buddhist or Shinto. And in the air around him was mist, or smoke, coming from four, larger candles set up behind the rock.

‘Wah, he’s here,’ yelled Matsu, dropping his bag of powder on his wife’s foot. ‘You said he was asleep.’

The female Miho hit her husband on the neck and told him to stop messing around, then turned to the intruder Miho and screamed, ‘kuso.’

‘Ah, it’s ruined now,’ mumbled Matsu, rubbing his arm.

‘You must’ve given him the wrong shōchū...you idiot.’

‘Can’t perform with him watching like this.’

‘Too busy fondling that girl, weren’t you?’

‘Too weird.’

Miho stuttered, ‘sorry, I didn’t-...’ then stumbled back into the wall and panicked, lashing out with the katana. The blade struck rock and the resulting tremor almost knocked it out of his hand.

‘Ah, he’s making a mess,’ said the female Miho, hands moving onto her hips, a little theatrically.

‘We should stop.’

‘But he’s here now.’ She looked at the large rock in the middle then inhaled a deep batch of chamber smoke. ‘Look, you can either go back to the room, or stay and watch. But don’t interfere or speak to it. Understand?’

Miho shook his head, the katana hanging limply from his hand.

‘Okay, blankness. That’ll do.’

She turned back to the large rock, grabbed her husband by the sleeve of his juniper green robes and, with Miho looking on, produced from beneath her own robes a curved dagger. With a verse or two of occult nonsense in Japanese from her husband, she then proceeded to slice her own forearm.

‘Kuso,’ she said, as more blood than expected dripped down onto the rock. ‘Hurry, cut yourself.’

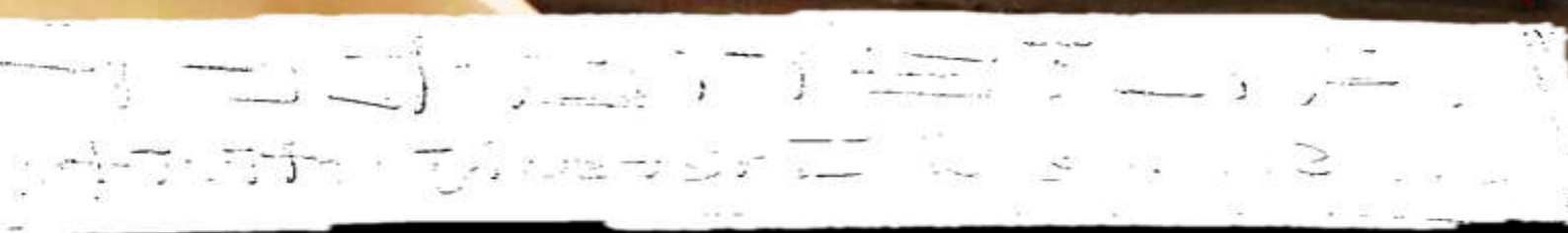
Wiping the dagger, she handed it to Matsu and the ritual was repeated.

More blood hit the rock, followed by chants that were in no language Miho had ever heard before...yet, somehow, they sounded vaguely familiar.

Slowly, the smoke thickened and the whole chamber became shrouded, and Miho was about to turn and run back up the steps,

when a new voice sounded out authoritatively from the middle of the chamber.

Miho turned, blinking like a mole in a kabuki stage spotlight as the smoke slowly started to dissipate and...a yellow-skinned figure stood where the large rock had been, a pair of misty turquoise orbs that may have been eyes staring right back at him.



CHAPTER 22

A DEMON UNINTERESTED IN HEAD-EATING

Eyes may have been a bit premature as, almost instantly, the turquoise blue mist broke out of their orb shape and darted right towards the married cultists, followed swiftly by the yellow demon's arms.

‘Again?’ it said in a voice that seemed to ripple as if it had come from the depths of a subterranean lake.

Miho watched as both his namesake and her husband stuttered and nudged each other in their green robes, until, finally, the demon gave up waiting and answered for them.

‘You got bored. Desperate for more aura.’

‘No...it was a coincidence, we swear,’ spurted out of Matsu's mouth, but the yellow demon swatted the words out of the air and turned to frown at the surrounding walls.

‘And this place...still the same...after I distinctly told you it was cramped and murky-looking.’

‘But it is ceremonial, and well hidden,’ replied the female Miho. ‘For the initial ritual, I mean. Of course, you are more than welcome to go outside and bathe in the fresh night air.’

The yellow demon grunted and walked a curved line over to the stairs, the turquoise mist again stretching out of the sockets like a

scouting party. Then it hit a human brick wall and reeled back in, forcing the demon's legs to come to a stop, too.

In front, blocking access to the stairs, was Miho in statue form, katana hanging loose from his right hand.

‘You too, huh?’ said the yellow demon, eyes dipping down to the green katana.

Move did prod against the door of Miho's brain, but, for some reason, he couldn't seem to enact it. His legs were completely rigid and his arms didn't even rise up to offer the most basic of defensive postures.

Luckily, the yellow demon didn't appear to care, giving up on conversation and gently pushing Miho's shoulder to the side as it moved forward, and then shouting back, ‘door better not be locked,’ when it'd scaled the first few steps.

As soon as the chamber was clear, Matsu and Miho lost all interest in being there and quickly rushed after the big, yellow guy, while Miho stood gormless for a few extra seconds, looking at the bowl of murky liquid that had produced the showy effect, before hurrying after them.

The door hadn't been locked, thank gods, and when he made it back out of the imitation-wood storage shack, he looked straight over to the path leading to the guest room.

In his short experience of demon activity, they tended to eat people's heads, or threatened to slice innocent, young village boys up into pieces, and if his body wasn't up to scratch or appetising enough then either Akira's or Aya's might be.

Assuming they were both in the room.

Akira probably was - his snoring had been apocalyptic - but Aya? He'd only been down in the ritual cave for about ten minutes, there was a good chance she still hadn't returned.

If she was ever going to.

Voices round the side of the wood shack lured him away from gloomy Aya speculation and back to the matter at hand. A yellow demon plus two fanatics planning to do something that required drugged wine and unconscious victims. A functioning katana in his right hand.

He edged round the path and, avoiding loose twigs on the ground, pursued the voices.

It didn't take long to find the source.

Matsu and Miho were both on their knees, holding out what looked like fallen leaves as an offering, while the yellow demon had one hand pushed flat against the trunk of a particularly large tree, muttering some occult language nonsense.

There was no real way to know what the hell was happening unless he stepped in and asked them directly, but Miho didn't feel comfortable doing that as all three of them looked insane.

‘We have offered our room to three travellers, including a vulnerable, young girl. And other travellers too, on different days,’ said Matsu, shaking the leaf in his hand.

‘And we have given money to beggars who appeared to be crippled,’ added Female Miho.

The yellow demon broke off from its tree meditation song, took one of their leaves and wiped the palm of its hand. Its eyes were still closed [or orbs of mist, technically] and remained so as it manoeuvred around the lunatic couple and made its way over to Miho's position.

Stopping a little to the side, it clamped the same palm it'd used to touch the tree on Miho's shoulder, asking in a much less submerged voice, ‘what the hell are you doing here anyway?’

Miho's first instinct was to stutter like the couple earlier, but some part of his brain kept it together enough to respond with, ‘just passing through.’

‘What about your clan?’

‘Err...my family?’

The demon tilted its head right, at quite an awkward angle, then removed its hand from Miho's shoulder and performed a series of patting motions down the side of his arm.

‘I don’t have a weapon,’ Miho said, confused yet making no move to resist. Then remembered the katana in his right hand. ‘The sword is someone else’s.’

The yellow demon didn’t seem to care, they just kept going with the body patting act. Finally, after bending down and doing the same action on Miho’s legs, the yellow demon let out a soft growl and said, ‘your family. Yes. Are they nearby?’

‘Well...my dad is dead...last year...and my mum is back home in my village.’

‘That’s where you were raised?’

‘Err...yes. Nambu.’

‘Any friends?’

‘Some. Most of the time. River Bitch. Kentaro 2. Spiritual Chiyo...before she got taken away for suspected witchcraft.’

‘And with you now...passing through here?’

Miho looked over at the door panel leading back into the main house. Should he mention Akira? Did he qualify in any way as a friend?

‘Ah, they are resting,’ concluded the yellow demon, taking Miho by the sleeve of his yukata. ‘Show me.’

‘Yes, the other two,’ said Matsu, re-joining them with a fresh supply of leaves. ‘This way, let us show you.’

‘They’re both a little rough,’ said the female Miho, ‘if you give them the chance to talk. Especially the girl. Very petulant.’

‘Hey, leave her alone,’ Miho bit back, thinking of Matsu and his wandering hands. And his wife’s too, now that he thought about it.

‘Go to your room,’ said the demon, putting an arm out like a stone wall. ‘I will call on you before I leave.’

‘But...we haven’t described all of our benevolent activities yet.’

‘We can show you the rice paper with the *thank you* messages.’

‘Your room,’ the demon repeated.

Hesitating a little then bowing obsequiously, both Matsu and the female Miho returned to the front of their own house, dropping the leaves like cigarette butts on the way.

‘Why do they do all this?’ asked Miho, watching them go, then refocusing on the yellow claw stuck to his sleeve.

‘Boredom. Fear. Sexual desire. The Lake Suwa effect.’

‘Huh?’

‘The bigger mystery is why I don’t take back their summoning stone. Relieve myself of all this...activity. Ah, whimsy, I suppose.’ The yellow demon tugged lightly on Miho’s sleeve, acting out a smile that may have been intended as jovial, but caught the moonlight at an odd angle and instead made it look homicidal. ‘Come, onwards to your room. Show me these friends of yours.’

~~~

The room remained Aya-less when Miho slid open the door panel and poked his head inside, but Akira's snoring was still going strong.

Which was odd as his body was wrapped up tight in the blanket, not a loose bit of material in sight, almost like he'd been prepped for burial the next day.

'Is he dead?' asked the yellow demon, stepping into the room after Miho.

In an act of unconscious defiance, Akira's splint arm shot out from beneath the covers, accompanied by a vocal warning not to fall in the river.

'Ah, never mind.'

'He had a lot to drink,' Miho said, edging round to the okiandon and propping the green katana gently against it.

'That's his blade?'

'Yes.'

'Did he drop it in a lake?'

'Sorry?'

The yellow demon gestured at the katana with a swish of the hand...then, when Miho said sorry again, just said, 'it's green.'

'Yeah. Err...it is. Green.'

‘Okay, clearly a tough question. Where is this other friend of yours?’

Miho coughed, forgetting the *he dropped it in a giant bucket of green ink* defence, and unfolded his arms [which he didn’t even realise he’d folded]. ‘I’m not sure. Actually, I was looking for her earlier. She went out for a walk, said she doesn’t sleep easily...maybe cos of recent events...but I couldn’t find her anywhere. I was hoping she’d be back by now.’

‘Perhaps she felt uneasy about sharing a futon with this one?’

‘Yeah. That’s also true.’

Miho nodded for extra effect, or credit, then flinched as a mosquito buzzed past his ear. He instinctively tried to lash out, but it was too fast, zig-zagging over to the futon and settling on Akira’s splint, which was lying exposed outside the blanket.

It stayed there a good while, sucking up the ashigaru’s shōchū-infused blood...and didn’t seem to have a limit. Was there a secret spiritual realm set up to store all that blood it was taking in?

Knowing that he should at least swat it away, Miho crept forward and slid his hand through the air until it was hovering over the mosquito.

The little insect was still gorging itself, and it seemed almost sad to kill it in this way, but...

His hand dived down quickly, then stopped...suspended about an inch above the blood-sucker by some invisible force.

‘What...’

Finally sensing its potential demise, the mosquito stopped drinking and flew off towards the open door panel.

‘My arm...’

‘That is a living creature,’ said the yellow demon, the turquoise mist orbs that sometimes doubled as eyes shimmering as it spoke. ‘A small, irritating one, but still...’

‘Sorry...we usually hit them. It’s normal.’

‘Not a good excuse.’

The yellow demon dimmed the glow of its orbs and moved to the wall near the okiandon. Aya’s bag was dumped there, a sign, at least, that she intended to come back at some point, and the yellow demon picked at its drawstring.

Miho felt life return to his hand and wiggled his fingers to confirm it. ‘Did you just freeze my hand?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Take over my brain?’

The yellow demon dipped its hand all the way inside Aya’s bag and muttered to itself in a language that was similar to the one used

by the tree trunk, one that definitely wasn't Japanese. Or human, even.

On the futon, Akira mumbled in unison, something about doing the same scam fourteen times.

Miho put the blanket back over the ashigaru's arm, frowning. Scam? What scam? Why would anyone need to do it fourteen times? The smiling image of the belt merchant popped back into Miho's head, making him shiver.

'You shouldn't get too close to that one,' said the yellow demon, standing by the door panel, apparently finished with Aya's bag.

'He's asleep.'

'Characters of his type, they care about one thing only. Survival.'

'Err...'

'Trust my words. The next town you come to, detach from this rogue. Take the girl with you.'

Miho raised his head, glancing at Aya's bag as if she were about to spring out of it.

'Don't worry, she'll be here when you wake up.'

'You can see her?'

The yellow demon put its hand on the door panel, closing its eyes [or orbs of mist, technically] and letting out a tiny wail. 'I have traced



her. She is nearby. Now, I must go and deal with those persistent stalkers before they tire.'

'Wait,' said Miho, stretching out a hand. 'Do you have to go?'

'*Have to* is a strong word.'

'I mean...there are some things I wanted to ask you, about your world.'

'Such as?'

Miho lowered his hand, dismissing the first question in the queue – why is your skin yellow? – and the second – are you it, he, she or they? – and the third, the fourth, the fifth...then saying, 'kuso,' when Akira's knee rose up and hit him in the waist.

'Perhaps too much pressure,' said the yellow demon, smirking. 'Though let me ask you something. Why is it you feel such comfort in the presence of a yellow-skinned demon from a different dimension?'

'Err...I don't know.'

'Have you met my kind before? Or is it the Lake Suwa effect washing over you?'

'Actually...there was one...no, two demons. In the last week.'

'I see. Yellow like myself?'

'No. One of them had a kind of green-ish...appearance...and the other was a beautiful woman in a yukata.'

'Doesn't sound particularly demonic.'

‘She wasn’t...until she turned into purple mist and threatened to eat me.’

The yellow demon’s turquoise orbs swirled and then lashed out in glowing tendrils, left, right, diagonal down, up towards the ceiling. Its claw gripped the door panel so tight it almost snapped a giant splinter off of it.

‘Do you know her?’

It took a moment, but the orbs finally relaxed and the door panel won back its freedom.

‘I deal with her kind from time to time, yes. A mercurial sort, vicious...especially in this world. Tell me, how is it that you survived your encounter?’

‘Honestly, I’m still not really sure. She just swirled around a bit then disappeared back into the forest. That was the last I saw of her.’

‘Ah, a range issue, perhaps.’

‘A what?’

‘You seem like a kind, amiable person, Miho,’ the yellow demon continued, reaching its fingers into the skin of its own waist and, with minimal pain or effort, pulling out a small, jagged stone. ‘And I fear for you. Especially in a place as superstitious-...as unhinged as Lake Suwa.’

‘It’s okay, we’re not staying. Farther north is our target.’

‘Good, good. You should go there fast. And if things seem bleak, drop this stone into any body of water, call for *Vit’oona Zah* and I will come. But, please...don’t overuse it like those two. And no blood-letting.’

Miho let the yellow demon open up his palm and place the stone gently on top. Thankfully, it didn’t fold its fingers over it as the edges were quite sharp. It did, however, place its knuckles on Miho’s temple and repeat *Vit’oona Zah* about ten times, which was a relief as he’d already started to forget it.

‘It is etched now,’ the yellow demon said, removing its hand. ‘Impossible to forget.’

‘*Vit’oona Zah*,’ whispered Miho, more to himself than the demon.

‘Now I really must leave. I can hear the moans from the other room.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Complaining noises.’

‘Oh.’

The pale blue orbs shimmered again and then evaporated into the air, along with the rest of the yellow-skinned demon, who managed a not very soothing wink as it faded out.

‘Not that house,’ shouted Akira, shooting his whole body up this time and reaching for his katana.

Which was now propped up next to the okiandon, on the other side of the futon.

*Kuso*, thought Miho, quickly leaping across, grabbing the katana guard and then placing it as gently as he could next to Akira's flailing hand.

A few seconds later, it connected.

'Wood's all wrong, too much light,' replied the ashigaru, patting the side of the blade then lowering himself back down onto the futon and pulling the covers all the way over his head.

# CHAPTER 23

## NOT HER BEST WORK



The room sat empty, the futon covers untouched, the typical furniture and okiandon for such a place completely absent.

Rumours among the ant community warned that this particular territory was haunted, but to the four young ants sneaking in through the gaps of the balcony door panel, it seemed more like a colony showroom, pulling them in with the visual promise of no humans and no adventurous bears that might accidentally step on them.

The only odd thing was the large wooden box in the centre of the room, sat on a rug laid over the main tatami.

It probably wasn't anything beyond ornamental, or perhaps a storage place for treasure stolen from beaten enemies, something rarely opened, yet it was quite odd that the lid seemed to be rattling.

Nope, confirmed the boldest ant, putting its leg next to the box. Definitely some movement inside.

It turned back to its comrades, giving them the signal to retreat, adding there might be something alive inside...before the lid shook itself clean off and landed edge-first on the poor insect's head.

Not a pretty way to go...though it was fast...and visually interesting.

The surviving ants scurried to the door panel, the quickest of them catching a brief glimpse of the sun outside before being swept up into the sudden purple storm and disintegrating obediently into infinitesimal gore molecules.

On the other side of the room, the interior door panel slid open and beach-mode kunoichi Misora strolled in, a half-eaten pear in her left hand. Another head poked in behind her, a young girl with rigidly cropped hair, giving out a whispered, ‘is that her?’ before pulling back quickly as the panel almost slammed into her face.

Shouting through the rice paper for Yuka to go and do horse prep in the stables, Misora took a small bite of the pear and turned back round.

‘Ah, you’re up and about,’ she said, eyes following the swirls of lilac for a few seconds before dizziness cut in. ‘Shall I come back later?’

The light show came to an abrupt stop, three streams of purple coalescing into one block and rapidly etching out the familiar shape of Atta Noe.

‘Ah, the work face. Feeling better now?’

‘Update, quickly.’

‘About your two escapees?’

‘Quicker.’

Misora took another tiny bite of her pear, acting out an expression of disappointment. 'Not the best news.'

'Dead?'

'All four of our men. In the ryokan lobby.'

'The ashigaru, the idiot boy?'

'Either very good at hiding or gone.'

Atta Noe put a hand on the side of her box, letting it slide into purple mist.

'Green guy's gone too. Though we're not exactly sure where.'

'... ..' replied the lilac demon in her native tongue.

'Call for my box carriers. I must pursue them at once.'

'That's the other piece of not good news. Yukio Ka is sending myself, Ichiko and that annoyingly curious girl outside in the annex chamber to go after them.'

'Yes, good, and I will lead you.'

Another bite of the pear, a shake of the head. 'Sorry, not on the table. Yukio Ka wants you to stay here.'

'What? For what purpose?'

'He didn't say.'

Atta Noe let the rest of her arm retreat into mist form, then lashed out at the almost finished pear in Misora's hand.



‘Hey, I was still eating that...’

‘Nonsense. Petty scheming nonsense. He sent you to tell me this?’

‘From his own weirdly narrow lips.’ Misora stared down at the remains of her pear, searching for a surviving piece of flesh.

‘Apparently, you’re less likely to have a hissy fit if I’m around.’

‘... ..’

‘Yeah, that’s what I said too.’

Atta Noe ranted a few more lines in her own language then gave both mouth and limbs, and the rest of her human form, over to the purple swarm, streaming in and around Misora, swiping at her hair, the sleeves of her yukata, slashing at the door panel leading outside, before finally coming back to an exhausted female slump at the side of the box.

‘If it’s any consolation,’ said Misora, brushing down her yukata and re-ordering her hair, ‘Ichiko is a complete sadist. When she gets her hands on your targets...’

‘They’re mine,’ Atta Noe whispered, somehow loud enough to carry to the door panel and the ears of the young girl listening in, who had to suppress her ragged breathing a little just so the guard at the end of the corridor wouldn’t come over.

‘Okay...their corpses...if we can get them back in time.’

‘Not good enough.’

Misora stepped closer to the box, leaning down a bit and patting Atta Noe on the shoulder. 'Sorry, but...Shingen's orders.'

The lilac demon appeared to finally notice the hand on her shoulder, lifting her own hand up and pushing it off.

'I hope you fail miserably,' she said, eyes stuck on the tatami.

Taking the hint, Misora dusted off her yukata again then headed out through the door panel, whispering to the young girl to get to the stables fast if she wanted to live.

'Is she okay?'

'Faster than that, please.'

The young girl tried to peer through the half inch gap the door panel had left open, and was successful for a brief moment, catching sight of a purple eye staring back at her...but then it was gone, and Misora was grabbing her yukata sleeve and dragging her down the corridor.

'The stables, Yuka,' she repeated, as the young girl babbled about how purple the eye was. 'No detours.'

'I know, I'm going, but-'

'Or I'll tell Ichiko.'

The guard nearby laughed, clearly familiar with the name, and said, 'good luck,' to the now very silent Yuka as she passed.

‘Yeah, thought that would do it,’ muttered Misora, finally letting go of the rookie’s sleeve.



An hour later, dressed in a less-slashed yukata and dōbuku combo, Misora stepped up to her horse in the main courtyard and told it not to make any annoying neighing sounds as she wasn’t in the mood.

‘Socialising with the equipment again,’ said the tall, ruler-straight woman next to her, already perched on top of her own horse.

‘It’s called respect, Ichiko.’

‘Well, at least you’ve bothered to show up. Where’s that idiotic new girl? She should’ve been here twenty minutes ago.’

‘Maybe Yukio Ka is giving her some private instructions.’

There was a glint in Ichiko’s eye, though her face remained stone-like. And her hand edged ever so slightly towards the dagger tucked into her belt. Then stopped as Yuka emerged from a side door, walking a bit awkwardly at first then settling into an exaggerated stride as she approached them.

‘Where’s my horse?’ she asked, looking around at the courtyard drones, who all reacted by shifting their weight onto their other foot and looking down at the random straw scattered about on the ground.

‘In the kingdom under the sea,’ replied Misora, smiling to herself.

‘What?’

‘In the stable, you dolt,’ barked Ichiko, steering her horse around and glaring down at the young trainee. ‘Don’t just stand there gawping, go and get it. Now.’

Yuka visibly tensed up, her hands turning not into fists but daggers. And her eyes...

‘What is the delay?’ came another voice from behind.

Misora glanced over, seeing the spymaster, Atta Ka Yukio, making his way over, the two ever-present servant twins trailing a metre behind on each side.

‘This third wheel is holding us up,’ answered Ichiko, backing her horse up a bit and nodding at her superior.

‘Is that so?’

Yuka looked down at the ground, mumbled something about getting her horse, then turned in a slow circle away from the tall, imposing figure of Atta Ka Yukio and headed across the courtyard.

‘Stop there,’ shouted the spymaster.

Before Yuka could do anything, the twins had dashed in front of her, their motion so fast that it registered to even the two kunoichi as an impossible blur.

‘Look, if we don’t get moving soon,’ Misora started to say, but was silenced with a swish of the spymaster’s hand.

Moving up behind Yuka, he reached out a long pale finger [with four rings that looked like peasants' wedding bands fixed on] and traced a line down the length of her arm. When he got to her hand, he stretched out all fingers and tapped the nails on the end, whispering into her ear, 'not your best work.'

'I was in a rush,' she said back, pulling her hand away and swirling out of Yuka's eyes, ears and mouth, coalescing into a brief state of collective purple mist before finalising herself into her usual human form. 'Of course, if the orders had made more sense...'

'You...killed her...Yuka?' stuttered Misora, eyes fixed on the corpse that had just been shed like an old bath robe onto the courtyard stones.

Atta Noe turned and looked past the spymaster's shoulder, directly at Misora's face...which wasn't the best idea as it looked even more stone-like than Ichiko's, with spots of pissed off volcano barely quelled underneath.

'Speak,' commanded Atta Ka Yukio, redrawing her attention.

'Yes, obviously I killed her. Because she was useless. Having sex with one of the guards in the Sparrow Garden. Peeping through my door panel and making weird breathing noises. No manners or brains or work ethic whatsoever.'

'And you thought you could just...ride out...on another little adventure?'

‘Of course. That’s why I’m here. And Shingen would agree with me if you weren’t always hanging off his ear like a Huxx insurance rat.’

The twins in front straightened out their hands, eyes glowing.

‘Even now, we’re wasting time. I should be on a horse, and you should’ve already ordered two men to carry my box, not be standing around this courtyard pretending to be disappointed.’

The spymaster folded both bony hands together, one slightly higher than the other, and took an uncomfortably long time to study Atta Noe’s eyes. Finally, when even Ichiko was beginning to shift in her saddle, he gave a diagonal nod to the twins and they powered down.

‘You may have the permit, Noe, but this recent behaviour and attitude of yours has stepped far past the accepted line,’ he said, voice modulated to that of a child’s teacher. ‘There is no point in screwing up your face, you know it to be fact. And you know there must be consequences.’

‘What? One week of box solitary?’

Atta Ka Yukio cleared his throat long and groggily, even putting a fingernail to his neck to regulate the sound. Then his hands dropped, merging into each other. ‘In one hour, you will board a palanquin and travel to Sunpu. There, you will deliver the elder Shingen to the Imagawa Daimyō.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Following that, as a sign of our nascent alliance, you will be retained in the daimyō’s service for one solar year.’

‘Service? For the Imagawa Clan? Don’t be absurd. The little ants can barely hold together their own province.’

‘Correct, and as an auxiliary consul, you will be charged with rectifying that.’

‘Nonsense. Those incompetents are just-...they’re beneath me. No, I refuse the assignment. I will not go.’

Atta Ka Yukio straightened up to full height, his head almost blotting out the sun crawling up in the sky behind him. ‘If you do not do it, you will not be beneath anything, nor above, nor in any position at all.’

‘You wouldn’t dare to-’

‘Impudence, again. It is not I who dares. If it were, you would not be getting off so easily. Please, do not speak again, I am tired of it. Go and pack. You depart in one hour. Guards, clear up the corpse. Inform her parents that she died in a gardening accident.’

With another signal to the twins, the spymaster turned on his zori heel and glided seemingly without footsteps back inside the annex. Passing him on the way, was another young girl, costumed in the same way as Misora and Ichiko, and leading a horse behind her.

Atta Noe stayed rooted to the spot, her legs outlined with shimmering purple mist up to the knees. The guards got on with the corpse-clearing business, taking a limb each, pretending not to notice the supernatural light show.

Outmanoeuvred by a geriatric palakkji, she thought to herself. And now a year with that Imagawa debacle. On Shingen's command. No apparent way out either.

The neighing of a horse forced her to blink, the new girl patting it on the nose to calm it down. 'I'm Kanae, Yuka's replacement,' she said, finally turning to face her two seniors.

'Hopefully a smarter one,' said Ichiko, giving a side-glare to Atta Noe, then pulling on the reins and guiding her horse towards the gate.

Misora patted her own horse on the side, but didn't climb up. Didn't do anything except stand there, watching the body of Yuka disappear through the second gate. Finally, she rebooted just enough to guide her horse over to Atta Noe, stopping behind and waiting to be noticed.

It took a while, but eventually the purple demon compromised and rotated her head halfway.

'You actually killed her,' said Misora, looking down at the string-like purple tendrils whipping aimlessly out at nothing.

'Must've been pre-meditated,' answered Atta Noe, clearly lost in her own cause. 'The ease of it. Sending me off for a whole year,



leaving in one hour. To the patheticness of the Imagawa Clan. Me.  
With my talents.'

'Okay, fine. Enjoy your vacation. You deserve it.'

'What was that?'

'Nothing. I'm going.'

'You're angry? At me?'

'See you in a year, sociopath.'

'For what? I killed the stupid one, not you. Sociopath?'

Misora patted her horse again and led it out towards the gate,  
finally climbing up when they'd passed through to the street outside.

'Ungrateful human wretch,' mumbled Atta Noe, watching her go.



## CHAPTER 24

### IZAKAYA WITH REIKO & NO FACE

After a rough dream-stroke-nightmare where Miho chased Aya around the Jewel of Kai courtyard, trying to gift her Himiko's decapitated head, he woke up and saw the same girl standing over him, asking in a brusque tone why he hadn't fought for space on the futon.

'You're back,' he slurred, rubbing his eyes, rustling his hair, then quickly checking to make sure he had some clothes on.

'If you give anything to these thugs, even futon space, they'll laugh at you and take a hundred times more.'

A spluttered cough from the right told Miho that Akira was still there, and, when he turned to see what kind of condition he was in, gave out a confused *huh?* as it turned out the ashigaru wasn't even awake yet.

'Ah, don't stare at him like that, let's just go. If we hurry, or you hurry, we can be out of here before he wakes up.'

She used her foot to push both his bag and yukata into his hip.

'What time is it?' asked Miho, sitting up, squinting at the dagger of light pushing through the gap in the door panel.

'Past sunrise. Come on, up, get dressed. I won't look.'

‘Where did you go last night?’

‘Nowhere. Outside.’

‘To do what?’

‘Nothing. I just went for a long walk, thought about a few things, got a bit lost. Here, yukata on first.’ She bent down and practically forced his arms in, then dug her hands under his armpits and pulled him up. ‘Grab your bag, your dōbuku.’

‘What about him?’ asked Miho, gesturing towards the ashigaru with his face now buried like a drunk owl in the body of the futon.

‘We’re near Suwa already, he won’t care.’

‘Seems a bit rude to leave without saying anything.’

‘Not to me. Quick, out through this way, don’t want to bump into that weird couple again.’

‘Ah, actually...’ Miho stopped, pretending to struggle with the bag on his shoulder. The same bag that had the stone the yellow-skinned demon had gifted to him the previous night. Should he tell Aya about that? Would she believe him?

‘Stop stalling and move,’ she said, dragging him by the dōbuku sleeve to the door panel and then letting go so he would have at least some dignity as he staggered outside. ‘Based on my co-incidental reconnaissance last night, the road into Uehara is down on the south-east side. Not too far.’

‘We’re not going to Fujimi?’

‘For what? We’re basically past it already. Might as well head to the next town north.’

‘I suppose...’

‘Then we can get to Suwa faster too.’

‘Yeah. Suwa. Good plan. Do you think we can grab something to eat first?’ asked Miho, peering over at the main entrance as they passed round the side of the fake wood storage shack.

‘No time.’

‘But I’m quite hungry.’

‘We’ll get a proper meal when we get to Uehara.’

‘How long will that be?’

‘I don’t know. About an hour. Hour and a half.’

Miho hesitated slightly, then reached out to Aya’s shoulders and pulled her to an abrupt halt.

‘We’re not going in there,’ she said, her tone exasperated.

‘I know, I know.’

‘Then why are you dragging me back?’

Miho pointed at the ground in front of her, where a huge crater was no more than a few millimetres from gobbling up her feet.

‘Pothole.’

‘Kuso...’

‘It’s quite well-disguised.’

‘Are you being caustic?’

‘Core sick?’

‘It’s the size of a bear’s head. Why didn’t I see that? Kuso.’

‘Fatigue, probably.’

‘Or distracted by your food questions.’ She stepped around the hole that seemed to have a small reservoir of muddy water at the bottom, which was odd as it hadn’t rained the last few nights. Bear spit perhaps? ‘How about we walk in silence for a while? At least till we get to the main road.’

Miho looked back at the entrance, shrugging.

‘Shrugging means okay?’

‘I suppose.’

Aya took a lighter hold of his sleeve and guided him round the hole like a pensioner, telling him that saying *err...* was better than shrugging so he should return to doing that.

‘Fair point,’ replied Miho, quelling the urge to tell her that, actually, he liked to alternate between the two of them.

‘And the next time there’s a futon, don’t surrender your half of it.’

‘Err...’

‘Unless it’s a sick person. Or a baby. Or a woman you’re attracted to who doesn’t like you back. Or the emperor...I guess.’

‘Don’t know if that’ll ever happen.’

‘No, edit that. Emperors should be down to earth. Sharing is fine.’

‘Noted.’

~~~

Aya’s time prediction turned out to be fairly accurate as just over an hour later, they left the trees and the birds and the creepy sounds of vague wildlife behind and entered the town of Uehara, an ancillary of Suwa about two kilometres north.

Architecture-wise, it wasn’t that different from Fujimi or Kōfu; the same wooden structures for houses, routine shops, trade fronts, izakayas, pagan stationery outlets, massage parlours, clan barracks - all of it sectioned into distinct zones - with the main road running parallel to the River Kami through the centre of it all, and announcing its entrance with a small, relatively bustling street market.

Miho and Aya stopped at some of the stalls, looking around for buns or snacks, but none of the hawkers seemed to be interested in the concept of food sales, mostly talking to each other or yelling at their dogs instead, so the duo kept moving, kicking occasional pebbles into the river, until they came to an izakaya at the corner of a busy

intersection, with a pretty wooden bridge leading another path off to a park on the right.

For some reason, the izakaya had a lit okiandon hanging outside, even though it was barely even midday, and that factor, plus the rogue group of ashigaru with Suwa insignia milling about on the bridge up ahead, persuaded Aya and Miho to give it a try.

‘If they ask us anything, just say we’re visiting from Nagano,’ whispered Aya, as she slid open the izakaya door panel.

‘As brother and sister?’ asked Miho, squinting at the dimly lit room they were walking into.

‘No, we don’t look alike. It’ll have to be lovers.’

‘Yuki won’t be happy about that.’

‘We don’t have to physically do anything, just pretend. Maybe hold my hand if they really look sceptical.’

‘Don’t know if they’ll be able to see that,’ replied Miho, almost knocking over the waitress coming to greet them as he gestured at the darkness with his arm. ‘Sorry, I didn’t-...it’s quite dark in here.’

‘Yes, apologies for that,’ the waitress said, smiling. ‘It’s by request of one of our regular patrons.’

‘Who, a bat?’ asked Aya.

‘There’s a slightly brighter seat over here, if the shadows are too uncomfortable for you.’

‘Sounds good,’ replied Miho, reaching down to Aya’s hand and squeezing it...then getting squeezed back harder in return.

The waitress, who gave her name as Reiko, led them to a table near the open window, which acted like a small pocket universe of trapped sunlight within a black hole. ‘You do have coin, don’t you?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Sorry, I have to ask. We’ve had some youngsters come in and order and then leap out through that window when it was time to pay the bill.’

‘Don’t worry, we’re too tired to do anything like that.’

‘Good. You do have money though, correct?’

Aya dipped a hand in her bag and took out a small purse, rattling it hard to make the coins inside clink.

‘Lovely. Can you open it up and show me?’

‘Seriously?’

‘Sorry, I have to insist. We had a belt merchant in here a few weeks ago, shaking a purse of replica coins at us.’

‘Ah, those guys,’ said Aya, stealing a glance at Miho, who flinched like a kindergarten Empress Kōgyoku [Soga who?] and looked out the window at an old man itching his crotch. ‘Okay, here’s all we got, if you can see it through all this shadow.’

She tilted the bag and a small avalanche of coins flowed out onto the table, one of them getting a little carried away and sailing right off the edge of the table.

Switching to reflex mode, Aya made a daring lunge forward as the coin dropped towards the floor, pulling back at the last millisecond when she saw another hand coming in from the other direction.

‘Wah,’ she cried out, as the other hand caught the coin in its palm...then dropped it again in response to her *wah*.

Stifling an instinctive laugh, Aya bent down to retrieve the coin, but was stopped a second time as the other hand pressed one finger down on top of the copper piece and then shot upwards, seemingly magnetising the coin enough to bring it up attached to the underside of their hand.

With a faint clink, it landed on the pile of coins on the table.

‘Unfortunate lapse for the first part,’ said the owner of the magic hand, a man with features that were almost redundant due to the red and white stripes painted on his neck, coupled with the matching colour accessory beads branching out of his hair.

In fact, his markings were so distinctive that Aya and Miho took a long while to stop staring at them and, by the time they did, he was already turning to leave.

‘Wait,’ said Aya, finally, stretching out an arm. ‘How did you do that?’

‘Magic, of course,’ he said, half turning.

‘Yeah...but how?’

‘What did he do?’ whispered Miho, who’d been too busy picturing belt merchant revenge scenes onto the street scene outside.

Aya shushed him and asked again, this time asking for specific details.

The man scratched the red stripe on his neck and looked at Reiko. They seemed to have a brief telepathic exchange, concluded with a nod from both sides.

‘I leave you in the capable talons of my agent,’ the man said, pulling his dōbuku tight and heading towards the main door.

The instant the panel slid shut, the light from the three windows spread further into the izakaya, brightening the whole place and making one of the patrons shout out loud, ‘thank fucking *Ebisu* for that.’

‘That was the patron I was referring to earlier,’ Reiko said, leaning down.

‘And you’re his agent?’ asked Aya, still looking at the door panel.

‘His little joke. I do help to promote some of his street performances, but they’re quite rare nowadays. Says he has other things to deal with, important things.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Kao Nashi.’

‘Kao...Nashi. Really? That’s real?’

‘Stage name. I just call him Daiki, but I think that’s supposed to be a secret. Anyway, what can I get you? The chef is doing some pretty good fried tofu today, if you’re looking for something light?’

‘There’s a kitchen here?’ asked Miho, raising his head up and looking over at the counter on the other side of the izakaya.

‘Annex, next door.’

‘Tofu sounds good,’ answered Aya, coming back to the table and the small mountain of coins.

‘Drinks?’

‘Just two cups of green tea. Very hot.’

Reiko nodded and headed back to the main counter. Miho waited until she was out of earshot, and the few other patrons looked occupied, before he nudged Aya and asked again what had happened.

‘Cheap magic trick,’ she replied, picking up the coins.

‘Doing what?’

‘Coin related. Doesn’t matter. Key point is the light is back in and we can actually see again.’

‘Don’t know. I was almost getting used to the dark.’

‘Yeah, it’s good if you want to get robbed. Or groped by a pervert.’

The door panel slid open again, cutting off Miho’s *you mean me?* response. The same group of ashigaru from the wooden bridge outside entered, surveyed the now well-lit environment, grinned when they saw Aya and Miho, and swaggered with hands on belts over to their table.

‘Not again,’ yelled Reiko, intercepting halfway and, despite being about five inches shorter and unarmed, pushing them back towards the door.

‘Get your paws off me, woman,’ shouted the lead ashigaru, a tall, scrawny type with hawk-like eyebrows.

‘I’ve told you a hundred times, stay outside or I’ll go direct to your daimyō.’

‘Your threats are water. And your face is doughy.’

‘And you look like a hangover shit. Move. Now. Out, out, out.’

The lead ashigaru turned to his cronies and shook his head like he was *head thug* in an amateur street play. ‘These irritating nags...’

‘Don’t act tough for your friends, leave.’

‘Woman, don’t you dare-’

‘Go. Get out. Move. Or it’s daimyō season.’

In a continued act of insane boldness, Reiko switched from pushing to prodding with three bunched fingers and eventually forced them back against the door panel. The ashigaru’s hand hovered next to his katana guard, but didn’t go any further, and after another hard prod from Reiko, he slid the door panel across and stormed out, kicking the first random passer-by he saw outside.

‘Brainless thugs,’ yelled Reiko after them, wiping both hands on her yukata and then turning to see which oddball was doing the clapping.

It was Aya, though she soon stopped, settling for a more reserved cheer of, ‘good job.’

‘Akira was right,’ mumbled Miho, helping Aya put the last of the coins back in the purse. ‘It’s like watching a bunch of animals.’

‘Of course, they’re ashigaru.’

‘Yeah...I’m learning that.’

‘Learning?’

Miho didn’t respond, he just handed her back the purse and looked out the window again. The ashigaru were now repositioned at their original place on the bridge, eyeballing the old man who, for some reason, wouldn’t stop itching his crotch.

‘Well, at least we don’t have to deal with them. Or your friend, Akira, who took up all of the futon.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Definitely a good thing.’

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After finishing a pretty impressive plate of fried tofu and sipping volcanic-heat green tea, the two pretend lovers left the izakaya and walked further down the river, stopping every now and then to ask a few random pedestrians, which town was better, Uehara or Suwa?

Most said Uehara, obviously, but a few crossed the line and said Suwa, mainly cos it was next to the lake and, therefore, closer to god.

God being nature, apparently.

‘If they like it better, why don’t they move there?’ asked Aya, more to her own hand than Miho, who seemed to be entranced by the gently rippling current of the river.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Unless they just prefer to visit sometimes.’

‘Probably.’

‘It is quite near, not that hard to get there.’

‘Right.’

Aya picked up a small twig from the path and threw it at the side of Miho's head, blurting out, 'wah, sorry,' when it hit him just above the eye.

Luckily, he barely noticed, interpreting the strike as an insect scraping against his forehead and giving it a quick brush.

'Did that tofu hypnotise you or something?'

'Huh?'

'You've been blank all afternoon. Just a lot of yeah and probably.'

'Yeah. Probably.'

'Kuso...'

He looked dazed for a second then broke into the slightest of smiles. 'Joking. I'm still here, don't worry.'

'What are you so deep in thought about? Where to go next?'

'Not really.'

'Wah, you're not still worried about that ashigaru, are you?'

'A bit.'

'Why? He's a thug.'

'Just feels wrong, leaving like that. Not saying anything to him.'

Miho looked up at Aya, keeping a lock on her eyes as they tried to dart left. 'Taking some of his coins.'



‘Ah, you noticed that.’

‘It was pretty blatant.’

‘Yeah, and deserved too. He took them from those other thugs, I took them from him. It’s the circle of economy, or trade economics, whatever you call it.’

‘If he catches up with us...’

‘He won’t.’

‘But if he does...’

She picked up another twig and threw it into the glow of the river, almost hitting the youngest of a family of ducks swimming by.

‘There’s a good chance he’ll come here, to Uehara...’

‘I’m hungry. How about you?’

‘What?’

‘Dinner. Do you want some?’

‘Isn’t it a bit early?’

‘Not if we walk slowly back to our favourite izakaya.’

Miho stared at her, then at the path on the opposite side of the river. They’d only walked about half a kilometre, so if he squinted, he could just about make out the sign of the place that was actually pretty cosy. In fact, he’d been half hoping Aya would suggest it and now she had, he was forced to act wary, as if he hadn’t also eaten at the same

izakaya in his village about seven thousand times in a row and never given it a second thought.

‘Well?’

# CHAPTER 25

## ASHIGARU BARFLY



Dinner was pepper-spiced chicken strips and a local Suwa soup Miho had never seen nor heard of before.

However, after surviving the blue enigma of Kumamoto chicken, he was now a lot more flexible on *exotic* food and finished everything in his bowl before Aya had even picked up her chopsticks.

And when, after twenty-odd minutes of staring at a fairly busy Reiko on the other side of the izakaya, she finally did dig into the meal, it was more a nursing of the chicken instead of an actual, focused attempt to consume it.

‘I don’t think she’s going to talk to us,’ said Miho, following his pretend lover’s line of sight. ‘Too many customers.’

Aya held up a clump of rice and then did nothing as it slipped and fell back into her bowl. ‘Way too many.’

‘Not sure how she copes with it all...assuming it’s like this every evening.’

‘She can’t, it’s impossible.’

‘And the kitchen staff are like ghosts, just bring in the food then gone. In fact, I think it’s the same guy each time. Sometimes in a hat, sometimes not.’

Aya muttered *yeah* and picked up a long strip of chicken, dipping it with a tad more attention into the spring onion sauce.

Miho looked around the rest of the izakaya, slouching back in his seat when he saw that none of the other customers resembled ashigaru. There was one guy who looked quite tall and muscular, but he was on his own and seemingly busy scribbling something on rice paper.

Probably a poet. Or a novelist. Trying to write the next *Genji Monogatari* or, if he was a traveller, *Fuji Kikō*.

Not that Miho had read either of those.

He'd tried *Heike Monogatari* once, when the local daimyō had authorised a book tour of the provincial villages and a copy of the text had sat in the Solitude Temple for a week and a half, but there'd been a queue behind him and he hated it when there was that kind of pressure.

Still, one page was enough to know it wasn't for him.

As in, he didn't understand what the author was going on about. Descriptions of tree bark and the different humming sounds of birds, okay, but how did that connect to the vibrations of human thought? And what the hell were ley lines and rhizomes?

Visibly shaking his head at the memory, Miho returned to his green tea and checked in on Aya.

Wah...

She wasn't there, the seat was-

Kuso.

Where did she get to now?

For some reason, he looked out of the window first, using the hanging lanterns outside to aid his search of the street shadows and silhouetted faces.

Then, rationalism kicked in and he readjusted to a narrower range. The interior of the izakaya, specifically, the counter where Reiko the Bold was pouring out drinks.

Ah, there she was, hanging off the arm of her new idol.

He thought about shouting out, to ask what she was up to, but by the time the idea had fully gestated, Aya was already glaring his way, waving her hand in a signal that either meant spin-dance on the table or get over there.

Going with the latter, Miho wriggled out from the bench and weaved his way past tables of customers without katanas until he was parked on the stool next to her.

'Here, take these,' said Aya, holding out two bowls of Suwa soup.

'What?'

'We're using our expertise to help out.'

'You mean work?'

‘Volunteer shift.’

‘Paid,’ corrected Reiko, glancing over from the eight cups of shōchū she was pouring out.

‘But...’ whispered Miho, pointing back at their table, ‘you haven’t finished your dinner yet.’

Aya patted her stomach and said she’d had enough already, and it was more important to repay the debt from earlier.

‘You are a very strange girl,’ declared Reiko, putting the eight cups on a tray and then picking the whole thing up without any sense of caution at all. ‘Ashigaru in here is bad for business, kicking them out had nothing to do with you.’

‘They were standing next to our table, leering.’

‘Happens to all young girls. Young boys too, sometimes.’ She glanced at Miho, stopping just short of winking, then walked off to one of the tables on the far side of the izakaya. After chatting to the customers for a minute, she came back, patting both Miho and Aya on the shoulder. ‘Still, if you really want to spend your leisure time serving drunk locals and salt merchants here, I won’t stop you. And you will get paid for it, I insist.’

Aya opened her mouth to protest, but Reiko wasn’t finished.

‘Of course, if all you do is stand there gawping while that soup gets cold then you won’t get anything.’

Miho looked down at the two bowls in his hands and...almost dropped them when Aya nudged him in the side and said to get on with it.

‘Where? Which table?’

‘The couple who look half dead.’ She pointed at an old guy and a thirty-something year old woman, both in matching pink yukatas, both incredibly sleepy-looking. ‘Or the father and daughter. I’m not sure.’

‘Wife and husband,’ said Reiko, this time winking for real.

‘Oh.’

‘Don’t ask how old she was when they got married.’

‘Err...’

‘Soup. Go,’ she ordered, pushing Miho towards the table and laughing when he tripped on his own zori and almost dropped both bowls onto the wife’s lap.

‘He’s better at cooking,’ said Aya, launching a soft defence.

‘Yeah?’

‘A lot better.’

‘Sounds like a good catch.’

Aya made a *gah* sound, looking down at her hands and being momentarily confused when she couldn’t see any soup bowls.



‘Of course, we won’t tell him that,’ added Reiko with a smile.

~~~

The impromptu, definitely paid shift lasted another two hours before Reiko finally called them over and said that all the food was done for the night.

‘Still looks quite busy,’ said Aya, looking around the izakaya and scratching her arm under the yukata sleeve.

‘Because we close at 1am.’

‘Wah, that late?’

‘It’s what we’re famous for. Open at eleven, close at one.’

‘You mean...you do a fourteen hour shift, every day?’

‘When you say it like that, it makes me sound heroic. No, most days are pretty lethargic, it’s just that it’s festival season now and we get a lot of travellers from around the province. Other provinces too.’

‘Like us,’ replied Miho, glancing at Aya to see if she would add anything to their background narrative.

Nope, she was too busy scratching herself and seemingly counting out the number of remaining customers, or guessing the amount of shōchū left in their cups.

‘I suppose I should ask,’ continued Reiko, pouring out a cup of shōchū. ‘What are your plans? Are you staying here for the Onbashira festival?’

‘Not sure yet,’ answered Miho, adding a redundant shrug. ‘I have to continue north, to Shinano.’

‘Is that where you’re from, Shinano?’

‘No, no...it’s where my girlfriend is. Or where I hope she is.’

‘Ah, girlfriend,’ Reiko said quietly, glancing at Aya, who was still occupied with her shōchū calculations. ‘Always nice to have one close by.’

‘Err...yeah. I think so.’

‘What about you, young lady? Are you off to Shinano too?’

Aya heard the *young lady* part and turned back, mentally sketching out the two faces staring back at her then saying, ‘what?’

‘Are you going with your friend here to Shinano?’

‘Friend?’ She looked at the vague outline of Miho and slowly shook her head. ‘No. I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘You seem unsure.’

‘Actually, I might just stay here. For a while.’

Reiko responded with the beginning trace of a smile, then downed the cup of shōchū. ‘Well, if that’s the case...if you’re serious about it...then there’s a job here for you any time you want. In fact, starting right now, if that’s not too sudden?’

Aya pulled the hand out from her sleeve, rubbed the ends of the nails then stuck it back in again and resumed scratching.

‘Why don’t you take a rest, think about it for a while?’

‘The same shift?’ she said sharply, pulling Reiko back from her attempt to leave with the shōchū bottle.

‘That’s right. Eleven to one. With a nice four hour break in the afternoon.’

Aya pushed her bottom lip over the top one and nodded like an arthritic rock dove. If Miho hadn’t known her a little, he would’ve thought she didn’t understand Japanese, but he did know her and based on her intensive arm scratching, he was guessing the slowness had something to do with Himiko.

Perhaps the idea of working for another employer so quickly, a woman who seemed like a replica of the last one, albeit a lot more gregarious?

It seemed like a solid theory and, as they returned to their table by the open window, he briefly thought about saying it out loud...but then Aya stopped scratching and put her face flat on the table.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Open to one in the morning...why? For who?’

‘I thought it would fit you quite well. Your trouble sleeping, the laidback customers and environment.’

Aya turned her face side-on and showed a barely existing eyeball to Miho...then a moon-sized one as she shot up and spat out, ‘kuso!’

Miho turned fast, picking up a chopstick to fend off the bird or bear or ashigaru he expected to see coming through the open window.

Then dropped it when he saw the grinning face of Akira staring back at him.

‘No need for *kuso*, you little thieves,’ he said, the jovial tone not at all matching his words. ‘I come in peace and benevolence. And with a full yukata of new coins.’

‘How did you-’

‘Find out where you were? Walked past, saw Miho’s vacant fat head and...magic, here I am. Point of advice by the way. Never take an open window seat. It’s borderline suicidal.’

‘We’re not in Kai Province anymore.’

‘Kai, Suwa, Echigo, they’re all the same on a basic level. Spies everywhere. Which reminds me, I better get inside. Wait here.’

Akira vanished from the window and re-appeared a few seconds later at the entrance door panel. He managed to get two steps in before Reiko yelled at him to turn back around and get out.

‘Excuse me, there seems to be a mistake. I am but a simple salt merchant passing through from-’

‘A salt merchant with a katana in his belt.’

‘Protection,’ Akira said quickly, moving his hand onto the guard, with the splint he’d made for his injured wrist nowhere to be seen.

Reiko left the bottle of shōchū on the table she was propped up against then marched over to the entrance. Mirroring the performance earlier in the day, there was no hesitation, no fear, just a pointed hand and authoritative jab in the chest of the intruder.

‘Gods in fresh shit...what the fuck is this, woman?’

‘Out. Go.’

‘I told you, I’m a salt merchant from-’

‘You’ll be a pile of salt on the floor if you don’t get out. Move, come on. And tell your ashigaru friends to stop pushing me or the shrine *and* Lord Suwa will hear about it...understand?’

‘Not a word or syllable.’ Akira tried to grab Reiko’s hand to stop her jabbing, but she was surprisingly fast, her fingers slipping out of his grasp each time. ‘Will you stop jabbing...for one second?’

‘It’s okay,’ said Miho, rushing over. ‘He’s with us.’

‘You see, my guarantor,’ said Akira, stretching his arm out to point at Miho and immediately having it swatted aside. ‘Kuso...’

‘Really, he’s our friend.’

‘What, a salt merchant?’

‘Yes.’

‘With a katana?’

‘For defence only...really. He’s been attacked on the road before, several times. Last time, they beat him so bad, he was in bed for a

week.’ Miho edged round the side of Akira and brushed away some of his ragged hair at the back. ‘Look, you can still see the wound.’

Reiko moved round the other side of Akira and squinted at the dried blood on his scalp. Then looked over at Aya, who may have nodded, it was too hard to tell, but it was apparently enough to earn the ashigaru a reprieve.

‘You can stay as long as they do,’ she said, putting a firm hand on the guard of his katana. ‘But this goes in the back room with me.’

Looking down at the smooth-skinned blockade, then at the customers in the izakaya, Akira muttered, ‘should’ve gone straight to Suwa,’ and relented.

Reiko took out the katana and said, ‘good boy,’ then made her way over to the stairs by the counter. Then stopped, squinting at the side of the blade. ‘Did you find this in a river or something?’

‘No.’

‘Half of it’s green.’

‘So? Just make sure you don’t lose it.’

Reiko looked at the katana again, tilted it a little to check the other side, then shrugged and resumed course up the stairs.

‘Think I preferred the weird sleaze couple,’ Akira said to himself, following Miho back to the table and sitting down next to a pinch-faced Aya. ‘What’s up with you?’

She shuffled away from him, her hand moving to one of the chopsticks still in the rice bowl.

‘Relax, I’m not gonna do anything. Here in peace, remember?’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Good, good, scepticism...very healthy. You shouldn’t trust anyone. In fact, if that couple hadn’t taken me down to their weird little shrine room and given me a whole bowl of coins, and rubbed some fucking miracle cream on my wrist, then I probably would be beating you right now. But they did do all that. So I won’t.’ He paused, taking some of Miho’s green tea. ‘Besides, there’s still an off-chance that I’ll need to use you as a human shield at some point.’

‘Hey,’ said Miho, frowning.

‘Joke. I wouldn’t do that. Got my fighting hand sorted now so probably no need. And then there’s all the bonding we did on the road over here.’

‘All the arguing, more like.’

‘Exactly. Very enjoyable. Very sharp. Now, where’s the shōchū in this fucking hag cavern?’

~~~

It took just over an hour for Akira to reach the slurred speech, *I love all of you even Himiko* level of drunkenness and that was probably cos he’d already drunk half a bottle of shōchū earlier, on the road down to Uehara, in plain sight of everyone.

‘Not bad as you think,’ he said, words mangled, hands moving over to slide the window panel shut for the seventh time since he’d got there. ‘Suwa province now...no need to be all wary...scrutinising things. But a little bit...okay...spies are here, can report back...maybe can do that.’

He stopped, studying his audience; Miho with a cup of lukewarm green tea, and Aya toying with the seaweed dregs at the bottom of her soup bowl.

‘Reminds me one time long back...years ago.’ He burped, quickly grabbing the bottle and pouring out another shot of shōchū. ‘Friend of me, two of us in mountains...and the woman appears there, in the fire. Just sitting, eating, stoking the flames and...looks little bit innocent, little bit nice...no knife or complick...accomplice, bandit, that kind of thing.’

Another break as Akira downed the shōchū, his cured right hand already gripping the bottle for the next shot.

‘I think it might be empty,’ said Miho gently, watching the ashigaru tip the bottle upside down.

‘Wah, too fast.’

‘Maybe it’s a sign.’

‘No, big sign.’ Akira raised a hand and shouted out ‘dragon lady’ across the izakaya. A few curses came back at him from the other patrons, but he didn’t care much as Reiko had got his signal and was



coming over. ‘Where was I...the fire, woman eating, innocent...no accomplice, bandit. And my friend guy...he was this wild kind, bear-like...and he goes to her and...her hair, just strokes it...grabs it and strokes it...and does she like it? Maybe, who knows, cos next thing he’s falling on her and...ah, sorry, accident, didn’t mean to land on top of you and...she looks at him, eyeball into soul, death stare...’

‘What is it?’ asked Reiko, stopping on the opposite side of the table and resting her hand on the bench behind Aya.

Akira looked up, his mind clearly years back in the past, the face of Reiko merging with the woman in his tale.

‘Okay, I think you’ve had enough for the night.’

‘Katana,’ he said, the word riding out on shōchū breath.

‘That rusted thing? It’s upstairs, in one of the vacant rooms.’

‘Need it.’

‘Ah, are you leaving?’

Akira responded by standing up, stumbling across to the next table [which was empty, fortunately] and then falling sideways onto the floor, bringing the wasabi bowl down with him.

‘He has money, right?’ Reiko asked, turning to Aya and Miho.

‘Yes,’ replied Miho, nudging Aya in the side.

‘Lots of money,’ she added, a little dazed.

‘Well, if he can make it up to the room where his katana is, he can sleep there. The two of you as well, assuming you don’t have somewhere else already?’

‘No...thank you. We’ll stay.’

Reiko nodded and moved over to Akira, kicking him in the side. He slurred a response then pulled himself up using the table leg, telling her he’d changed his mind, it was too early to sleep and what he really needed to do was go for a peaceful late night stroll. With his good friend, katana.

‘Fine, I’ll go and get it...but I won’t hand it over until you’re standing outside.’

‘Outside. Inside. River bed.’

‘Okay, well...you just wait over there. Try not to fall down again.’

Shaking her head at the swaying ashigaru, she headed up the stairs and returned a minute later with the katana. Gesturing at him to come over, she then proceeded to walk outside.

Then came back in twenty seconds later and told Akira to stop hassling the young woman in the pink yukata, she was already married.

‘So am I,’ he slurred and zig-zagged over to the door, disappearing outside along with Reiko.

‘You think he’ll be okay?’ Miho asked Aya, who was leaning across to open up the window again.

‘It’s pretty quiet out there.’

‘Could be some bandits hiding by the river, beyond the treeline.’

‘He’ll be fine.’

Miho nodded, taking more of his green tea. Aya’s tone was quite distant, as if she were one of those festival psychics channelling a dead person’s voice through her own, and the more he thought about the comparison, the less comfortable he felt about Yuki being alone out there.

Unless she’d found someone else to protect her?

A stronger, more experienced man?

Turning back to the table, he tried to focus on the soup bowl, the chopsticks, the other customers in the izakaya, but all of it had the faint image of Yuki’s face laid out on top, and, as his mum always told him, if you want to stop worrying about a thing then it’s better to talk about it, use it up, get tired of hearing its name.

Following this advice, he put Aya in frame again, shivering slightly as for a brief moment, perhaps shōchū related, he saw himself pushing forward and kissing her, and then the two of them naked, entwined, her body slowly morphing into the whiter form of Yuki and-

‘I’m going to bed,’ said Aya, dropping the chopstick on the table.

‘What?’

‘Bed. Upstairs. You can stay here if you like.’

Miho watched her stand up and walk away from the table, choosing a route across the izakaya that evaded all other customers and then, finally, getting eaten up by the stairs.

‘Yuki...Yuki...’ Miho mumbled to his cup of green tea. ‘Please don’t be out on the road at night.’

The entrance door slid open and Reiko came back in. She looked over at the table and frowned, then decided to investigate.

‘Aya gone to bed?’

Miho nodded. ‘Just now.’

‘Odd. I didn’t tell her which room you were in.’ She looked across at the stairs, then back at Miho. ‘It’s seventeen, by the way. I’ll give you the spare key when I come back down.’

‘Okay.’

Reiko hurried off, wiping something on her yukata as she went, and Miho returned to sipping green tea.

Now that Akira and Aya were gone, the place felt empty, even though there were at least ten other customers on the nearby tables.

Reminded him of the first week away from Nambu, when he’d sat alone in the cheapest ryokans he could find, crying himself to sleep the first night, then just lying still and staring up at the ceiling,

painting imaginary scenes of him and Yuki chasing each other around the snowy mountains, drinking warm shōchū, snuggling up next to an acceptable fire, having sex for at least twenty minutes at a time, her cold breath making him tingle and-

A shout of ‘Moooooove’ from the street outside snapped him back, his hand moving to slide the window firmly shut.

Better.

No more noise.

He looked at the empty seat next to him, at the stairs farther across. Tried to suppress the demon voice inside his brain screaming to get up there, kiss her, rip off her yukata, she’s a dozen times better than that weirdo cold witch who barely answered your questions half the time, a dozen dozen multiplied by infinity better.

Then pushed himself up and muttered, ‘she is quite funny, quite cute,’ and headed over to the stairs.

It was only one floor up and, as he checked the number on the first door panel, another one slid open farther down the passageway, with Reiko coming out and saying, ‘key time.’

Handing over a small metal thing that would be incredibly easy to lose if drunk enough, he said good night and waited until she was a third of the way down the stairs, then slid open the door panel next to number seventeen.

The room was empty, as was the futon. But Aya’s bag was there.

Which meant, somehow, she'd come up and gone out again. Or she'd gone to the bathing room.

He leaned against the wall, and breathed out in relief. Or frustration. Possibly a mix of both.

'Probably for the best,' he mumbled, taking out the yellow-skinned demon stone from his bag, sounding out a bastardised version of the summoning phrase.

Company or sleep?

Yellow demon or...nothing?

He rotated the stone in his hand and looked at the door panel, wondering if Aya would come back in with a towel wrapped around her chest.

Or if she'd go missing for the whole night again.

His body dropped down on the futon, hands keeping the stone tight in their grip.

Or if he'd actually do anything when she did come back.

If this was just loneliness

the absence of Yuki

or something else?

If it was just-

Eyelids sagged and head dropped down onto the pillow, his body spreading out over one clear half of the futon in case she did come back.

Which had to happen at some point

her or Akira.

One of the two.

Hopefully her.



**CHAPTER 26**  
**THREE NINJAS PRETENDING**  
**TO BE TRAVEL POETS**

*not at all cruel  
people*



A cedar trunk the size of a small province  
with black door carved at the base  
pulling Miho in and up an endless spiral of wooden steps  
portraits of black branches on the walls  
sometimes black twigs in over-sized yukatas  
not their preferred choice, said Yuki, chunks of snow sliding  
down her long black hair,  
they really had to be talked into it  
not by me  
the artists  
though to be fair I was nearby, eyeballing them and  
wah, the blackish cave system  
just as byzantine as I remember, come on  
and Miho nodded  
waltzed forward into the black tunnel and  
part of him knew what was ahead but the other part said no  
her arm is elsewhere

portals are harmless

in fact, swirling only looks chaotic and fast when really it's  
gradual

so he reached ahead for Yuki's robe

hoping she would confirm it

but it was too far

his fingers

failed miserably to extend beyond

Yuki, he cried

Yuki come back

I have a question about the portal

its swirling rate

but her ears were covered by patches of blackened snow and the  
blackened snow was crumbling

into black pieces of

~~~

He woke up with another cry of *Yuki*, followed by a breath of
relief when he saw where he was.

The room lay quiet, the other side of the futon empty.

Probably to be expected, he told himself as he rolled onto the tatami and felt around blindly for his yukata. It wasn't anywhere nearby, so he rolled back and realised that he'd scrunched it up into a ball and used it as a pillow.

'Old habits,' he muttered, standing up and unravelling it.

Unlike the Jewel of Kai Ryokan, there was no balcony attached to the room, just a small window with a slide-across panel. He opened it two thirds and stared at a doppelganger room opposite, a naked middle-aged man sleeping on tatami next to a clump of black hair wrapped in a blanket.

A married couple?

He poked his head outside and looked down, seeing a pink-framed sign in the alley below.

Okay, maybe not married. Though, from what Kentaro 2 used to tell him about the pink sign places back home, it was odd for customers to pay for the whole night. Especially when they didn't even get a share of the blanket.

Miho slid the window nine-tenths shut to keep some air flow coming in, then looked around the room. Apart from his bag and zori, there was no sign that anyone else had stayed in the room. Perhaps they hadn't. There was a fair chance he was alone, that both Aya and Akira had given up on his lethargic pace and moved on to Suwa.

He put on his zori, thinking of the road ahead, the lack of anyone to talk to, the lack of petty bickering between Akira and Aya, the lack of-

Nope, it was no good.

Travelling without company had led to blue chicken and the fucking belt merchant and he wasn't interested in going through that again.

He rummaged in his bag and pulled out the yellow-demon stone, throwing it up in the air and catching it. Something about its texture felt odd, but he couldn't put his finger on what exactly it was. Smooth yet gritty? No, that wasn't it. And it didn't matter anyway, he wasn't going to use it. Not when the other two demons he'd met had threatened to bite his face off.

He dropped the stone back in the bag, laughing as he played back his line.

Not when the other two demons he'd met had threatened to bite his face off.

Demons. In the flesh. Real. Eating humans.

One week ago he'd never even known they existed.

And now they were here.

Attempting to murder him.

Kuso...

He closed his eyes and isolated the three demons in a field of shadow, closing the darkness in around the pretty purple one and then the green yukata psycho until the only thing left was the smiling head of the not-so-bad, yellow-skinned guy.

That's better, he thought. One demon. Not murderous. But not completely trustworthy either. Keep for emergencies.

Now, back to the human world.

First plan of operation: find Aya, see if she's okay.

Second: devour breakfast.

Third: Akira?

~~~

The lump below seemed to be dormant.

And the crumb next to it incredibly tempting.

Pro: big meal.

Con: human trap.

After umming and ahing to itself for a good seven and a half minutes, the spider finally went with the daredevil archetype and slid down a line of silk onto what it called a *deh di do*, and what humans referred to as a table, then scuttled across its surface to the crumb.

This will feed my boyfriend's family for a week, it thought, jabbing at its newly-claimed treasure and then freezing in abject terror as the lump shed its skin and rose up.

A giant eyeball appeared, staring directly at the spider.

Ah well, the spider thought, closing six of its eight eyes, at least it'll be quick.

But it wasn't.

An even larger shape emerged to the side and put a *ba sa* [cup] down on the table, giving the spider enough cover to make a run for it. Which is exactly what it did, sprinting back to the wall and up into its getaway crack in the ceiling.

'Finally awake,' said Reiko, taking a cloth off her shoulder and squeezing it.

Aya stared up at the blurred shape with no emotional display whatsoever, her brain clearly filling in a lot of gaps, before giving out a low energy nod.

'You wanna tell me where you were all night?'

'Outside.'

'That's what you said when you came back in here...at sunrise.'

'Did I?'

'Outside. Walking around. That's it, that's all I got. Then you just sat down here and passed out. Not sure what's wrong with the room I gave you, but-'

'What time is it?'

Reiko stopped squeezing and spun the cloth in small circles in the air. Then looked back at the counter, her telepathic waitress sense correctly detecting the young thug with the katana harassing the only other customer in the place.

‘Just a second,’ she said, strolling over to the youth and, without any hesitation, whipping him across the cheek with the cloth.

Surprisingly, he took it without reaching for his blade. More than that, he actually bowed and said, loud enough for Aya to hear, something akin to an apology.

‘Must be an empress or something,’ muttered Aya to the cup in front of her, which she belatedly realised was full of green tea.

Taking a sip, she watched the rest of the scene play out.

Reiko tilting her head at the ashigaru, shaking her head when he offered her a small bag of something, then whipping him playfully with the cloth and giving him a jar of what looked like broken-up twigs.

After bowing half a dozen more times, the ashigaru left, pausing briefly at the door and glancing at Aya. She hid herself quickly behind her cup, and closed her eyes, hoping that he wouldn’t get any dirty ideas. Then counter-hoping that he would so she could have the pleasure of watching Reiko whip him again, perhaps this time with a barbed tip.

Opening her eyes again, she saw the space by the door vacant, the panel closed and Reiko on her way over to her table.

‘Still sleepy?’ she asked, placing a bowl with mountain asparagus and bread next to Aya’s hand.

‘Recovering.’

‘A bit of food might help with that. Don’t worry, all part of the overnight package. I’ll keep some for your boyfriend too...if he ever gets up.’

‘You mean Miho?’

‘Sorry?’

‘He’s not my boyfriend. We’re just travelling together.’

‘Wait...his name’s Miho?’

Aya coughed, unconvincing. ‘I thought he told you that last night.’

‘Not that I recall. And I’m pretty sure I would remember. Miho...wow, his parents must really have a sense of humour.’

‘Actually, I think his father was drunk, when he wrote the certificate.’

Reiko laughed and said, ‘ah, my second guess,’ then turned to the entrance as the door panel slid open again. Two ashigaru popped their heads in and were immediately told to get out. As was the trend in this



izakaya, they obeyed, bowing a little more awkwardly than the last guy then sliding the door panel shut.

‘How do you do that?’ Aya asked, not bothering to hide the awe in her voice.

‘I told you. Magic.’

‘The other guy too...you whipped him in the face and he just bowed at you. Magic? No way. They’re scared of you, I can see it in their eyes.’

‘Well, that’s it. Magic is fear. Or superstition, if you wanna be more precise. And with the festival coming up, people around here are more superstitious than ever.’

‘The festival?’

‘Especially ashigaru. Or some of them, at least. They know I have friends in the shrines, so they all worry that causing trouble here, with me, will cause them trouble with the spirits. Which is why I can get away with whipping the little bastards. Of course, once the festival’s over they’ll be calling me a haggard bitch again, dishing out casual rape threats...some of them at least. The ones without a brain. Ex-bandits usually, those lot.’ She paused, looking over at the stairs. ‘Ah, I see your non-boyfriend is up and about. Time to dish up a second breakfast.’

Reiko walked off, giving Miho a little whip on the ass as she passed him and then putting a finger to her lips when he frowned in response.

Aya picked up the cup of green tea and took another sip, trying to think of a convincing way to say *I walked around all night, no, I'm not tired at all.*

It wasn't easy, and by the time Miho sat down opposite, she'd given up on the idea altogether and just asked him where Akira was instead.

'No idea.'

'He's not in the room upstairs?'

'Didn't see him.'

She picked up a chunk of mountain asparagus and took a bite, surprised at how soft it was.

'Didn't see you either,' continued Miho, staring at the green stem being sucked slowly into her mouth. 'Or your bag. Figured you might've left already.'

'Not quite.'

'So you're gonna stay here, work in this place?'

*'Here and here, plastering Garrel's lair.'*

'Huh?'

'Nothing.'

Miho nodded, switching to mildly confused as a cup of green tea and quite a large bowl of mountain asparagus appeared suddenly in front of him.

‘Added to your room charge,’ said Reiko, smiling.

‘Thank you.’

‘Speaking of that, are you planning on staying another night? Or will you be heading north today?’

‘I’m heading north,’ replied Miho, his eyes on the steam rising up from his green tea.

‘Aya?’

‘Same. I think.’

‘You sure I can’t persuade you to stick around, work here for a while? You did seem pretty keen on the idea yesterday.’

Aya picked up the bread and held it to her lips, opening up a little and stroking the crust against her teeth. It was hard to tell if it was genuine reflection or the pretence of it, but she stuck with the performance for a full minute, almost two, before finally responding with, ‘it’s a nice place, but I can’t stay. Sorry.’

‘Well, it’s an open offer...if you change your mind.’

‘I won’t.’

~~~~~

I’ll be back soon

Don't cry.

Don't neigh.

Think of the relief for the constant back pain.

Misora held her finger to the horse's head and transmitted all of these thoughts and a few more, then kissed the animal awkwardly on what she hoped was its cheek and walked back to the courtyard outside.

Ichiko the Bloodless and Kanae, Yuka's even more novice replacement, were hovering around the wooden bridge exit, the former making small talk with the Fujimi environmental protection officer-stroke-Shingen spy, and the latter kicking loose pebbles into the nearby stream.

'All set,' Misora shouted ahead as she approached them, left hand instinctively dropping close to the dagger in her belt.

'Finished wiping away your pet's tears?'

Misora ignored Ichiko's remark and did a long swerve towards Kanae, watching the latest pebble fly off into the water and skim once before sinking. 'Another hour and we should be in Uehara. Hopefully no more salt merchant interactions along the way.'

'I quite liked the last ones,' the novice replied, nodding at her own line.

'Yes, they were very nice. Staring down the front of your yukata every time you looked at that bag of pink salt.'

‘All men do that.’

‘Okay, well, if that’s your standard.’

‘No, course not...I just thought they were nice. Friendly. Good to talk to.’

‘That’s the same description three times.’

‘Garrulous even.’

‘Four times.’

Kanae tried an Ichiko move, folding her arms. ‘Hey, stop counting me like-...stop counting out my words. You know what I meant.’

‘Relax, just a bit of mission humour.’ Misora put a hand on Kanae’s shoulder, making her flinch and half go for her belt. ‘No more counting from this point on, I promise.’

‘Are you going to stand around chatting all day or are we going to move?’ asked...no, demanded Ichiko, already a good few yards along the path that led in a long curve back to the main road.

‘Move, obviously.’

Misora pulled back her hand and followed after Chief Misery Witch, laughing to herself when she recalled the previous day and their surveyance of the ryokan massacre scene. Four ashigaru, stab wounds all over each body and Ichiko’s first response was, *we should stab them again, make sure they’re not faking.*

If she weren't sleeping in the same room as this woman at night, and walking next to her all day, then she'd find it even funnier, but as it was, she could only laugh sporadically, to herself, when she was alone.

Ah, if Atta Noe were there...they could laugh together...and paranoid or not, there wouldn't be much Ichiko could do about it.

And not much she, herself, could do either.

Kuso...

Killing that silly girl...Yuka...just to go after one drunk ashigaru and a simple village boy. What was she thinking? No, not thinking...what was she feeling? Nothing? Would she have killed her, too, if Yuka hadn't been in the way?

Misora nodded at Kanae, who had slotted in next to her and was saying something about salt merchants again, and looked left at the trees.

Atta Noe was probably halfway to Sunpu by now, paying for her crime with exile.

Either plotting her way back or...what?

Feeling pangs of guilt?

Did she even know what a pang was?

That was the question.

How human-like could a purple mist demon be?

Reaching the main road, Ichiko gave the hand signal for change, prompting the three kunoichi posing as travel writers to switch to a *two up front, one back* formation. After that, silence again.

Misora had no idea what the other two were thinking, and didn't much care as she was too busy conjuring up reasons why Atta Noe was actually the most compassionate being in Japan instead of the sociopathic monster she convincingly [and actively] played the part of.

It wasn't an easy case to make, and her face must have painted the struggle as Ichiko finally gave up on her own solipsism and told her direct that Atta Noe was on her way to hell.

‘What?’

‘Lord Imagawa is a notorious young drunk, and his retainers are all sleazy manipulators. They'll play with her like a little toy.’

‘I highly doubt that.’

‘It's true, without Shingen's protection, she's nothing.’

‘Strange how you never said that to her face.’

‘Actually, I was just thinking,’ interrupted Kanae, catching up to them. ‘Is it possible to do anything harmful to a purple smoke demon?’

Misora almost laughed, forcing it into a cough at the last second. ‘Yes, bore them to death.’

‘I mean...how do you hurt smoke?’

‘You trace it to its source,’ replied Ichiko, glancing left at a path leading off to a sparsely-decorated slope and squinting...then changing it quickly to a smirk. ‘...and hurt that.’

Misora noticed Ichiko looking left and followed her line of sight to a figure slumped in the middle of the path. ‘Kuso...that’s embarrassing.’

‘What?’ asked Kanae finally catching on and scanning the trees comically for a few seconds before spotting the same figure. ‘Wah, someone’s hurt. Could be one of those nice salt merchants.’

Both senior kunoichi walked on, ignoring her.

‘Wait, shouldn’t we do something?’

‘Keep your position,’ shouted Ichiko, without turning back.

‘But...they could be seriously hurt.’

‘Position.’

Kanae looked again at the narrow side path, the figure strewn across it not moving at all, and tried to conjure up enough steel in her heart to move on. The birds chirping didn’t help. Sounded like they were scolding her. After all, there was a very good chance that it *was* one of the salt merchants from the previous day. Or another person who’d turned the wrong way and been attacked by-

‘It’s a fucking bandit, you dolt,’ said Misora, grabbing Kanae by the sleeve of her dōbuku and dragging her forward.

‘Hey, easy-’

‘See, it’s a side path. Plenty of cover for his friends in the trees.’

‘You mean...’

‘Most obvious trap in the world.’

‘...that’s a bandit, lying there?’

Misora kept dragging until Kanae was back in position and then let go, telling her, in future, not to be such a soft touch.

‘Lucky we haven’t come across any belt merchants,’ muttered Ichiko, shaking her head at her *comrade* and then turning back to the main road, mouthing a *thank gods* when she saw the sign for Uehara up ahead.

‘There’s still time,’ responded Misora, catching half of the jibe and filling in the rest.

‘Belt merchants?’ asked Kanae, baffled. ‘What have they got to do with it?’

CHAPTER 27

PORTABLE SHRINE SCAM



As with most of Shinano Province, the scenery flanking the road to Suwa was a mix of pine greens and azure blues, with splashes of smooth, speckled white on the nearby mountain slopes.

If they'd walked it a month earlier, it would have been blanket white all around, and the surface of the river they were walking beside may even have frozen over, but that was the past, before all the demon madness, and Miho and Aya were now happily in the present.

Well, almost.

Miho had noticed that, in the two kilometres since they'd left the izakaya-stroke-ryokan, Aya had spent most of her time either staring down with a blank face at the path or staring down and to the right [with a blank face] at the river.

Blank face didn't necessarily mean depressed, of course, but it did feel like there was something wrong. Maybe lack of sleep from the last two nights? Or the telepathic sense that Miho had been thinking of her, briefly, drunkenly, in a beyond-friendship kind of way?

Whatever the reason, it quickly evaporated into the crisp morning air on the third kilometre of their journey as they came across a human-shaped lump on the road ahead.

‘Keep walking,’ said Aya, after Miho had nudged her out of her river-dream and pointed out the obstacle.

‘They might be injured.’

‘Us too, if we stop and help them.’

‘Huh? *We* will be injured?’

‘Don’t bother trying to understand, Miho, just keep walking. Try not to look in that direction. In fact, we should go closer to the riverbank, put a bit of distance between it and us.’

Miho was hesitant to repeat himself, but he still didn’t understand. The lump lay about ten metres in front of them now and showed no signs of movement. Which was the exact same state Akira had been in a few days earlier. Or a week earlier. Whenever it was that the purple demon incident happened. And, if he had just kept walking then, what would have happened to the poor ashigaru who...had left them the night before in a drunken state and...not been that nice to Aya before that...or anyone really, to tell the truth.

‘The riverbank,’ said Aya, tone almost akin to a command.

Miho looked over and saw that she’d already made the curved adjustment, and slipped a small knife into the grip of her left hand.

Was it that serious?

He tried to work it out quickly in his head, taking into account his innate naivety [which he was still trying to shake off] and the potential deviousness of strangers.

It was a short road to Suwa, about five or six kilometres, and not too close to the mountains. If it were bandits, they were being uncharacteristically bold. If it were a freelancer, even more bold as they'd have to assume most people would travel in pairs or groups.

What else?

The shrine nearby, maybe a kilometre farther down the path and then turn west. That's what Reiko had told them. It would have to be a truly fearless bandit group that would set a trap so close to a place of spiritual judgment. And from what River Bitch had said, those monks could fight too. Viciously.

'Miho,' shouted Aya, snapping him back to the path.

But not soon enough.

There was a groan from below as something whacked against his foot. He looked down and muttered *kuso*, as the lump's arm flailed again, this time striking him on the back of the calf.

'Wah, what are you doing here?' he yelled, bending down to inspect the ashigaru's yukata for signs of assault. 'Aya, it's Akira, he's been attacked.'

'Keep walking,' she muttered to herself, picking up a loose rock and flinging it into the river.

‘Get over here, quick, bring the water flask.’

‘Yes, *meijin*,’ came the caustic response.

Picking up another pebble and attempting to grind it into dust with her bare hand, she slipped the knife that was still in her other hand back into her belt and replaced it with the flask from her bag.

‘What happened?’ asked Miho, lifting Akira up into a sitting position and doing another wellness check of his yukata. Apart from a few dirt marks and one long tear under the armpit, it seemed to be undamaged. ‘Did someone attack you?’

‘Mist demon...’

‘Wah! The same one?’

‘...disguised as a tree.’

‘Huh?’

‘...with incredible legs.’

‘I think he’s delirious,’ said Miho as Aya arrived and, without looking, threw the flask down onto Akira’s stomach.

‘Hungover, more like.’

‘Ah, my favourite grouch,’ said Akira, grabbing the flask and holding it to his lips. And holding it. And holding it. And tilting it. And then pulling it back and shaking out the last few drops. ‘Ah, that’s better.’

‘You drank the whole flask?’ asked Miho, grabbing it back and holding it upside down. ‘That was supposed to be for all of us.’

Aya threw the pebble [that wasn’t dust] onto the path and spat on it. ‘That’s what happens when you give anything to an ashigaru. You get nothing back. Except a casual threat of violence.’

‘Stop whining...there’s a lake just over there.’ Akira raised his arm and pointed the wrong way towards the slopes. ‘And a river right here.’

‘Great, you can go jump in it,’ replied Aya, walking off down the path.

‘I might just do that,’ Akira shouted after her, using Miho’s shoulder to pull himself up onto his feet. ‘Gods in heat, she’s abrasive this morning.’

‘You did just drink all our water.’

‘Where are we anyway? Last thing I remember I was on the path to Suwa...and it kind of looks like it’s the same one.’

‘It is. I think we’re about another three kilometres from the main town.’

‘Ah, so she didn’t carry me...’

‘Who didn’t?’

Akira's eyes ballooned suddenly, both hands going to his belt and fumbling underneath the yukata. Then, just as abruptly, he stopped, closing his eyes and muttering, 'demon fucking shōchū.'

'Someone took your money?' guessed Miho, looking down the path to the already receding figure of Aya.

'Ah, well, easy come, easy steal. Yes, someone took it...a sexy belt merchant who may or may not live in Suwa.'

'Belt merchant?'

'Save the confused cow face for later. Surly lump over there is our only source of finance now, can't let her run off on us.'

Akira pushed out shoulder blades and hit his lower back with a balled right fist, then grunted in satisfaction and walked off...the first ten, twenty metres in an erratic zig-zag pattern...then something a little more stable as he slotted in beside Aya and asked if she'd had a good night's sleep.

'Better without you nearby...'

'No insomnia?'

'...much more peaceful, much less sleazy.'

Miho caught up in time to hear the last line and opened his mouth to say, *hang on, you didn't come back to the room last night...* but something inside, perhaps a burgeoning sense of intuition, put a gag on it, telling him to focus on the scenery instead.



As predicted, Suwa wasn't much farther along, and with Aya leading at a dynamic pace, they arrived at the town's welcome sign in less than half an hour.

Within a framed shot, the place appeared almost identical to Uehara; the same type of buildings, the same river running through the middle, the same font on the izakaya signs. The only discernible difference was the giant lake looming in the background, and perhaps a few extra ashigaru patrolling the streets.

That made sense as the castle was only a few hundred metres to the right, on the east side of Lake Suwa. The central base of the Suwa Clan, allied to the larger Murakami Clan further north, whose daimyō was in turn a close retainer of the notorious Nagao Clan in Echigo. That's where the chain stopped...though, in truth, there was no real sturdiness to it anymore. When ashigaru could murder their lords on a whim, and claim their domains with only the flimsiest of excuses, nothing was sacred.

The trio of unlikely travelling companions continued down the main road, checking out the Onbashira festival stalls set up next to the river, picking up ugly-looking charms and fir tree talismans whenever a group of ashigaru walked past and pretending to show a keen interest. Then throwing them back down again, when the danger had passed.

‘Superstitious trash,’ whispered Akira, holding up one particular item that looked like a purple octopus.

‘You don’t believe in any of this?’ asked Miho, checking out a pocket-sized fir tree with *good times* painted on its trunk.

‘In what? Fantasies made up by ancient lunatics who thought the four islands came out of some god’s fanny?’

‘You’re disgusting,’ said Aya, handing a coin to a woman and getting a wrapping of seaweed strips in return.

‘Don’t blame me, I didn’t write it.’

‘It is partially true though,’ said Miho, unconsciously stepping between Aya and Akira, with the fir tree still in his hand. ‘I mean, we almost got eaten by a demon. And there was that purple mist woman too. And the-...’ Miho paused, that intuition voice inside his head pulling him back again. Don’t mention the yellow guy. Don’t mention the yellow guy. ‘The portal in the cave, Himiko’s arm.’

‘Two separate things.’

‘Are they?’

‘Those demons were real, tangible. This shit isn’t. Deal with each on its own merits.’ Akira dropped the pink octopus talisman onto the pile of replicas and wiped his hands. ‘Now, who’s for getting off this Hell street?’

Aya sucked on a freshly unwrapped seaweed strip and stared at Miho. Feeling sudden pressure, he looked farther down the path and

saw about five hundred more stalls of festival trash. Was that the way to the exit? He had no idea. It could lead them to Suwa castle, and that wasn't a good thing, certainly not for Akira.

‘Okay, I’ll assume that we’re all in favour,’ said Akira, patting Miho on the shoulder and shaking his head at the fir tree. ‘Obviously we want to avoid the castle, so east is out of the question. Which leaves the west side road. More likely to have those oddball monks and psychics as it’s nearer to the shrine, but they’re mostly harmless. I suggest we find a small ryokan on the north side of the lake, get an early night, then start off on the Kyoto road in the morning.’

‘I can’t,’ said Miho, slouching his shoulders and causing Akira’s hand to slide off. ‘Yuki is further north somewhere.’

‘Okay, north for you. No problem. We’ll just call it even on the life-saving thing, as, technically, I did guide you here safely.’

‘Err...I suppose...’

‘Good. Aya-chan?’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘Fine. Prune face?’

‘What?’

‘Joking. You don’t look like a prune. I just thought it was synonymous with anger, first thing that popped up in my brain. Your face does look a bit sour though.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you.’

‘Yeah, probably for the best. So, we head to the lake then?’

Both Miho and Aya glanced at each other, half a seaweed strip still hanging out of her mouth, and a pink octopus talisman replacing the fir tree in his right hand.

‘Are you conferring telepathically?’ asked Akira, putting a hand on both their waists and pushing them gently towards a gap in the stalls. ‘The answer is yes, we head to the lake. Unless you wanna wait around here until Aya gets sleazed on by some ashigaru?’

Aya sucked up her seaweed strip and removed Akira’s hand from her waist.

‘See, that was a compliment. You’re worth sleazing on. Not a prune at all.’

‘I’ll lead,’ she said sharply, walking between the stalls then stopping halfway and turning back. ‘And no more conversation.’

‘Really?’ asked Miho, coming up beside her.

‘That was aimed at him, not you.’

Akira jabbed his temple and moved after them. ‘Suit yourself. My head’s starting to drum anyway.’

~~~~~

According to local legend [backed by the current Lord of the area], each side of Lake Suwa had a spiritual significance; the east

represented mental control, the south, penance, the north, futurism, and the west, that which remained blurred and unknown.

Of course, it was too vague and lacking in dogma to really scare anyone physically – there existed no demonic figure rising from watery depths, looking to impale disbelievers on its coral trident – but it did have an odd effect on the mind.

Which is probably why so many poets and travel writers travelled to the region, and why there were so many clogging up the main road, getting in the way of Aya and raving about the giant fir trees being ushered down in pale green light from the heavens.

‘Gods, this is ridiculous.’

‘And they’re all writing poetry,’ added Akira, one hand on his katana guard, somehow restraining the urge to start slicing. ‘I can hear them dictating verse.’

‘What about that path to the left?’ asked Miho, standing on his toes.

‘That leads up the slope, no good.’

‘Then we have to keep going forward?’

Akira shrugged and gestured at Aya, who pushed the shoulder of a poet muttering about the majesty of large, virile trunks and tried to spot accessible gaps in the crowd. Before she could finish her scan, one of the men near the front, possibly an official, got up on a box and

shouted that the fir tree descent would be delayed as there had been a fatality.

The crowd booed and parted a little.

Then parted a lot, half of them running onto the grass to the right, heading in erratic lines towards the lake.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Miho, trying to see past the giant man in front of him.

‘Not sure,’ said Aya, quietly.

After a few seconds, the giant man swiped a hand through the air and called something a scam then moved off, apparently going back along the road towards Suwa.

‘Kuso, not these clowns,’ said Akira, folding his arms.

‘Who?’

‘Portable Shrine Artists.’

Miho looked at Aya, who looked equally confused, then shifted to the path ahead. As far as he could tell, the Portable Shrine Artists were the twelve monks standing next to a giant box with grip-rails attached to the side.

‘What are they doing?’

‘Scamming.’

‘Huh? How?’

‘Watch.’

Miho moved a step closer and did as instructed. At first, nothing happened. The twelve monks just stood there, most of them rigid, all in a slightly different pose, while the only one with actual hair busied himself scraping loose specks of something off the side of the box.

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Wait.’

‘Nothing’s happening.’

‘You’ll see.’

Finishing with scrape duty, the monk with hair - very wild, very orange hair - cleared his throat and shouted in a surprisingly harmonious tone that the curse was airborne and the spirits were getting tired of waiting.

Apparently, that held some kind of meaning to the locals, as they started to amble out of the nearby shacks and artisan trade shops, dropping coins in a smaller box that Miho hadn’t noticed earlier, with one or two of them hanging back a bit and calling the monk with orange hair a rat motherfucker right to his face.

‘What exactly are they buying?’ asked Miho.

‘Nothing,’ replied Akira, adding a grunt after it and walking forward. ‘Come on, let’s go...before I vomit.’

‘You’re the one who told us to watch,’ said Miho, frowning.

‘A mistake on my part.’

‘Thought he would feel kinship with them,’ whispered Aya into Miho’s ear, before putting her fist into her travel partner’s back and nudging him forward.

‘Hey...’

‘Sorry, but I need a shield, in case these monks-’

Aya stopped exactly the same time as the monk with orange hair put a long wooden staff out to block Akira.

‘Donation,’ he barked.

‘Move the stick, monk,’ replied the ashigaru, his hand not even bothering to reach for the katana guard.

‘Same rules for everyone, old man. Donate or the box stays.’

‘Do I look like I live here?’

‘I’m sorry, let me clarify. You have entered the box’s sphere of influence. House or not, shop or not, poet, merchant or rogue, you cannot move on until we have received a donation.’

‘You’re starting to irritate me,’ said Akira, finally putting fingers on his belt.

‘Ah, a fool who would risk the curse.’

‘Cheap scam theatrics.’



‘I believe the last one I encountered is still at the bottom of Lake Suwa being tickled by weeds. Cheap what?’

‘You heard.’

Miho took a step forward, not really sure how he was going to mediate, or even if he could get over there in time, and was saved from finding out by a firm tug on the sleeve by Aya.

‘Don’t. You’ll get cursed too,’ she whispered, glancing at the other eleven monks, who were still standing there, oddly blank, as if their leader wasn’t about to have his head lopped off.

‘You know, I really wasn’t going to kill you,’ said Akira, pulling out his katana. ‘Just wound you a little. But as you keep pushing me...’

‘Ha, did you paint that?’ laughed the monk, pointing at the blade.

‘What?’

‘Find it in a river somewhere?’

Akira glanced at the green stain apparently dooming him to the same question for the rest of his existence and, blanking on any golden comebacks, spat on the ground instead.

‘Wah, there goes the brain cells.’

‘Okay, monk, enough babbling. You wanna be stabbed in the gut, the heart, the throat or the face? You’ve got one second to reply. One. Zero. Right, all four it is then.’ Akira floated the katana forward,

prodding at the air near the irritant's stomach. 'Think I'll start down here...or maybe I should aim a bit lower. If there's anything to even-'

'Drop the weirdly-green blade,' cut in the monk, his voice altering abruptly to that of some feral-like creature, one that sounded like it was trapped in a large cave.

After buffering for a few seconds, Akira straightened up, grunted out breath...then dropped his katana on the dirt.

'Turn around.'

Without blinking, he turned around.

'Good boy. Now go, walk yourself into the lake.'

There was the briefest hesitation, a small spasm of his right arm, then total compliance as the ashigaru who, seconds earlier, had been ready to cut down this pestiferous monk, walked casually off the main path, and headed at a steady pace towards the serene calmness of Lake Suwa.

'What the hell's going on?' asked Miho impotently to the surrounding air particles, as Aya walked ahead and dropped two coins into the small donation box.

'Not enough,' said the monk with orange hair, both pupils glowing the same colour.

Aya dropped two more, grabbed Miho by the yukata sleeve and pulled him past the box and on towards the path ahead.

‘What the-...he’s walking towards the lake. Why? How?’

‘Leave him, and just keep walking.’

‘Akira,’ Miho shouted, shrugging off Aya’s grip. ‘Where are you going?’

‘He’s hypnotised, we can’t help him.’

‘What?’

‘That monk...’ She glanced back, letting out a gasped *kuso* when she saw the group of monks staring right at her, all twelve heads tilted left in eerie unison. ‘If we try to pull Akira back, or intervene, he’ll kill us.’

Miho shook his head and looked in the same direction as Aya, eking out a high-pitched *wah* when he saw the twelve monks facing his way, the one in the middle doing that little bit extra with his glowing orange eyes. ‘No-...another one?’

‘Just keep walking.’

‘Twelve of them?’

‘Miho...’

‘Kuso!’ He turned back, looking at her hand yanking on his yukata sleeve. ‘We can’t just leave him.’

‘No choice.’

‘But he’s right there...hypnotised.’

‘Come on.’

Aya gave up on the sleeve and slipped her hand into Miho’s, squeezing it lightly and using a softer voice to say, ‘at least get out of sight first.’

It seemed to work.

Miho made a quick mental map of the terrain and the distance between Akira and the lake, then turned and said, ‘until the next corner.’

‘Agreed.’

‘Then we go back and get him...’

‘We?’

‘...snap him back to his senses.’

‘Not possible. He’s hypnotised. Words won’t-’

‘Aya...’ Intentionally or not, Miho pulled the same face as when he’d woken to an empty bed three months earlier, minus the confusion after reading Yuki’s pillow note [‘too hot, heading north, don’t follow’]. ‘We have to try.’

‘Okay, fine...trauma face. We’ll *try* to get him back.’ She half turned, flinching at the audience of twelve still monitoring their retreat. ‘Gods, I hate monks.’



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**CHAPTER 28**  
**DROWNING IN LAKE SUWA**  
**WITH ZERO COMPLAINTS**

As luck would have it, the path around the western edge of Lake Suwa had been designed and crafted by someone fond of curves and bends, and, therefore, it only took about half a minute before they were out of sight of the twelve monk demons. Then another minute on top of that to find a sufficiently dense clump of trees to hide within while they got a visual on Akira.

‘Kuso, he’s not stopping,’ protested Miho, trying to move out and quickly being pulled back by his yukata sleeve.

‘I told you, it’s hypnotic suggestion. He’ll go directly into the lake without stopping, and if anyone tries to block him or pull him back, there’s a good chance he’ll hit them. Or worse.’

‘No, he knows us...’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘...and there’s no way he wants to drown in a lake. Not even a little bit.’

‘What part of hypnotic suggestion is confusing you?’

‘I don’t care about that. You just said we’d try to help him and now you’re a stone again. Let go of my sleeve.’

‘Miho...’

‘Let go or I’ll rip it off...the sleeve. I’m serious.’

Aya used up a few more seconds with pretend contemplation then said fine and released her grip, muttering *kuso* under her breath as Miho shot out from the treeline and, straight away, started sprinting after the zombie ashigaru. In some ways, she admired him for this kind of moral nature, the impulse to rescue those who definitely wouldn't do the same for him. But those ways were deep in the back of her brain, right next to *not all ashigaru are bad* and *the bandit lifestyle is quite romantic actually*, and her functioning rational core was telling her to ditch them both, cos they'll only get you killed, *Sessskat*.

It was a persuasive argument, but a lonely one too. Further diluted by the sight of Miho reaching Akira and, two seconds later, getting punched like an irritating insurance merchant down to the ground. Okay, she thought, breaking into a troubled jog, maybe we can knock the ashigaru out before he reaches the water, tie him up against a tree or something. And then leave. Yeah, that could work. Maybe.

By the time she'd caught up to a dazed Miho, Akira was already at the shore of the lake. He ignored the shouts of the people who'd initially run away from the twelve monks to 'wake the fuck up,' and strolled straight in as if it were nothing more than an early afternoon dip.

'His eyes...they're gone,' said Miho, letting Aya help him up and then stumbling on again towards the water's edge.

‘You have to hit him first,’ she replied, scanning the grass for a decent-sized rock. ‘Hard enough to knock him out.’

‘On the head?’

‘Yeah, obviously.’

‘What if we kill him?’

‘It’s either that or the water does it,’ she said, spotting a rogue twig and swooping down to pick it up.

They both ran on, past the onlookers who had given up yelling and were instead lobbing pebbles at Akira’s skull as he descended towards the surface of the lake, and then on into the water itself.

‘He’s going too deep,’ said Aya, pulling back.

‘Come on.’

‘Miho...it’s too far, he’ll drown you too.’

‘Just need to get on his back.’

‘He’s too strong, he’ll-’

‘Both of us. Come on, stop paddling, get in here.’

Aya stayed rooted to the spot, the tide trickling over her feet. She watched, with the twig still loose in her hand, as Miho started shouting Akira’s name, abandoning his laboured strides through the water and launching into a desperate front crawl when the ashigaru’s head vanished beneath the surface.



It really was too late, she thought. Somehow, the ashigaru, Akira, had walked faster than expected, as if some part of him welcomed this kind of passive death, and there was a good chance that Miho wouldn't even be able to find him anyway.

Was that a good thing?

The twig fell out of her hand and sank into the water. Crouching down to reclaim it, she heard Miho's shouts in the near distance, then splashes behind her, another voice telling her it was okay, this wasn't the first time this kind of thing had happened.

She looked up and...toppled over sideways as a figure with red and white ribbons trailing out of his hair blazed past...his water wading technique exceptional.

No, wait...she knew that face...had seen it before.

The magic guy from the izakaya in Uehara, the coins floating off the floor. The red and white paint on his neck.

Kao nashi? Was that what Reiko had called him?

Either unaware of or unconcerned about the tide, Aya stayed sitting in the shallows of the lake, eyes fixed on the magic lake paddler as he joined Miho, the two of them trading shrill queries with each other for a few seconds before screaming 'no' and diving like panicked seals under the surface.

Thirty seconds passed and Aya started to get nervous.

Then a full minute.

Then Miho broke the surface and pushed back, looking around for signs of other life. But there was nothing, just the sedate backdrop of Lake Suwa.

‘Anything?’ shouted Aya, unsure why she was bothering to say anything.

The ashigaru was gone, done for. Mesmerised into oblivion like countless other unfortunates before him.

Miho must’ve felt it on some level too – even from this distance, she could it in his eyes, the lost cow expression - but that level wasn’t in control of the rest of the body, or the brain. Nothing was. Except, perhaps, a bizarrely naïve vein of sentimentalism.

She looked at him, his stupid wet head, those stupidly determined eyes.

Gods, he’s gonna do another dive. Why? To drown in solidarity with some pervert thug?

Shrugging off these invisible questions, Miho’s body rose up slightly as he took a dolphin’s breath, his head dipping to drop under the safety line of the-

*Woouooooosh.*

Or something to that effect.

A rush of wind, past him, past her, rippling across the entire lake, accompanied by a whistling noise...followed a hundredth of a second later by two heads bursting up like *‘just married’* koi out of the water,

the red and white striped one gripping the waterlogged other with his right arm.

With Miho bobbing alongside, trying to find an avenue to get close and help the escort mission, the magic guy swam slowly, methodically back to shore, eventually getting close enough to stand up and carry Akira over his shoulder.

‘Close call,’ he said, passing a yogi-esque Aya, who re-grabbed her twig and stood up, pursuing them onto the grass.

‘How?’ she asked, kneeling down next to the magic guy as he slapped Akira on the face several times before holding his nose and giving him a big, wet kiss on the lips.

‘Magic,’ he replied, coming back up for breath, attempting a grin...and then getting a gob full of lake water in the face.

‘But...he was under hypnosis.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘Water...who...where?’ blurted Akira, coughing up more contents of Lake Suwa, and then stabilising just enough to squint at the magic guy’s face. ‘Kenji? Is that you?’

‘Err...not quite.’

Akira rubbed his eyes and tried again, singling out the red and white ribbons, which seemed to be emitting a faint, silvery glow.

‘Who the hell are you? What happened?’

‘That depends on how much you remember.’

‘You almost drowned,’ added Miho, bending down on the other side, pushing the ashigaru’s soaking wet fringe to the side.

‘Drowned...’ Akira closed his eyes, slapped himself on the cheek then opened them again. He did a full scan of the three faces staring back at him. Then coughed and brought up more lake water.

‘Take your time,’ coached the magic guy, sitting back and wiping his own face.

‘Don’t try and move,’ added Miho, swiping away an insect attempting to crawl onto his hand.

Akira nodded shakily, then let his head drop back down onto the makeshift grass-dirt pillow. He looked up at the sky for a while, coughing every now and then, before finally let out a long, deliberate breath. ‘Kuuuuuuso...’

‘What?’

‘I have a sick feeling...that you just saved my life again.’

‘Not really. It was mostly this guy.’ Miho paused, looking at the magic man. ‘Sorry, I don’t know your name.’

‘Daiki.’

‘Ah, not Kao Nashi,’ muttered Aya, accidentally stamping her hand down on Akira’s arm and making him muffle a squeal.

‘That’s my stage name, for performances. I assume you saw one?’

‘No. We met at the izakaya...yesterday, in Uehara.’

‘We did?’

‘You lifted a coin off the floor. Using your hand.’

‘Err...doesn’t sound like a very memorable trick,’ he said, running fingers down the length of a hair ribbon and then onto the painted skin of his neck. ‘Though I do vaguely remember something like that happening. In amongst the fog of things...up here.’

‘In your hair?’

‘My head. Here.’ Daiki shifted the hand away from the red and white ribbons to his scalp and then down to the sides again. ‘Lucky for you guys I happened to be walking by today, otherwise...’

‘...he would’ve died.’

‘Well...in all likelihood, yes.’

Aya looked down at the ashigaru and the lake water still dribbling out from the corner of his mouth. ‘I still don’t get it though, how did you disarm the hypnotic suggestion?’

‘Hypno what?’ asked Akira, raising his head again.

‘Hypnosis. It’s what led you into the lake.’

‘It’s true, you wouldn’t stop,’ said Miho, pointing at his not-yet-bruised cheek. ‘I tried to pull you back and you punched me.’

‘So that’s why my hand is sore again.’ Akira slowly rotated the previously sprained wrist, making quiet *kuso* sounds, then stopped abruptly and stared at Miho’s face. ‘Wah...the monk...’

‘Ah, I see it’s coming back to you.’

‘Twelve of them, way too calm to-...wah, those orange eyes. Kuso, he’s a fucking demon, isn’t he?’

Daiki rubbed the red paint on his neck and looked at Aya, who looked at Miho, who looked back at Daiki, who got tired of looking at Aya and looked down at the drenched ashigaru instead.

‘I take it this isn’t the first time you’ve encountered one of their kind.’

‘Not the second time either,’ replied Miho.

‘We’ve seen one or two,’ clarified Aya, swatting an insect away from Miho’s hand [the same one as before, in fact].

‘Huh? When did you see one?’ asked Akira, coughing up more fluids.

‘The green man at the ryokan. I didn’t know for sure, but-...then you said he was a demon and-’

‘Hang on,’ interjected Miho, moving his hand off the grass completely as the insect just wouldn’t stop. ‘You knew about that monk too.’

‘Who did?’ asked Akira, instinctively looking to the stranger with weird paint on his neck, and then at Aya when she started speaking.

‘Yeah, the hypnosis part...it happened to my friend before, the same thing. But I didn’t know he was a demon.’

‘Okay, maybe we should keep our voices down a bit,’ said Daiki, his own voice not that quiet. ‘Not everyone around here knows as much as we do.’

‘We’re not that loud, are we?’

Daiki looked down at his hair, muttering something.

‘Daiki?’

‘Not yet...still too open.’

‘Sorry?’

‘When I’m certain, then I’ll go.’

‘Did he eat one of those fir tree talismans?’ whispered Akira to the general air space above his face, ‘or am I hallucinating this?’

One of the words, possibly *hallucinating* got Daiki’s attention and brought him back up from his hair. Or his neck. Whatever he was communicating with.

‘Sorry, I like to self-strategise sometimes. What did I miss?’

‘You said we shouldn’t talk too loud about demons.’

‘Ah, right. Good advice. People around here might not understand.’

Miho put his hand back on the grass, trying out one of his new scepticism faces. ‘Are you sure? They all ran away from the shrine when the orange monk demon came.’

‘Yeah, that’s just them being cheap. They don’t want to pay off the curse, see.’

‘They don’t know he’s a demon?’ asked Aya.

‘Not objectively, no. Of course, they believe in them generally, the stories, myths...Suwa is a historically superstitious place after all...but they wouldn’t pin the monk to it.’

‘But you do,’ said Miho, one eye on the insect discreetly approaching his fingers for another round.

‘I’ve had some experiences.’

‘Tell me one thing,’ said Akira, leaning forward. ‘If I see that monk again, will he be able to control my brain?’

‘No. Theoretically.’

‘Right, action time.’ Akira used Miho’s yukata sleeve to pull himself up to his feet, acted out some impromptu neck exercises, then turned and began walking back to the portable shrine spot.

‘Where are you going?’ shouted Miho, straightening out his yukata sleeve.



‘You’re still in recovery, idiot,’ added Aya, standing up.

‘Gonna get my katana back off that scammy monk. And by *get* I mean I’m gonna cut his fucking face off. Grinning little scab thinks he can-’

The insult died at the exact same moment his legs deserted him, and the whole irate, vengeful ashigaru-mass collapsed in sideways steps back onto the grass.

‘I told him not to move so much,’ said Daiki, letting out an impressive whistle.

‘Is he okay?’

‘Probably unconscious. You can go and check on him if you like?’ Daiki gestured at one of the onlookers moving over with a bucket and brush. ‘Before they start painting him.’

‘Wah, what is he doing?’ Miho sprang up and rushed over, pushing the bucket guy away and spilling some of the paint in the process.

‘I better go and assist,’ said Aya, looking down at her hand and wondering why and how the twig was still there. ‘Thanks for saving our-...for saving that guy.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be paid back in kind one day,’ he replied, smiling.

‘Yeah...I hope so.’

Aya got to her feet and ambled over the grass towards Miho, who was standing with his arms folded, waiting for the bucket guy to finish his paint line.

‘You’re letting him do that?’ she asked, glancing back at the mage and frowning when she saw him jabbing a finger at his own hair, seemingly arguing with it.

‘He was upset about the spilt paint.’

‘Miho...’

‘Hey, one line, remember?’ Miho complained, prodding the guy with the bucket, who turned and gave a feral look...then returned to add a final dab of red to Akira’s forehead.

‘There, fully reborn,’ he said, putting the brush back in the bucket, bowing to Aya, growling at Miho and then walking off with an occult whistle tune towards the shore of the lake.

‘What are you going to tell him when he wakes up?’

‘About the paint? Nothing.’

‘Okay. Interesting choice.’

‘Should be no big deal. I mean, how often do you look at your own forehead?’

Aya shook her head, then saw the sincerity on Miho’s face, took off the handbrake and laughed.

‘Not often, right?’

Below them, the *reborn* ashigaru opened his eyes and groaned, then rolled onto his side and mumbled directly to a burnt-out patch of grass, ‘that fucking monk...gonna face off...cut it good.’

‘Maybe after a short rest,’ suggested Miho, bending down and patting the air near Akira’s shoulder.

‘All of it...not just chin...whole skin...get my katana back and cut off his-...’ He stopped, wiping his forehead and taking off some of the paint. ‘Sweating...not that hot...’

Aya and Miho held their breath, but luckily, Akira was too out of it to look at the palm of his hand, and even if he did, he would probably think it was lake water.

Which, to be fair, it partially was.

# CHAPTER 29

## DON'T MESS WITH ICHIKO



keen to be  
annihilated?

The street running alongside the main river in Uehara was bustling with hawkers selling festival-related tat, tourists picking *said* tat up and saying *ooh*, locals throwing pebbles into the water from the bridge, prostitutes stroking the arms of off-shift wood cutters, and intermittent groups of ashigaru with one hand permanently on their katana guards keeping a vigilant eye on the whole tapestry, ready to sleaze it up.

Normally, three women in their 20's walking together would've attracted attention, either from sex addicts or ashigaru, but Misora had instructed the *two steps behind an oblivious man* formation before entering the town and so far it was working.

No one had approached them and, apart from a few close calls with Kanae getting distracted by some of the hawkers' stalls and losing her designated *oblivious man*, no ashigaru had picked them out as someone to trail.

Of course, that all went out the window the moment they stopped outside the entrance to River Joy Izakaya and a whining ashigaru came tumbling out.

Ichiko was closest to him and backed off with typical kunoichi reflexes, somehow repressing her natural urge to kick the Suwa Clan wretch in the nuts. This turned out to be a smart move, as the scene

quickly filled itself in with curious locals and a team of eight ashigaru, each one of them standing with their blades half out, doing absolutely nothing to help up their beleaguered colleague.

‘Kuso,’ said the fallen ashigaru about seventeen times, before managing to pull himself up and storm off across the bridge.

The other ashigaru hovered a while longer, staring at the izakaya as if it were a haunted mountain cave, then finally tucked their weapons into their belts and aggressively dispersed the crowd.

‘Inside,’ whispered Misora into Kanae’s ear as she passed, then nodded almost imperceptibly at Ichiko before entering River Joy Izakaya.

The two kunoichi counted out a few extra seconds then followed her in.

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Inside it was dark and relatively quiet, with most of the vacant tables situated close to the group of ashigaru cropped together at the counter.

Taking a stool next to the most distant one, Misora took out her bag and emptied out a collection of hand-made rings and necklace talismans. Some were so ridiculously ugly that she struggled to stifle a laugh, but Ichiko and Kanae sitting down next to her soon cured her of that.

‘Too close,’ she said quietly, gesturing for Kanae to find another table.

‘It’s comfy here,’ the novice replied, picking up one of the uglier talismans and trying it out around her neck.

‘Move.’

‘We’re just three local artisans,’ said Ichiko, putting her hand on Kanae’s wrist, pinning her to the table. ‘Here for a drink and a meal.’

Resisting the impulse to shake her head, or mutter some caustic remark, Misora leaned back and feigned interest in the surrounding décor instead.

Nearby, the apparent leader of the ashigaru was speaking loud enough to eavesdrop on, his gloved hand the only one of the six not stroking the guard of his katana.

Even more relaxed was the woman behind the counter, one hand feeding herself strips of seaweed, the other sipping from a glass of shōchū.

‘A temporary posture,’ she said, between mouthfuls, ‘but it may be extended if your men don’t find a way to control themselves.’

The ashigaru leader formed a fist with his hand, then, almost as gradual as a blossoming flower surrounded by smoking monks, unclenched.

No feral shout of *kuso*, thought Misora, watching the move. How unusual...

She shifted focus to the painting of the Kiso Road to the left of the counter, giving herself a chance to covertly evaluate him...or the back of his head at least. Taller than Shingen, broader than Shingen, and far too calm to be a foot soldier, or even a low level *Kenin*. More likely a retainer, or a close general...of the spiritualist school based on the creepy blue eye stitched onto the back of his dōbuku...but if that were the case, if they were that high-ranking, why would they be wasting their time in a parochial shack like this?

‘Your shrine,’ said the Suwa General, running a solitary fingertip along the side of his white-flecked beard, ‘is tolerated out of respect for Suwa traditions. As long as it continues to follow those traditions, we can co-exist. Yet this recent behaviour, and the heightened emotions around the festival, seem to have made you forget your duties.’

‘Last time I checked, the duties of the shrine are separate from provincial law. Unless there’s been a change I didn’t hear about?’

One of the ashigaru behind the Suwa General stepped forward, shirking his katana for a small dagger and pointing its tip at Reiko’s chest. ‘You dare speak in such a tone to-’

The line was interrupted by a backhand slap from his superior, sending the ashigaru onto the floor and headfirst into Ichiko’s shins.

‘Stay there,’ shouted the Suwa General, glancing briefly at the three oddly-stiff, young women then turning back to the counter.

Then tilting his head, muttering something under his breath and turning round again.

Feeling his eyes on them, Misora picked up one of the talismans and threw it at Kanae, shouting at her that it was the easiest one to sell.

‘What?’ stuttered Kanae.

‘If you can’t manage it, I’ll have to get Ichiko here to take your place. Which means her husband will have to cook his own dinner again. You remember what happened the last time he was forced to do that?’

Belatedly remembering her training, Kanae nodded and eked out a submissive *sorry*, then took the talisman and pretended to examine its stitching.

‘Artisans, huh?’ said the ashigaru on the floor, putting his hand on Ichiko’s thigh and using it as leverage to pull himself up. ‘I like women who are good with their hands.’

Misora glanced at the counter, letting out the tiniest slither of breath when she saw the Suwa General had lost interest and turned back to his initial conversation partner.

‘Remove your paw, please,’ said Ichiko, practically hissing out the last word.

‘Yes, I used to know a girl in Fujimi, a very skilled craftswoman. She was prettier than you, younger too, but...I’m sure you have other, hidden charms.’

‘Your paw. Move it.’

Nodding politely, the ashigaru took his hand off Ichiko’s thigh, held it in the air as if apologising, then flipped it side-on and made a shark like movement towards her breasts.

If he’d gone faster, he may have made it. But as it was, he was far too slow, and far too confident, giving Ichiko plenty of time to not only snap his wrist and put a needle pin to his throat, but also to make it look like the work of an amateur.

‘Wahhh...what is this?’

‘Penance,’ Ichiko whispered in his ear.

‘Get that fucking thing off me, you ragged witch.’

‘If this were a quieter place...’

The commotion was too much for anyone to ignore – even some curious onlookers from the street peeped their heads in through the window – and the Suwa General quickly moved across the izakaya floor to the table.

‘Unhand him,’ he commanded, all five ashigaru behind his blue-eye dōbuku pulling their katanas three quarters of the way out.

‘Certainly,’ replied Ichiko, withdrawing the needle and putting it back on the table, adding a small yet noticeable tremble at the end.

‘Who are you?’

‘Just a local artisan, meijin.’

‘With combat skills?’

Ichiko flinched, then allowed her forehead to crease in confusion.

‘Do not pretend that we are all blind.’

‘I didn’t-’

Misora coughed, putting a hand on Ichiko’s wrist and making her flinch again. Then did a slow turn and looked up at the samurai...and flinched herself. She couldn’t help it...the face above, looking down on her...did not seem like a real face. More like a crafted replica, stretched out over something else beneath. It was so eerie it almost made her flinch again, but then her training kicked in, forcing the brain back on track. ‘Her husband taught her the move. There was an incident, when she was younger...’

‘And you are?’

‘Regular and loyal customers,’ said Reiko, coming round the side and putting three cups plus a bottle of shōchū on the table. ‘Come, Lord Jun’ya, do you really believe women to be incapable of basic self-defence?’

‘Basic...a strange word to use.’

‘Your man here clearly has the alertness of a bloated sloth, as well as the manners of a village drunk. Not that I’m in such a lofty position as yourself, but if I were, punishment would certainly be delivered.’

Lord Jun’ya kept his eyes on Ichiko, scrutinising the faint shivering effect that was still affecting her needle hand, then shifted slowly on to Misora and Kanae. It was a long, drawn-out study, so long that the other five ashigaru got tired and put their katanas away, and the sixth one recovered enough to say, ‘yeah, actually, I let her do that. Makes it more exciting.’

Finally, the judgment was completed and Lord Jun’ya turned back to Reiko, who had just finished topping the three cups up with shōchū.

‘Remember my words. Don’t overplay your role. Lord Suwa will only stretch the line so far.’

‘I believe the shrine will have similar advice.’

Lord Jun’ya ran another fingernail down the length of his beard, looking down at the assortment of cheap-looking rings and talismans on the table, then gave a signal to two of the ashigaru and left.

‘Woman, I’m gonna give you such a good, hard-...’ the injured ashigaru started to say to Ichiko, but was cut off by three of his colleagues grabbing him by the arms and legs and dragging him out through the entrance. Apparently, they’d forgotten about his broken

wrist as the screams were feral, and carried on for at least twenty seconds before finally being usurped by the outside shouts of the hawkers.

‘Seems like an opportunity has arisen,’ said Ichiko, taking the needle pin and sliding it back into the sleeve of her yukata. ‘And with such a memorable face too.’

‘Wah, you noticed that too?’ Kanae checked back on the door panel for stragglers, then moved in closer to Ichiko. ‘It’s like he had someone else’s skin on...so creepy.’

‘It would, of course, be discretionary, and a stark challenge, but...judging by the standard of his personal retinue.’

‘You idiot,’ answered Misora, picking up the cup of shōchū and downing it in one go.

‘Me?’ stammered Kanae, quickly breathing out in relief when she saw Misora’s eyes were aimed elsewhere. And then sucking breath in again when she realised the izakaya lady was walking over.

‘If you’re referring to the ashigaru pervert, my actions were appropriately disguised.’

‘As a fucking afterthought. Gods, you could’ve ruined us before we’d even laid down our bags.’

‘Exaggeration, as usual.’

‘That was a Suwa General...right in front of us...and I’m not even totally sure he bought our story.’

‘Of course, he did. That’s why he left.’

‘Err...about these talismans, meijin,’ said Kanae, trying to gesture with enlarged eyes at Reiko, who was pulling a chair over from the other table.

‘Nah, he was definitely suspicious,’ started the izakaya boss, planting down a freshly opened shōchū bottle. ‘But as long as you’ve got the shrine’s seal of approval, which I just cloaked you with, free of charge I may add...’

Kanae held up a talisman, getting out the first few words of her sales pitch before Misora reached over and guided her hand back down. ‘It’s fine, she’s a friend.’

‘She is?’

‘A stout and reliable one.’ Reiko smiled, patting Misora on the thigh and pouring out another cup of shōchū. ‘On the rare occasions that you bother to stop by.’

‘We go where we are sent,’ answered Ichiko, sipping from her cup.

‘Still all business I see, Ichiko.’

‘She’s happy to see you underneath,’ said Misora, taking the new shōchū offering and downing that one too.

‘Yeah, I can tell. All of you look so happy. Gods on a riverboat, it feels like centuries, Miso. Where in the seven realms have you been?’

‘Centuries? You make me sound like a tree.’

‘Ha. I wish you were. Then I’d at least know where to find you.’

Misora laughed, pouring herself another shōchū and adding a bit to all the other cups too, even Ichiko’s.

‘Well, I suppose you’re here now, needle pins at the ready.’

Ichiko muttered something too low to catch, left hand rubbing the sleeve of her yukata.

‘The only question is...for what purpose?’

Misora nursed her cup of shōchū this time, swirling it in tiny little whirlpools before drinking in two rapid bursts and putting it back down on the table.

‘Nothing back-breaking,’ she said, one eye on Ichiko’s sleeve, the other on Reiko’s hand still camped on her thigh.

‘Details?’

‘Later. More drink first. Celebrate our arrival properly.’

‘It’s barely afternoon,’ said Ichiko, glancing over at another table with an elderly man slumped face first on the table.

‘But no longer morning,’ said Misora, picking up the bottle.

Reiko grinned, holding out her cup. ‘Works for me.’

‘Me too,’ added Kanae, shifting her seat closer to the shōchū pourer.

The three women raised their cups and clinked them together, while Ichiko remained rigid in her seat, staring at the surface layer of shōchū in her own glass, mentally tutting.

And deeper down, in the Id maelstrom...probably a lot worse.



CHAPTER 30

DEMON MONK VS VENGEFUL ASHIGARU

‘Give me a donation and I’ll let you rest.’

‘No.’

‘Everyone else has.’

‘Don’t care.’

‘Come on, you’re the only one stubborn enough, and selfish enough, to hold out on me. Sorry...I mean, hold out on the temple.’

‘I don’t recognise your temple.’

‘Of course, I could just put a little magic behind it and make you pay. Or pick up that rusty green katana on the grass over there and cut your fingers off until you came to your senses. But that would feel like cheating. You see, I want you to donate out of the pureness of your heart. The strength of your faith in what this lovely portable shrine represents.’

‘It’s not a shrine. It’s a box with pictures on it.’

‘Okay, then how about respecting the craftsmanship?’

‘I’m not paying you anything. Ever. Again.’

‘Ah, so you like standing on one leg?’

‘Go to hell, scam man.’

The orange-haired monk nodded slowly, sagely, as if he finally understood what his universe's version of Derrida was going on about with all that *pine's not a pine shit*...then jumped off the portable shrine, walked closer to the man wobbling on one leg and whispered into his ear, 'eat dirt, *bakayarō*.'

Trying desperately to open his mouth and scream *kusoooooooo*, the man instead bent down and, keeping his other foot at least a few inches off the ground, very awkwardly scooped up some dry mud granules.

'Go on, gobble it all up.'

'... ..'

'Sorry, what was that?'

'... ..'

'You want some condiments to go with it? Some wasabi perhaps?'

'... ..'

'Ah, you're eyeing that green katana, aren't you?'

'... ..'

'It's quite far. You think you can make it?'

'... ..'

'Wah, why are you still mumbling, you haven't even started eating it yet?'

The man smiled, his eyes shifting slightly behind the orange monk's shoulder, which turned out to be mistake.

Sensing an ambush, the orange monk swished a hand through the air and activated one of his eleven brothers, who seemed to glide across the ground like a chess piece, parking himself just in time to take Akira's green-tainted katana square in the gut.

'... ..' he slurred, coughing up orange smoke before evaporating into gory flecks of dust and sailing silently off on the breeze.

A still fairly wet Akira stared at the body of his blade for a long second, running through all the *what the fuck* and *was that a ghost* questions privately, then re-focused on his main target and advanced.

Unfortunately, the orange monk must've been accustomed to such attacks as he'd already retreated behind the portable shrine, and positioned his remaining ten brothers as a perimeter line to protect him on all sides.

'Come out from there, coward,' shouted Akira, his voice so loud that it prompted the orange monk to yell back, 'I'm only ten feet away, you idiot. Stop screaming.'

Curving around to the left, Akira shifted the slightly muddy [and still green] katana to his right hand...and then quickly back to his left when his wrist started to throb again.

Fucking Miho, he thought, remembering what had just happened at the lake. Making me punch him in the face...allegedly. And fuck that green demon too, for giving me the wrist injury in the first place. And that happy couple with their useless rejuvenation cream. And this monk for moving out of the way so fast.

And all the rest of these Hell creatures, swarming about Kai Province as if they own the place.

How many was it now? Atta Noe, Green cannibal man, orange monk...all in little more than a week. The thirty-nine years before that, nothing, no demons whatsoever. To call this mess a co-incidence wouldn't do it justice. It was batshit insane. As was that monk just vanishing into nothing. Was he actually dead? Had he ever been alive?

Akira felt the grass-and-mud stuffing creeping out of his left ear and put his weaker hand up to shove it back in.

'Take your trashy katana and stab yourself in the neck,' shouted the orange demon from behind the portable shrine.

'Sorry, can't hear you,' Akira replied, though he did manage to catch the faint sound of *katana* and *yourself*.

'Gods, the grass in the ears trick...'

'What?'

The orange monk scanned the road around him, peeking through the gaps in his ten monk shield.

‘If you don’t come out and fight, I’ll have to go through all your monks. Which is no problem for me.’

‘Take the grass out of his ears,’ shouted the orange monk, his words directed at the local artisan still trying to swallow all the dirt he’d put in his mouth.

‘No problem whatsoever, assuming they’re all made of air like the last guy. What was that anyway? Dark magic?’

Akira cupped his head towards the shrine, half curious about the answer...then reeled back as the weirdo eating dirt grabbed him by the neck and tore the grass out of his left ear.

‘Kuso...get off me, I need that.’

The man moved around the back of Akira, targeting the other ear while managing to put himself in such an awkward position that the ashigaru couldn’t quite get his katana in the right place to poke him with it. Not even in the leg.

‘... ..’ mumbled the man, spilling out dirt and spit juiced together.

‘Stay still,’ yelled Akira back, finally getting his elbow up high enough to strike his puppet opponent in the side of the head.

The man fell backwards, landing on a small rock and groaning in pain. Then holding up his hand and letting the second batch of ear grass tumble out.

‘Kuso,’ shouted Akira, patting his ear and quickly realising his defences had gone.

‘... ..’ moaned the man, shrugging.

‘Yeah, too late for apologies.’ Akira jabbed the man’s calf with the tip of his katana, and then did the same to his right arm. ‘Stay down, *friend*. I’ll deal with you next.’

Turning back to the shrine with katana raised, Akira was surprised to see the line of ten monks parting and the orange monk strolling forward like Emperor Tomohito through the bathing rooms of his favourite harem.

‘Ah, natural law re-established,’ he said, clapping his hands together. ‘Now, let me repeat myself. Take that cheap-looking, weird, melon-coloured katana and stab yourself in the...let’s see now...we don’t want it to be fast...there has to be some punishment for the insult of this attack. How about the thigh? Yes, the right thigh, lots of arteries, perfect.’ He coughed, taking another step forward. ‘Stab yourself in your right thigh.’

Akira’s eyes moved down to his blade, waiting for it to turn against him.

But nothing happened.

It swayed slightly, in the grip of his fatigued hand, and that was it.

‘Quickly, please,’ said the orange monk, crease lines appearing on his forehead and, for some odd reason, his cheeks.

Again, neither the katana nor Akira’s hand moved.

‘Stab. Yourself. In. The. Right. Thigh. Now.’

‘Looks like your tongue’s not so blessed anymore,’ Akira said, performing a small circle with the tip of his katana and then advancing.

‘This doesn’t make-...how are you doing this?’

‘Natural law, brother.’

‘No, you’re a human. You can’t stab me, I’m a-...’ The orange monk stumbled backwards, doing another side-swipe with his hand as he landed on the dirt to the side of the shrine. ‘Block him, don’t let him past.’

The ten monks nodded and quickly slid into the previously arranged perimeter formation. Nine of them pulled out short blades and pointed them forward, as the tenth disintegrated into orange dust.

Akira pulled his katana back and assumed a defensive posture, waiting for the other monks to attack.

And waited. And waited. And waited a little bit more.

Then straightened up, walked a few paces to the monk on the edge of the shield line and sliced him across the chest.

Just like his two brothers, he broke into particles of orange and floated down onto the ground.

‘Either these monks really like you,’ he said, stabbing another monk and nodding when the same thing happened again, ‘or they’re an illusion of mist and bullshit.’

‘Only five of them, ashigaru,’ replied the orange monk, the top of his head poking out over the shrine. ‘And you’ll never know which are which until it’s too late.’

‘Ha, more bullshit.’

‘Yes, very good. Keep acting casual, play right into our hands.’

‘Okay, brother.’

Akira walked side-on and cut through three more monks, completely unshocked when they also dispersed into harmless bits of orange dust.

‘Circle him,’ shouted the orange monk, stepping out from the side of the shrine, eyes glowing. ‘Don’t let him get through.’

‘Only four left,’ said Akira, wiping the end of the katana with his yukata sleeve and smiling as his main target starting moving back towards the trees about fifty metres behind. ‘You should really watch your rear more closely.’

Confused for a moment, then sceptical, the orange monk spun on his heels and let out a panicked *wait* as Miho’s fist hit him in the cheek.

It wasn't the cleanest hit ever, so Miho tried again, and when that didn't knock out the monk either, Aya threw down her twig and joined in.

'Stop!' wailed the monk, putting hands up to defend the wrong parts of his face. 'You can't knock me unconscious, I'm not human.'

Nodding their understanding, Aya and Miho switched targets and brought the monk down by his legs. Then sat on his chest to keep him there.

'Does glowing orange eyes mean he's angry?' asked Miho, looking over at Akira, who was wiping orange particles off the green of his blade.

'Could be fear,' said Aya, moving her head to dodge some orange vapour seeping haphazardly out from the monk's mouth.

'Quick, take the ashigaru's katana, stab him in the gut,' whispered the orange monk.

Aya and Miho exchanged glances, then looked up as Akira appeared next to them, katana raised and ready to strike.

'Did he just tell you to do something?'

'No...not really...' stuttered Aya.

'Take his katana, stab him!' screamed the orange monk, trying to lift his head up to give the rabid command extra distance.

Akira stepped back two paces, alternating the tip of the blade between his two comrades.

‘It’s not working,’ said Miho, checking both his earholes.

‘Must be Daiki’s magic,’ added Aya.

‘It rubbed off on us too?’

‘Has to be.’

‘Which Daiki? Where?’ asked the orange monk, looking in seventeen different directions all at once. ‘What are you blathering on about?’

‘Someone more powerful than you, obviously,’ said Akira, coming forward again and placing the edge of the katana against the monk’s throat. ‘What’s the bet you don’t turn into orange mist?’

‘Wait,’ said Aya, putting her hand close to but not on the blade. ‘You can’t.’

‘Relax, it’s my better hand.’

‘No, he’s subdued...we’ve beaten him.’

‘Yes, and now we get to kill him.’

Miho reached forward and placed his own hand, gently at first, then a little bit firmer, on Akira’s sword arm. ‘She’s right, we don’t have to do this.’

‘Gods, you’re not my fucking conscience. He tried to kill me, I kill him, that’s how it works. There is no higher dictate of mercy in

this. Now, get your hand off my arm before I chop it off.' Akira paused, checking back on his line, frowning. 'Your hand, not my arm.'

Miho kept his hand there for another second, then reluctantly pulled it away, giving Aya the frown code to do the same with hers.

'No, don't pull away,' moaned the orange monk, trying to shift up onto his elbows and immediately getting prodded back down. 'He's mad, you have to stop him.'

'Shut up, you.'

'Please, don't leave. I'm only doing this to survive. I have five kids to feed. They're at home, waiting for me right now. Starving to death. Really, you can see their bones through their-'

The monologue plea ended with a katana guard to the head, followed by a light slash on the left arm.

Both Miho and Aya stayed as they were, trying not to look at the blood slipping out from the fresh wound.

'You can start walking if you're squeamish,' added Akira, gesturing at the road ten metres away leading north. 'Might want to check the shrine first, get back some of that donation money.'

Aya looked at the katana, spotted with blood [on top of the green demon shit, which appeared to be semi-permanent], then turned her back completely and walked off towards the road, muttering, 'should've let him drown.'

‘Okay, you check the shrine for coins.’

Miho stood up and neither shook his head nor muttered anything, instead just opting to look visibly disappointed. And it was convincing too. So convincing that Akira shoved him quite hard on the shoulder and told him to go, check the fucking shrine.

It didn’t work.

The village boy moved away.

‘He’s the one who started it,’ Akira shouted after him, watching him meander up to a slowing Aya.

‘My powers,’ mumbled the orange monk, rubbing the side of his head, ‘why didn’t they work?’

Akira turned back to his fallen opponent and lined up the katana against his throat. ‘You still whining? Let me help you with that.’

He raised his katana diagonal, aiming for a quick cut to one of the arteries. Hopefully that would be as fatal for demons as it was for humans.

‘Treasure,’ gasped the orange monk, raising a shaky [and slightly bloody] hand.

‘Hey, I’m trying to focus here,’ replied Akira, bringing the katana down for a rehearsal strike.

‘No, no, no, no...I have treasure, nearby, at the temple.’

‘Bull. Shit.’

‘It’s true, and not just donations...jewels too. Hundreds of them, thousands.’

‘And you have access to it?’

‘Of course, I’m the head monk. I have the keys to the whole chamber.’

Akira rested his katana on the demon’s neck, clipping him slightly as his fingers twitched on the guard.

‘You kill me here...now...and you’ll never get one nugget.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Spare me...and you can have it all.’

‘It is a tempting offer, and obviously a trick of some sort.’

‘No trick, just a trade. The treasure...for my life.’

‘That’s it?’

‘Please...I can’t die...not here.’

Akira made a series of half-whistle, half-irritated breath sounds, mentally sketching all the pros and cons of the deal onto the green blade of his katana.

Pro: treasure.

Cons: a hundred monks waiting for him at the temple. Probably not comprised of orange mist. Too much treasure. How to carry it all? This monk moaning all the way there.

After a few more mutterings, Akira pulled his katana away and told the orange monk they had a tentative deal.

Then flipped the blade and brought the guard down hard on his right ankle.

‘But if you cross me...’

‘You fucking-...’ the orange monk shrieked alongside muffled cries of pain.

‘Yeah, I think we understand each other.’

About fifty metres further along the road, Aya and Miho stopped and looked back, hearing the faint scream. However, instead of Akira swinging the orange monk’s decapitated head in the air like a carnival prize, they saw him re-sheathing the katana and dragging the wounded demon back to his feet.

‘See, I decided not to kill him,’ he shouted, waving his free arm at them. ‘Happy now?’

CHAPTER 31

INTO THE CLAWS OF THE SAKAI CLAN

Chapter 31: Into the Claws of the Sakai Clan



心 郁 郁

Begin the dance of not crying for anyone

Trees, trees, trees, trees, more trees, the same type of trees, infinite trees, *sleep and you'll still see them* trees, *what sky, what are you talking* about trees, trees fucking TREEEEEEEEES.

Atta Noe dissipated her human face-construct into soothing purple vapour and swirled to the side of the palanquin window, trying to remind herself that there couldn't be much more of this hell-scape left.

A day's travel from Kōfu to Sunpu, with one and a quarter already passed. Apparently, they'd taken the longer, scenic route on Shingen's command, that's why it was taking so long, but now they were on the final stretch and Sunpu Castle would be greeting them soon.

Well, it better be.

In no way could she tolerate another night of drunken ashigaru thugs tapping on her box, telling her to come out and perform for them.

Idiot foot soldiers...they actually thought she was a real woman, a senior advisor to Shingen who, for some reason, chose to sleep inside a box. And that she would demean herself to such a base level as to stand in front of their little fire and slowly peel away her yukata.

Gods...it was exhausting.

There were times when she thought, forget the rules, Noe, just unleash your true form and let the little ant-wretches cower in fear, make them eke out the true deference you deserve.

‘That’s an interesting shape,’ said a gravelly voice next to her.

Great. The cuckolded mouse wanted to chat again. How fortunate she was.

‘Does it ever tire you to hold it together like that? Or is it the human form that is difficult to maintain?’

Atta Noe swirled in small spirals, going through her kill list again. The ashigaru. The idiot boy. The annoying ryokan girl. The annoying ryokan owner. That caustic *Gos Usso* wretch. Atta Ka Yukio. Shingen. And now this clownish coward father of his who allowed himself to be-

‘Can you hear me, child?’

The words filtered through and her natural lilac deepened to a darker, more violet state, the fleeting urge to slide through her travel companion’s neck suppressed...somehow.

‘I was resting,’ she said, reforming the Japanese face assigned to her pre-portal that evidently made these particular humans more comfortable.

‘When there is such beauty outside? Hmm, a strange choice, indeed.’ Shingen’s father turned to the window on his side and tapped the wooden frame. ‘Do you see the uniform shape of the trees, the

regimented way they line the road? That must be artificial, you think, but no...it is their own arrangement.'

'In truth, it all appears as a blur to me.'

'The artistry of nature. Perhaps this is lost on your kind. Or you find beauty in other things. If that is the case, then it is a sad loss. I, myself, am looking forward to spending time by the sea, observing forces more powerful than we could ever hope to be. Did you know Sunpu has the longest beach in the entire province?'

'You speak like a painter.'

'Ha, an astute observation.'

'If I were you, I'd be thinking of ways to get Lord Imagawa on side, give you a chance to reclaim your title, your power.'

'Yes, I can see why my son likes you.'

'Undoubtedly, I can feel nothing but his total adoration,' she replied, gesturing at the palanquin containing them both.

'Ha, my child. It is merely a temporary cage. Perhaps even a test for you to rise to.' Shingen's father reached out for her hand and stroked the back of it. 'Yes, I can see in those tempestuous purple eyes that you're already scheming a way forward. An alliance with Imagawa, a study of his sons, the potential push towards Owari and the Oba Clan...it is not a complex game at its core.'

Atta Noe pulled her hand away...then swished it into mist form, mildly annoyed that she hadn't done that to begin with.

‘For me though, it is the temple by the sea. No more machinations and meaningless wars, just a sedate appreciation of nature’s magnificent forms. Until the day comes when it sweeps my own ashes up into its bosom.’

The last words trailed off out the window and Shingen’s father went with them, lost to the lines and lines and lines of obedient trees.

If she were capable of projectile vomiting, Atta Noe would’ve done it, right there on the palanquin floor. What the hell had happened to this man? A year ago, he was the daimyō of Kai province, a commander of troops, inept lover of countless concubines and teenage fanboys...and now...he was fantasising about sitting on a chair, watching the tide come in.

The sense of confusion turned again into disgust, so much so that she felt compelled to slip her left arm round the back of the beaten man’s neck and switch to mist particles, which she duly did, letting the lilac hover next to the slightly saggy skin at the side of his throat and...

One swift move and his head would come toppling off.

Or balance for a few seconds and then topple off.

In her experience, it varied, depending on speed of slice, level of victim awareness, wind velocity, wind direction, vein strength etc.

Gods, it was so tempting...like a mercy killing. But that was her description and it was pretty clear that Shingen wouldn't see it the same way. Not with that snake Yukio Ka whispering in his ear.

Talentless snake, too.

Twelve years to her one and a half and where was he? One place above her on the ladder and still advising alliances with every clan in the country. Following home-spun rules like a good little slave. Penalising her for having the guts to do something different, something fresh. In what dimension did that make sense?

There was a noise outside, horses whining about something, followed by an order from a stranger's voice to stop.

Re-constructing her arm and pulling it away from the coward's neck, Atta Noe poked her head out of the window and looked ahead along the road.

An ambush? she wondered briefly, seeing a line of dishevelled ashigaru flanking two higher ranking men on horseback...two quite young-looking men, one in armour and helmet, the other not...then re-assessing when she spotted the creased yellow octopus Sigel on a poorly-raised banner.

'Ah, they bothered to send a greeting party,' said Shingen Senior, opening the door of the palanquin and stepping carefully out onto the dirt. 'Good to see respect is still valued in some places.'

‘Back inside,’ shouted the armoured man on horseback, the same voice who’d ordered the palanquin to stop.

‘Tell me,’ said Shingen’s father, ignoring the blunt command, ‘are you one of the Imagawa boys I’ve been hearing so much about? You certainly look the part, up on that horse, barely of age, dressed in a very fetching-’

The man, who couldn’t have been much older than twenty, if that, spat on the ground and dismounted, walking with great purpose over to the former daimyō and seizing him by the dōbuku sleeve. ‘Back inside,’ he repeated, guiding his catch back to the palanquin door.

‘This is not protocol,’ complained Shingen’s father when he was back inside, but the man didn’t seem to care, looking past him towards Atta Noe.

‘Your guard has been relieved. From this point on, Lord Sakai will escort you.’

‘A retainer,’ said Atta Noe, running a finger down her hair. ‘A young, assertive one too.’

‘Assuming no delays, we will arrive in Nishio before midnight.’

‘Sunpu, you mean?’

‘There, at the behest of Lord Shingen, you will stay as a temporary guest and, if required, offer service as an advisor to the Sakai Clan.’

Atta Noe heard the words and did the calculations and then slumped back in her seat, muttering, 'Yukio Ka...' to the palanquin roof.

'Nishio? Ah, a little irregular, but still next to the sea. As long as-...' Shingen's father stopped and did a double take, literally using his hands to frame the retainer in one shot. 'Wait...Tadachika? Is that you? Wah, it is, isn't it? I thought you were still a little boy.'

The retainer neither confirmed nor denied the name, he simply stared with utter contempt at the man in front of him. Then turned and gave a signal to the other horse rider, who, in turn, yelled at the ashigaru to take the box.

'Be careful with that,' said Atta Noe, poking out of her side of the window and watching four ashigaru walk by, one of them with a hand inside his yukata at crotch level. 'Don't let that one touch it, he's fondling himself.'

'Ignore the witch,' shouted Tadachika, walking round the palanquin to her side.

'Advisor,' Atta Noe replied quickly, waiting until he was close enough to see the lilac glow of her eyes before continuing. 'To the boss of your boss.'

The Sakai retainer stared at her, running his eyes up and down her yukata, then slowly reached out a gloved hand and gripped her chin.

Out of instinct, Atta Noe morphed into mist form, her chin drifting away in Tadachika's hand.

'Ah, there it is,' he muttered, reaching into the particles and swaying his hand from side to side.

Cut it off.

Just a low rank retainer. Kōke wastrel. Dressed for battle when there's no battle.

Cut it off.

Cut it all off.

The stupid smug head too.

Before she could turn thoughts into slaughter, a shout of cursed pain rang out, one of the ashigaru clutching his wrist and kicking the box in retaliation.

'Fucking stupid wooden...thing.'

The ashigaru moved to kick it again, but was pulled back by the collar and struck to the ground.

'It is not a piece of junk,' shouted the man from the other horse, the red cloth tied around his neck possibly indicating a general of some kind. 'Treat it with the utmost respect.'

'The edge of it cut me,' moaned the ashigaru, trying to stand up and getting smacked back down again.

'Respect and caution. Do you understand?'

The ashigaru nodded, making half a move to stand up again and then crawling backwards instead, beyond the range of a third strike.

‘It’s only a dent, Gen’ichi,’ said Tadachika, walking over to examine the damage to the box. ‘As long as the lid still shuts.’

The man, whose full name was in fact Gen’ichiro, opened his mouth to respond...then thought better of it. Then counter-thought and responded. ‘This box is ours to safeguard, as is our guest. We should treat them both with the deference they deserve.’

‘You and your childhood whimsy,’ muttered the Sakai retainer, walking past and slapping Gen’ichiro on the shoulder. ‘Come, let’s try and make it home by nightfall. I have no desire to camp outdoors with these degenerates.’

The ashigaru laughed, clearly used to such remarks, and picked up the carrying pole, while Gen’ichiro trudged back to his horse, turning to check a few times on the status of the box.

As he passed by the palanquin window, Atta Noe leaned forward and rested her face against the frame, waiting for him to glance left.

But he declined to indulge her, and merely kept walking instead, as if she were nothing more than a stable boy.

‘Gen’ichi,’ she called after him, provoking a stop and a half turn. ‘Your care is noted and appreciated.’

Staring at the palanquin wheel, or the dirt next to it, he bowed his head, telling her in a blank voice that it was his duty, then continued on towards his horse.

Intriguing, Atta Noe thought, receding into the palanquin, her face dispersing into the more comfortable mist form.

‘They all grow up so insolent,’ muttered Shingen’s father, more to the window than to her. ‘Especially the chubby, adorable ones.’



CHAPTER 32

ACCIDENTALLY CLOSING IN ON THEIR TARGETS

The pebble spun awkwardly through the air and landed with crack on a large rock sticking out of the river.

‘Kuso,’ blurted Kanae, quickly putting a finger to her own lips as two elderly locals glanced over from their game of *slap* on the bridge railings.

‘Excellent aim,’ replied Misora, attempting to clap her hands and making no sound, then staring at the palms of her hands accusingly.

‘I missed the water completely.’

‘Huh? You mean you weren’t going for the rock?’

Kanae looked down at the river below, and the large rock that was at least twenty metres away. Then turned back to Misora and said, ‘little bit.’

‘Okay, step back, it’s meijin’s turn.’

‘Isn’t that pebble very, very big?’

‘Water-patch by that couple groping each other on the riverbank. See it? One with the ashigaru nearby, purple yukata, pretending to read that book.’

Kanae squinted down and to the left, vaguely nodding. ‘It’d be nice if they put more lanterns up down there. Too dark now.’

‘Keep eyes on them. Ready.’

Misora performed a couple of rehearsal throws then pulled her rock hand back for real and...collided with the waist of someone behind her. Spinning round the wrong way, she blurted out ‘sorry’ then edited it to ‘walk over that side’ when she saw how close he was to both her and the railings.

The young man was neither an ashigaru nor a socialite, so he bowed slightly and then bent down to pick up her rock.

‘Don’t need any male help,’ Misora slurred, taking it from him with a glare then shifting immediately to a smile when she saw how subservient he was and ordering him to watch her throw.

‘Sorry, I have to get home.’

‘Gonna splash that couple down there, maybe the ashigaru too. Five seconds.’

The young man bowed and scuttered off, adjusting his path to the middle of the bridge. Misora watched him go, shaking her head and mumbling *kuso* when she saw Ichiko walking over to replace him.

‘Still laying low I see,’ the sober kunoichi said, moving to the wooden railings and folding her arms.

‘Nothing more covert than standing out,’ replied Misora, turning back to her river target.

‘That makes no sense whatsoever.’

‘It is quite strange,’ added Kanae, tagging her own fingers one by one.

‘Quiet, I need to concentrate.’ Misora closed both eyes, sucked in the cool night breeze running through Uehara, then opened them again and launched the projectile.

She let out a whistle as it sailed towards the water, then a wicked laugh as reality hit and the rock struck the bottle of dark purple liquid propped up next to the couple’s feet.

The resulting shattering noise made the lovers jump – the book-reading ashigaru too – and when they looked around to find the culprit, all they could see was Misora pointing a finger at Ichiko beside her and mouthing, ‘she did it.’

‘You are a like a guileless child.’

‘And you’re a sexless monk. The difference is...I’ll be professional again in about an hour, whereas you-’

‘Do monks not have sex?’ asked Kanae, now pinching little specks of sand up from the bridge railings.

‘Professional,’ muttered Ichiko, glancing at the couple picking up the broken pieces of glass on the riverbank. ‘It amazes me that Lord Shingen lets you out of the compound at all.’

‘I saw two of them once, in the back room of a temple I was visiting...maybe they were just in costumes and pretending though. Don’t know.’

Ichiko glared at Kanae, her eyes enough to convince the drunken low-grade kunoichi to shut up.

‘Let me tell you a little tale,’ started Misora, putting an arm around Ichiko’s shoulder and instantly being shrugged off. ‘Once upon a time...four years ago...there was a kunoichi working for the Later Hōjō Clan. A very serious girl, super austere...seriously austere...and everyone who met her said the same thing, wah, her face, it doesn’t move, she’s so serious and austere all the time. Right? A very serious kunoichi. And one day, another kunoichi came to her and said, hey, you’ve gotta loosen up or the daimyō’s gonna have you killed. You see, a good kunoichi needs to be able to laugh at their target’s jokes and socialise, to blend in, and no matter how much she tried, this serious kunoichi couldn’t do it. And finally...skipping to the end, sorry...it got her killed. A rival daimyō, as I recall, pretended a shōchū bottle in his yukata was his penis, and she sat there stone-faced, basically broadcasting, hello, I’m a spy, I’m a spy. When all she had to do was crack the tiniest of little smiles at the penis joke.’

‘That’s so sad,’ whispered Kanae, to the grain of sand between her fingers.

‘And a complete fabrication,’ replied Ichiko, folding her arms even tighter.

‘Nope, happened just like I told it.’

‘Well, let me tell you a different story then. About a sensualist kunoichi.’

‘Ha, this should be good...’

‘Everything was a big joke to her, mainly because she lived most of her life from inside a bottle of shōchū. And, although she had been trained to possess some rudimentary skills of the trade, her hand was never steady enough to implement them. Such was her lack of professionalism that, one day, when her daimyō called her to his chambers and demanded to know why her eyes were so pink, she told him, semi-drunk, to stop being so inquisitive and give her a mission. Of course, she used cruder words than this, but the result of this insult, I shall leave unedited. A quick signal to the guard, a swipe of the katana and the sensualist kunoichi was dead. Defeated by her own slovenliness.’

‘Sorry, I nodded off at the beginning. What happened?’

‘Impudence,’ muttered Ichiko, picking up a pebble that Kanae had placed on the railings and throwing it into the river.

‘Ha, you’ve decided to enter the pebble challenge,’ hollered Misora, picking up a medium-sized stone from the ground.

‘I have no interest in your childish games.’

‘It is getting a bit tedious,’ said Kanae, giving up on the grains of sand and rubbing at the burgeoning ache in her head.

Misora ignored both of them and turned to the river, saying ‘large rock’ before throwing her stone and missing it by about three inches.

‘That was pretty close,’ came Reiko’s voice from the other side of the bridge.

‘Wah, the wanderer returns,’ shouted Misora, stretching out an arm to highlight the izakaya owner as she strolled towards them. No one seemed to care much, probably because they were too busy rushing to the temple for the totem-raising ceremony.

‘Sorry, it took so long, the road around the temple was like a beehive. Kept getting stopped by the Suwa ashigaru, half of them asking me to bless their katanas. Gods, they’re the weirdest guys...today spiritual, tomorrow back in the gutter, stabbing anyone who looks at them funny.’

‘What did the temple say?’ asked Ichiko, blunt as ever.

‘Nothing substantial. Just a few salt merchants staying the night, none of them from Kai Province. Of course it’d help if you gave me a better description of your targets.’

‘They are not staying at any of the ryokans either,’ continued Ichiko. ‘Though I have yet to investigate the ones closer to the lake.’

‘A more likely hiding place for them.’

‘Well, I’ll tell you one place they won’t be,’ said Reiko, frowning as Kanae started punching the back of her own head. ‘East side of Lake Suwa. There’s been an ashigaru company there for almost two months now.’

‘Doing what?’ asked Misora.

‘For what purpose?’ amended Ichiko.

‘That’s what I just said.’

‘Let her speak.’

‘Yes, Emperor Ankō.’

Reiko laughed at the two kunoichi and switched the container in her right hand to the left. ‘No idea. Guarding something I suppose. Of course, I could tell you the rumours swirling around, but to tell you the truth, they’re quite erratic...even more so than usual. One guy, a poet, tried to convince me that it was the Kusanagi blade they’re trying to dig up.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘Yeah, he was four bottles deep when he said it, so I didn’t believe him either. However, there is something going on over there...maybe worth mentioning to your boss.’

Ichiko flinched at the word *boss* and turned to the river.

‘So about these targets of yours,’ said Reiko, focusing on Misora, who was staring at the large crimson container in the izakaya owner’s hands. ‘If you give me some basic details, I might be able to refine my search a little.’

‘Well, Kai foreign policy makes that a bit tough.’

‘Why, because of embarrassment? Hang on, it’s not another escaped concubine, is it?’

‘No.’

‘One of your colleagues gone rogue?’

‘Stop guessing,’ barked Ichiko, turning back round with another of Kanae’s pebbles in her hand.

‘Sorry, but you’re not giving me much choice.’

‘We do not need your help.’

‘Okay, fine, go your own way. I’m just letting you know...my izakaya-stroke-ryokan is a pretty busy place, lots of strangers coming in and out.’

‘You have guests that stay the night?’ asked Kanae, surprised.

‘There are a few rooms upstairs, yes. Usually reserved for patrons too drunk to find their way home.’

‘And recently?’ prodded Misora, holding up a finger to stop Ichiko having a hissy fit. ‘Any non-patron stayovers?’

‘The last week...of course, it’s festival season.’

Misora lowered her finger and moved close to Ichiko’s shoulder, whispering into her neck. A few sharp responses of *no* came back, followed by more whispering, followed by an eventual shrug and, ‘just the basic descriptions, no names.’

Moving back to her original spot by the railings, Misora told Kanae to stop hitting her head and then faced Reiko.

‘You people are so dramatic,’ the izakaya owner said, shifting the container to her other hand again.

‘It’s a dangerous business. As are the ones we’re looking for. They killed four trained samurai, as well as several civilians.’

‘Ashigaru?’

‘One of them, yes. Around forty years old, survivalist type, fairly tall. The other one is a little more vague...a young man, twenty or so, deceptively simple-minded. Also quite tall.’

Reiko stared back, using her spare hand to wipe her nose.

‘Have you seen them?’

‘They both killed those samurai, and the civilians?’

‘Appears that way.’

Reiko shook her head, making a feeble attempt at a whistling sound. ‘I don’t believe it. He really did seem simple...kind even.’

Ichiko straightened up, throwing the pebble on the ground.

‘So you have seen them?’ prompted Misora.

‘I think so.’

‘When?’

‘Last night.’

‘At the izakaya? Are they staying there now?’

Reiko looked at Kanae, the supposed trained kunoichi, as she started to fall asleep with her head on the railing. 'Is there another target you're after?'

'No, just those two.'

'Not a girl as well?'

'Which girl?' asked Ichiko, turning to her comrade [the non-sleeping one].

'We don't have information on that,' answered Misora, giving a curt nod towards Ichiko. 'But she could be a hostage. Or someone they met on the way here.'

'You won't harm her?'

'She's not on our list. No.'

Reiko looked again at the young, dishevelled figure of Kanae, her eyelids sliding down, the shoulders falling into that familiar drunken slump.

'Okay. I'll tell you what I know.'

'Good.'

'Though temper your expectations...cos it's not much.'

Ichiko poked Kanae in the side, shocking her back into a standing position. 'We'll be the judges on that.'

'Yes...I'm sure you will be.'

CHAPTER 33

OCCULT CROWD HORROR SHOW



‘Make the cup float.’

‘No.’

‘Go on, make it float.’

‘No.’

‘Do it, do it, do it, do it.’

‘No, no, no, no, no.’

‘Wah, call yourself a mage? You can’t even do the basics.’

‘1,000 mon.’

‘What?’

‘Give me 1,000 mon and I’ll lift the cup.’

The heckler in the totem hat coughed out a ‘pah’ and swatted a skinny hand at Daiki’s red and white hair ribbons, then meandered off into the crowd.

‘Should’ve stayed at home,’ the mage muttered, finishing his shot of shōchū and raising a tired hand to the pop-up bar owner for another.

Behind him, locals dressed in every imaginable thing related to the Onbashira festival mingled and laughed and screamed, and waved cheap totem souvenirs in the air.

And drank like nihilistic fish.

Which was also what the mage had been doing for the last four hours. Since he'd let that trio of lunatics wander off to get killed by the palak monk. Not his fault, really. It wasn't the right time and attacking a palak demon without doing at least four months of surveillance and contextual research beforehand was akin to ritual suicide.

The new shot arrived and Daiki stared down at its tranquil, relatively smooth surface.

'Nope, three and half months actually,' he muttered, annoyed, running fingers down one of the red and white ribbons.

The shōchū waited.

'What? Just off the cuff like that? No plan?'

And waited.

'Yeah, I'm sure grass in the ears has never been tried before.'

And waited.

'They're not even that important, the palak monk.'

And waited.

'Idiotic more than brave.'

And waited.

'Well, maybe you should've hooked onto him then.'

And waited.

‘Yeah, maybe I will. If not wanting to die is something you consider strange.’

And waited.

‘Gods, it’s all premature anyway. Another chance will come along at some point.’

Daiki finally abandoned his ribbon stroking and picked up the cup, downing it in one and then turning to see if there was anything going on in the background that could distract him for a while.

Not a hell of a lot.

Some local men with their chests painted in the festival colours, climbing on each other’s shoulders to form their own totem...then toppling down onto a group of nearby women...and trying to grope them as they got back up.

Fortunately the women were veterans of this kind of event and had totem sticks ready to hit them with. Which could’ve been the men’s plan in the first place as they seemed to enjoy it.

Gods, why do I come here every year? Daiki asked his empty cup. Tradition? Nostalgia for the one guy I managed to hook up with seven years ago?

But he was long dead.

Killed by a panicked bandit, of all things.

And the new batch of potential targets were all drunk and overweight...and totem-building perverts.

In fact, now that I think about it, he thought, turning to the side of the festivities that had a lake view, the only guy even close to attractive I've come across recently is...that crude ashigaru.

And he barely even said thank you after I'd saved him from swallowing half of Lake Suwa. Seriously, not even a simple nod of appreciation. What an insolent piece of-

Daiki froze, empty cup in hand.

'Am I hallucinating?' he asked himself, as about ten metres into the crowd, the same ashigaru he'd just been half-fantasising about was walking close behind the orange-haired palak monk, with a short blade egregiously tucked into the small of his back. And to the sides, the young couple, Miho and the girl...Ayako...both holding one of the toy-sized totems in their left hands.

Putting down his shōchū cup and giving not a single shit that it toppled over, the confused mage pushed off his stool and....was dragged back almost immediately by the stall owner demanding payment, and not in the form of that trashy occult paraphernalia.

'Okay, okay,' replied Daiki, pulling out his money bag and handing over double the amount of his bill.

The stall owner released his grip on the mage's dōbuku sleeve and told him he'd keep the stool for him all night, but it didn't land as

Daiki was already moving through the crowd of occult revellers, his fingers stroking the red and white ribbons in his hair, telling himself out loud that this was the chance they'd been waiting for.

And he was right...when he said it.

But then something odd happened. One of the revellers in front of the palak monk stopped waving his totem stick in the air and turned abruptly, grabbing the rude-yet-oddly attractive ashigaru by the sleeve and punching him awkwardly in the side of the face.

The oddest part was the reveller himself...a man so frail-looking that he couldn't have been much under seventy, yet, after his first strike landed and the ashigaru stumbled backwards, he didn't back up into a defensive posture or try to flee or cower, he advanced confidently and tried to hit him again.

Of course, no ashigaru would be caught off-guard twice and this one used the hilt of his short dagger to put the pensioner down with one strike.

'What the hell was that?' yelled Aya, running in from the side.

'A fucking drunk,' said Akira, squinting at the old man unconscious on the grass and reacting far too slow as another assault came in from the left.

This time it was a totem stick, the edge of it scraping down his cheek.

‘What the-...’ the ashigaru slurred, backing up and a step and parrying the follow up.

‘Another one, behind you,’ shouted Miho, coming in from the other side.

Akira spun and swerved in one move, making the assumption that the attacker was an amateur, then lashed out with the back of his fist.

It connected hard, too hard...as he realised too late that he’d used his splint hand. Or the hand that had been in a splint two days ago. That was supposed to have been healed by that magical cream from those two lunatics but kept fucking relapsing.

‘Kuso,’ he spat, pulling back again, holding his blade up at the other stick guy.

Normally, that would’ve bought some time, but this opponent was riled up, high on whatever fumes were coming out of that log bucket they’d seen as they’d come in, and the blade was clearly irrelevant as the lunatic stormed forward and poked at Akira’s chest with his shabby little stick.

‘Don’t make me use this,’ warned Akira, just as the man leapt through the air and basically pushed himself onto the end of the dagger.

‘This is madness,’ yelled Miho, summing up the feelings of most of the crowd, who’d realised, finally, that this wasn’t a performance they were watching, but a real life and death struggle.

‘He jumped on it, I didn’t-...’ started Akira, pulling his blade out and pointing at the man, who hovered a second, drooling blood lines, before slumping like a straw dummy onto the grass.

‘Wait, where’s the monk?’ asked Aya, looking around the crowd and seeing not a hint of orange.

Miho followed her scan. ‘He’s not here?’

‘The attackers...he must’ve told them to do it. Hypnotised them.’

‘What, in this din?’

‘Cunning little-...’ Akira grabbed the finger of a reveller jabbing into his chest and twisted it, then took out his green katana and made his way quickly through the parting masses. ‘He’ll go for the temple, over there.’

Aya and Miho trailed after their sometime ashigaru bodyguard, though it was harder for them to push through the locals screaming for security as all they had were the little totem sticks and everyone else had those too.

Luckily, no one seemed to realise that they were friends of the murderer so there were no physical attacks, and, after seven minutes of wrestling and jabbing and shoving and repelled fondling, they finally made it to the quiet shore of Lake Suwa.

Akira was about fifty metres ahead and...somehow, he’d already caught up with the monk.

No, wait...someone else had...another figure pinned on top of the orange-haired trickster, shouting at him to come out and do something.

Hurrying forward, Aya and Miho quickly realised it wasn't just a random someone, it was the apparent saviour-on-call; the red and white ribbon mage. And, for some reason, Akira was trying to push him off the orange monk.

'He's mine.'

'Not anymore.'

'I caught him first.'

'Then dropped him.'

'Give him back.'

'Not likely.'

The back and forth continued for about two minutes, interspersed with background moaning from the orange monk trapped beneath the mage's knees, until Akira decided to escalate and jab forward the tip of his katana.

'You'd stab the guy who saved your life?' asked Daiki, his face genuinely shocked, so much so that he put a moratorium on slapping the monk.

'If needs must.'

'Over someone like this.'

Akira looked down at what he could make of the monk, which was basically just a unruly mop of orange hair. It was true, he didn't particularly want to stab the guy who'd saved him from drowning, which meant he'd have to come up with some snappy rhetoric to persuade him instead.

And if that didn't work...just wound him a little. A scratch on the leg maybe. Just enough to get him off his prey.

'Stop fighting, both of you,' interjected Miho, stepping next to Akira's blade and instantly getting a *kuso* right to the face.

'Both? He's the one with the sword,' protested Daiki, losing his grip on the monk for a second and correcting with a tighter knee into his back.

'He's right,' said Aya, moving behind the mage. 'Stop being a thug and try talking for once. If you're capable of it.'

'Gods, all three of you...'

Miho held up his hand, diplomat style. 'I'm sure we can come to some agreement, if you put your katana away.'

'Why am I always the bad guy?'

Somewhere in the festival behind them, violent shouts started to get louder, closer, the last of them comprehensible. And visible too; a group of revellers telling at least twelve Suwa enforcers that the murderer was over there.

‘No, you’re not doing it here,’ muttered Daiki, seemingly talking to his own hair.

‘What?’

‘Do that and I’ll throw you in the lake...bury you forever.’

‘Who the hell are you talking to?’

The mage looked up, confused momentarily, then angry when he saw the twelve ashigaru advancing along the shore. ‘You idiot, you’re gonna get us all caught.’

‘Then get off my prisoner.’

‘So you can lose him again?’

Aya waved her arms at both of them, shouting that they had to ditch the stupid orange monk and get out of there, head back into the crowd before it was too late.

‘Don’t have time for this nonsense,’ replied Akira, moving forward and aiming the tip of his katana at Daiki’s arm.

Typically, it would’ve been a simple cut to make, but when there was a sudden rush of grassy sand flying up into your face, it was pretty much impossible.

‘Kuso,’ cough-shouted Akira, dropping his blade and rubbing furiously at his eyes.

Seizing his chance, the mage grabbed the palak monk by the arms and pulled him up...put a hand over his mouth before he could say

anything...then tripped on Akira's katana guard and fell back down again.

'Beautiful,' cried the orange-haired demon as he broke free and ran full pelt towards the twelve ashigaru, waving his arms and screaming at them that he'd just been attacked by the murderers. Seeing a man of the cloth, in peak festival season, was evidence enough for any disciple of the Suwa Clan and the twelve ashigaru continued on, eight of them rugby-tackling Akira onto the sporadic grass, three pinning down the mage, and the last one clamping a hand on Miho's shoulder and saying, between jagged breaths, 'don't...no moves...too knackered.'

'Miho, run,' shouted Aya, instincts sharp enough to have already taken her ten metres farther along the shore.

Both her intended target and the ashigaru holding him [while also bending over with cramp] heard it, and both of them did nothing.

For the ashigaru, the girl was too far down the shore...and probably a groupie anyway.

For Miho, he felt bad disobeying a security officer.

Besides, they hadn't technically done anything wrong. As soon as they got put in front of someone with authority, they would be able to explain everything that had happened.

That an orange-haired monk had hypnotised those locals to attack them.

And the festival guy had jumped onto Akira's dagger.

'You crazy...fume-inhaling...spiritualist lunatics,' said one of the other ashigaru, finally rising up from the scrum and leaving enough of a gap for Miho to see that Akira was bruised, cut and out cold.

'All male gang too,' added another ashigaru, rubbing his punishment hand and looking down at the unconscious mage.

'We're innocent,' said Miho, his voice a husk of its usual bright self.

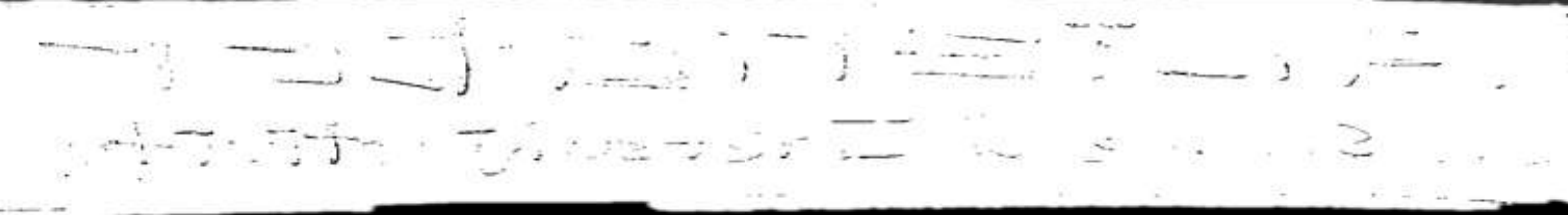
'Yeah, and I'm Kublai Khan.'

'Err...okay. Is that a clan title or-'

'*Kuso*, a simpleton. Shut him up, will you?'

Miho opened his mouth to say, *wait, I remember now, Kublai Khan, he was the guy who-...*but the fist heading to the back of his head didn't care, and the second, third and fourth fists that followed didn't either.

Ah, well, he thought, staring down the shore as the void closed in, at least Aya got away. If they'd got her too, I don't know what I would've-



CHAPTER 34

NISHIO CASTLE

The best thing about travelling in a palanquin adjacent to the sea was the constant influx of curious mosquitoes flying in through the window, even on an early spring night when it wasn't yet warm enough to function.

To humans it would've been irritating, but, to Atta Noe, it was fun, letting them land on her face, roam a little, prod their tiny proboscis into her ersatz skin...and then consume them in a ball of purple mist. And when that got boring, she'd swoosh them over to the elder Shingen, guide them into his earhole, then tell him to shut up when he turned around to moan about it.

'All that childish sulking is making you miss the view,' he said, finally, hitting the side of his head to try and dislodge the latest insect invader.

'Don't care.'

'It may not be Sunpu, but the streets are quite delightful with all the winter lanterns still hung up. Peaceful too. No drunken louts leering, making caveman noises.'

'Because they're all at the castle.'

'Yes, Nishio castle. That will be quite a sight. I admit, I haven't seen it since its renewal. Apparently it's unassailable, and the only way to infiltrate is by climbing up the cliff face.'

‘Not unassailable then.’

‘Bah, you’re impossible. Is there no part of you that understands the art of basic conversation?’

Atta Noe opened her mouth to say *fuck off, weakling* in her native tongue, but was pre-empted by the neighing of the horses outside, followed by that over-dressed Tadachika child ordering them out of the palanquin.

Allowing the elder Shingen to stumble out first, Atta Noe waited a full minute before pushing open the door and half-stepping, half-gliding down to the path.

‘Congratulations, you move slower than an old man,’ said Tadachika, standing at the front of a semi-circle of bored-looking ashigaru, one hand on the guard of his katana.

‘Where is my box?’ she asked, looking first behind the palanquin, then over towards the cliff edge on the left, and finally up at the five-floor *honmaru* looming on the plateau above.

‘It has been taken ahead to your chambers.’

‘Which are where?’

‘You will see soon enough. Come.’ Tadachika held out his gloved hand, tilting his head slightly, as two of the ashigaru behind him struggled against the forces of a moderate sea wind to pull down the Sakai banner.

Glancing at Gen'ichiro to the left, Atta Noe tilted her own head, assessing the likelihood of the Sakai daimyō's outstretched hand being pulled back as soon as she reached it, then decided, no, he wouldn't, his pupils were dilated, which in her experience of male humans meant one of two things: sexual desire or lunatic self-destruction.

She moved forward, riding on discreet platforms of purple mist, and accepted the retainer's hand. To her surprise, it wasn't sweaty at all beneath the fabric, a sign that he either didn't comprehend what she truly was or simply didn't care.

'Your skin is cold,' he said, guiding her towards the stone steps that curved up through an opening courtyard towards the side of the main compound. 'I can feel it even through my glove.'

'Winter habit.'

'But it is almost spring.'

She smiled, not even attempting to make it sincere, and looked left at the smaller structures with cheaper-looking lanterns hanging from their walls. 'That is where your soldiers are kept.'

'Stationed, yes.'

'Beneath the eyes of their lord.'

'As it should be.'

'Interesting. In Lord Shingen's castle, the samurai are positioned farther from the honmaru.'

‘That is the old style. And unnecessary. Here in Nishio, we do not fear our own men.’

Atta Noe looked at the medium-sized child in full battle dress and nodded, biting her tongue in the name of diplomacy, and sublimating the voice in her head telling her this young fool could be steered her way if she played him correctly. The traditional type, elevated too young to leadership, stuck with an emaciated clan living off past glory days...that weren't that glorious to begin with. The Sakai Clan, definitely a challenge, as long as this boy could keep it in his yukata and not force her into any reactionary measures.

‘Tell me...Atta Noe...what do you think of our castle?’

‘Not a witch anymore?’ she asked, turning back to him and keeping a lock on her human face for a few moments...then slipping into her own variation of the smile she'd learnt in training.

‘A slip of the tongue. And perhaps an ill mood at the time.’

She maintained the smile a little longer, then switched to pensive. ‘It is not completely inaccurate. To humans, I am certainly more witch-like than any of your own kind.’

‘Yes...I admit, I am curious about the extent of your powers.’

‘Powers?’

‘The tricks you are able to perform.’

‘Ah, I see. The physical traits I possess.’

‘Is it true that you can slice a man in two with your...mist?’

‘A woman too.’

Tadachika tilted his head [and helmet] again, then laughed, placing the demon’s hand against his lips and holding it there with a long kiss. Behind him, Gen’ichiro looked away, over towards a side gate, muttering something under his breath. Atta Noe couldn’t catch the words, but she could read his lips and, pulling her hand back, asked if he’d met one of her kind before.

The sudden attention seemed to puzzle him and he looked at Tadachika for guidance...then changed his mind and went with his own thoughts. ‘As a child, there was someone similar, yes.’

‘You knew them?’

‘No.’

‘Followed them?’

‘It was not-...there was no worship aspect entreated.’

Atta Noe glided over and stopped near his sword arm. ‘Did they have a name?’

‘Name?’

‘Mine is Atta Noe. And theirs was?’

‘You’re wasting your time,’ interrupted Tadachika, coming in from the side to retake Atta Noe’s hand. ‘He told me the whole story

on the way here. There was no relationship, the woman was staying in his village, he saw her swirling purple a few times and then she left.'

'Ah, she assumed a female form. Perhaps I know her.'

Tadachika sliced a hand through the air. 'This kind of talk is for future days. Now it teeters on midnight and we must show you to your chamber. Come, this way, through the courtyard.'

'As you command,' said Atta Noe, glancing back at Gen'ichiro as the Sakai daimyō led her along the left-hand path and around to the rear of the castle.

It wasn't much of a surprise to see a stone garden greeting them – most modern castles had at least one - along with template ponds and sculpted maple bonsai, though it was a little odd that the Sakai retainer was taking her to what seemed to be a large shack isolated by itself at the tail end of the compound, far from the *honmaru*, far from the samurai barracks too, and half-concealed by the beginning rows of the pine forest leading down the rear slope to Nishio.

'To keep rumour and speculation to a minimum,' Tadachika explained as he slid open the entrance panel and gave a signal for the remaining four ashigaru to leave.

'By putting me in an incredibly distinctive structure closer to no other?'

‘It is the safest way. Of course, you will stay out of sight during the day. Food will be delivered by the servants and, in the rare cases that I need your counsel, I will send for you.’

‘Yes, a pleasant cage for a witch...’ Atta Noe muttered with a polite laugh, walking ahead down the short corridor with salt sacks stacked against the walls, then moving through an open wooden panel into an almost completely unfurnished chamber. The first thing that caught her eye was her box, safely positioned near the corner. She glided over, stroking the native emblems on the lid, then took in the rest of the desolate space, frowning at the double-sized futon.

‘As I understand it, you are capable of functioning in a human capacity...eating our food, drinking our drink...’

‘I do not require a futon,’ she replied sharply, without turning. ‘You may take it away.’

Tadachika walked to the box and patted the lid, nodding at the decorative patterns that were like hieroglyphics to him. Then took her hand and kissed each individual knuckle.

‘You have already done that,’ she said, pulling her hand back, losing the smile. ‘It is late and I must rest. Tomorrow, we will discuss the state of the Sakai Clan and potential operations within the next few months.’

‘Yes, you should rest. Recover your spirit. I will come by tomorrow night and lie with you.’

The line was spoken matter-of-fact, so much so that Atta Noe had to mouth the words back to herself, while Gen'ichiro just stared blankly at the futon.

‘You seem to be regressing,’ she replied, finally. ‘I am a senior advisor to Lord Shingen, not a third-rate concubine.’

‘In Kai Province, perhaps. Here, you are my guest. To do with as I please.’

‘Ah...that tone again.’

‘Nonsense. There is no tone. I am simply telling you the role that your service will take, which, as the head of the Sakai Clan, is mine to decide. It is not anything personal. In fact, I am quite looking forward to sampling what you have to offer.’

‘Lord Imagawa will not approve.’

‘Imagawa...Lord Imagawa...will be occupied elsewhere. And if he does stop by, he will most certainly be too drunk to notice.’

Atta Noe held up her left arm and drizzled it into vapour, forcing the Sakai retainer back a step as it swirled near his face. ‘Bold words for a child retainer. Of a village club.’

Tadachika's eyes flashed feral lightning for a brief moment, his fist clenching with a crackle of bone. Then the hierarchal breeding seeped back in as he propped himself up to full height and looked left at Gen'ichiro, performing an unreciprocated grin. ‘Age is subordinate

to ambition. And ambition is paramount. Ask your young ex-daimyō Shingen, he will confirm it...if he ever deigns to see you again.'

'Lessons from a juvenile, how quaint.'

'Until then, you are under my command. And will refer to me as daimyō.'

'Again, you severely misunderstand. This is simply a temporary assignment...to prop up an under-performing cog in a much bigger wheel.'

'Is that so? Then this cog will have to make good use of you while you are here. Starting tomorrow night, in these chambers. Bathe thoroughly before I arrive, I detest poor hygiene.'

Atta Noe mouthed back the words *bathe thoroughly* as if they were poison, then sat down on the futon, stretching her arms back as if advertising her yukata for a Kyoto fashion house. Looking up at an almost salivating Tadachika, incongruous to a ludicrous degree in his battle armour, she couldn't help but laugh.

'No more comebacks?' he asked, eyes running down the length of her human form.

'You truly are of that age. Did you not ever wonder why Shingen would have me as an advisor and not a concubine?'

'He lies with boys, everyone knows that.'

'Ah, silly child. I am not like you. Physiologically. Biologically. This form...is not human. Do you understand that? My insides are

toxic to your kind. The first thrust and your penis would dissolve into gooey nothingness. I am literally untouchable.'

It wasn't the prettiest warning ever, but it was enough to shut the Sakai Head up for at least thirty seconds. During which time he adjusted the tilt of his helmet and straightened his armour pads and grimaced like he'd just failed a surprise dictation test. After all that superficiality, he moved back to Gen'ichiro and whispered into the tail-end of his hair, 'is what she said true?'

The general tugged at his red neck cloth, coughing up the courage to respond. 'I believe so. Yes.'

'Your one was like this too?'

'According to rumour.'

Tutting to himself, he turned back to Atta Noe and spoke down to the gap in the front of her yukata. 'We will see how our relationship develops then.'

'As you command, warrior king,' she replied, full caustic.

Digging nails into his palm, Tadachika made a grunting sound then strode to the door panel, sliding it open and leaving it that way as both him and his full battle dress vanished into the salt storage corridor outside.

'Tell me, Gen'ichi,' said Atta Noe, lying down across the futon and gazing sideways-up, 'did you ever get close to this other one of yours?'

Gen'ichiro coughed and looked at the wall, possibly where the window should've been. 'It is late. I will leave you to rest.'

'I'm not especially tired...now that the child's gone.'

'Good night,' said the Sakai General with another cough, then a short bow, then a quick turn as he hurried out and slid the door panel back across behind him.

Ah, one of those, Atta Noe thought, closing her eyes and swirling up towards the ceiling. Useful to an extent, yet...

Outside, an owl flew onto the roof of the shack and made footstep sounds, followed by a half-hearted mating call.

Gods, a whole year in Nishio. Babysitting the Sakai Clan.

Unacceptable.

No, unbearable. Intolerable.

But how to climb out of this pit?

She swirled in purple mist form over to the box and slipped in through the gap that the sloppy ashigaru carriers had left.

The toxic vagina ruse should be enough to keep that little wretch at bay for a month or two...but I can't be lax. He will try again. Probably after half a bottle of shōchū.

No, tomorrow must be the start of things. Scope out the surroundings, gauge my perimeter, poke around for potential schisms, then spin into superior Atashhka strategy.

Make Shingen and that Palakkji snake, Yukio Ka, regret ever sending me to this shithole.

The owl on the roof stamped its claws hard, three, four times, then phased into a scraping noise. Possibly annoyed that no female [or male] owls had responded to its call.

But first, Atta Noe thought, stretching a purple trail up to the ceiling and tracing the owl's movement, the young daimyō of Sakai.

All dressed up and no one to fight...

Well, that's gonna change.

Very soon.

Funnelling the vapour into a spear tip, she prepared to pierce through the wood...then stopped at the sound of wings flapping, letting out a tiny huff of approval as the owl flew off into the night.

CHAPTER 35

A LIZARD ATTEMPTING COMPASSION



聞到棺材香

女

A four inch fir tree with a *good luck, long life* idiom inscribed on the trunk.

An eight inch fir tree with *get rich, get happy*.

A twelve inch fir tree with *big is better*.

A thirty inch fir tree to put outside your front door panel.

Misora picked up the last one and rotated it, examining all sides. The text scrawled on its surface was mostly occult gibberish, nothing Reiko would take seriously as a serious shrine-adjunct, but still...it would make a funny present. *When you're feeling lonely and adventurous, use this*. Or an alternative note: *when I'm not around, try this*.

Wah, on anyone else, a huge risk, but on Reiko...

'How much?' she asked the stall man, who had his yukata spread out beyond his nipples and clearly didn't give a shit as he was openly scratching his crotch, too.

'Seventy mon,' he slurred, moving the nails up to his belly.

'Excuse me?'

'Child-sized tree brings extra fortune for its owner.'

Shaking her head in clear disgust at festival economics, Misora awkwardly slotted the fir tree replica back with the others and returned to the smaller versions.

‘Twenty mon for any three,’ the stall owner said, moving his scratching hand back down as a pretty, young woman in a full moon yukata stopped at the next stall over...then spitting on the ground when two ashigaru popped up beside her.

‘They’re all different sizes,’ replied Misora, picking up a twelve inch fir tree and using it to point at the others. ‘Your pricing doesn’t make sense.’

‘Buy or don’t.’

Misora glanced at the stall owner, briefly wishing Ichiko was nearby with her under-the-sleeve needle...then forgot all that completely as the words of the two ashigaru drifted over.

‘Big, fully trained samurai, armed, one of Shingen’s...posing as a salt merchant...went down like a bag of rabbit shit.’

‘Wah, they’ll promote anyone in Kai, won’t they?’

‘Right. Truly embarrassing. Even the skinny runt next to him put up more of a fight.’

‘I heard there was a monk too.’

‘Yeah, but he’s not saying what shrine he is, and he attacked another monk, so there’s no way he’ll get out of it. And even if he did

have backing, wouldn't matter. The guy stood there and watched that rogue samurai murder someone.'

'Disgraceful...'

'Yeah, poor guy was just enjoying the festivities and this lunatic popped up and stabbed him. If he'd looked at him funny, I could understand it, but just nothing...no provocation at all.'

The ashigaru both shook their heads and puffed their chests up a little bit more as the young woman in the moon yukata glanced over at them, then half-reached for their guards as Misora popped up at the side and said, 'hi.'

'What?' barked the taller of the two, relaxing his grip.

'I just heard what you were saying, about the samurai from Kai...and I wanted to say thank you.'

'For what?'

'Keeping us all safe. It's such a relief to know that decent, strong men like you are walking around, ready to deal with that kind of crazed degenerate.'

'You married?' prodded the smaller one, running his eyes without any disguise down the full length of Misora's simple white yukata.

'Err...not exactly. I'm still looking for the right man.'

'You live with your parents?'

Misora smiled as genuine as she could make it, giving eye signals to the moon yukata woman to get moving at the same time as running a finger down the side of her waist.

‘That a yes?’ prompted the ashigaru, reaching out a grubby hand towards her and then rubbing it in irritation as it got swatted away by the sudden appearance of a child-size fir tree.

‘Sorry, didn’t see you there,’ said Ichiko, keeping the tree upright between Misora and the two thugs.

‘Clumsy wench...’

‘She’s always like that. Ignore it.’ Misora ran her hand back up her side, stopping near the underarm. ‘Tell me, what happened to that samurai you caught? He’s not going to escape is he?’

‘Not a hope. Him and his reprobate accomplices are locked up tight at Suwa Castle. With guards that never feel fatigued...or fall for that line where a prisoner says he suddenly feels sick.’

‘That’s a relief.’

‘Yeah, but the streets can still be dangerous. If you really want to feel safe and protected, I suggest staying close to two strong samurai...like us, for example.’

‘Ideally in a ryokan chamber, with your yukatas off,’ added the smaller ashigaru, getting a kick in the shin from his colleague.

‘We are busy tonight,’ said Ichiko sharply, adjusting her fir tree to a more offensive position.

‘Tomorrow then.’

‘Even busier.’

‘Is that so?’

‘What she means to say is,’ interrupted Misora, putting a hand on Ichiko’s fir tree and lowering it slightly, ‘we have plans to attend the shrine for the next two nights. The night after that, however...’

‘Free?’

‘We may or may not be relaxing by the shore of Lake Suwa, late into the night...with very loosely-tied yukatas.’

‘As may I,’ replied the taller ashigaru, eyes on Misora’s finger as it moved down onto her stomach.

‘Excellent. We shall meet soon then.’

‘How loose exactly will these yukatas be?’ asked the smaller one, both eyes a lot lower than Misora’s stomach.

‘He’s not known for his manners. Ignore him.’

The taller ashigaru bowed and then dragged the other ashigaru by the arm, spit-whispering something into his ear as he went.

Ichiko watched them all the way to the bridge before finally putting the fir tree back and telling Misora to stop being so alluring towards enemy foot soldiers.

‘Relax, I’m not actually going to meet them.’

‘That is irrelevant. You should not even imply that you would. It is beneath our position. As is seductive gesturing with your finger.’

‘Gods in Saitama, Ichiko...’

‘If I had not stepped in, the short one would’ve tried to grope you. And then you would’ve been forced to cut his hand off and our whole mission would have been placed in jeopardy.’

‘Yeah, jeopardy. You’re right. How about we get out of the public eye and back to Reiko’s izakaya. Then we can discuss what we’re gonna do about this dungeon situation. That I uncovered. While you were doing your angry tree impression.’

Ichiko didn’t growl, but she did glance back at the fir tree stall, half of her probably stuck on a fantasy of beating Misora to death with one of them, the other half imagining the same thing with the stall owner who was staring at her legs.

‘Come on, you can run through your revenge fantasies on the way,’ said Misora, taking Ichiko’s yukata sleeve and guiding her down the street.

Surprisingly, perhaps for public security reasons, there was no attempt to shrug her off.

No muttered insult either.

A softer Ichiko, thought Misora, smirking to herself.

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‘Impossible.’

‘You haven’t heard my ideas yet.’

‘It’s Suwa Castle, the most heavily guarded compound in the province.’

‘I’m aware of that.’

‘And the dungeon...even more impossible. The guards down there are not human. I’m serious, they never feel fatigued on duty, and if a prisoner feels sick...’

‘...they ignore them, I know that too. But we can eschew all the super guard stuff with our cunning and experience.’

Reiko picked up the bottle of shōchū on the counter and poured out three lonely drops into her cup. Then swirled those drops with a distant look on her face.

‘It is necessary that we complete this mission,’ said Ichiko, tapping the tips of her fingers on the counter surface.

Reiko vaguely looked at her, then downed the three drops.

‘If you cannot assist us then we will go to the shrine directly.’

‘Can’t you just wait for them to come out?’

‘That is unlikely to happen.’

‘Why? What did they do?’

‘According to a couple of Suwa ashigaru,’ said Misora, raising a hand in front of Ichiko and cutting back in, ‘they killed a local resident. Which means they’ll probably be executed within the next few days.’

‘Then...why do you need to go in there?’

‘Obviously, we cannot risk a full interrogation. The ashigaru knows a fair bit and, based on what we know of his character...is likely to accept a deal.’

‘Betray his master?’

‘Happens more than you think.’

‘Among low-ranking ashigaru,’ added Ichiko, in a not so low voice.

Reiko picked up the shōchū bottle again and held it upside down over her cup until another drop squeezed itself out. Another minute of swirling and then a giggle as she saw Kanae appear at the bottom of the ryokan stairs, hair branching off to the side like cut grass after a typhoon.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked, tying up her yukata as she walked over to the counter.

Ichiko grunted and folded her arms, leaving Misora to fill in the gaps. And tagging her first, and best, idea on at the end.

‘You want to dress up as a monk?’



‘A nurse-stroke-monk,’ Misora corrected, shaking her empty cup.

‘I suppose it is the season for it,’ muttered Reiko, disappearing under the counter for a few seconds and coming back up with a full bottle of shōchū and two more cups. ‘Drink anyone?’

‘I will do it,’ said Ichiko, pushing the new cup away.

‘You?’

‘The performance requires sobriety and composure.’

‘And compassion,’ added Misora, watching the shōchū being poured out. ‘No, I will have to do it.’

‘That is not your decision to make.’

‘Nor yours.’

‘I have made my case and it is watertight. Compassion is irrelevant, there are plenty of stern monks, and, of the three of us, I am by far the most ascetic.’

‘Okay...okay then.’ Misora took her cup, which had only been half-filled with fresh shōchū, and handed it to Ichiko. ‘Pretend this is medicine and I’m a sick prisoner. Give it to me.’

‘I told you, compassion is irrelevant.’

‘Actually, that’s not entirely true,’ said Reiko, swirling her cup again. ‘As a shrine-affiliate, we only send those with a clear heart into this kind of environment. And a friendly face is quite important too,

especially when dealing with captive ashigaru who are naturally suspicious.’

‘An ashigaru who has to drink the poison we give him,’ added Misora, pointing at the cup.

‘We’re poisoning them?’ asked Kanae, alternating her confused koi face between her two meijin.

‘Yes, unless you think the guards will be okay with opening the cell door and letting us stab them directly?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Fine,’ said Ichiko, confronting the three faces staring back at her, each with a cup of shōchū in hand. ‘I will mimic it.’

‘Compassion?’

‘It is not so difficult. For a short time.’

‘Go on then,’ said Misora, pushing the cup of figurative medicine forward.

Ichiko flinched, stiffened and stopped just short of a complete transformation into a human-shaped rock...then picked up the cup with two hands and offered it back to Misora.

‘Is that your version of a smile?’

‘Take the medicine, it will soothe you,’ replied Ichiko, maintaining the lizard-in-human-skin grin she had cemented to her face.

‘I’m not interested in your poison.’

‘What?’

‘Fuck off back to the shrine, weirdo.’

Ichiko’s eyes flared up, then closed quickly as she realised what she’d done. ‘This was not a fair test,’ she said, finally, opening up again.

‘Fair as a dungeon gets,’ answered Misora, taking back her cup.

‘That was pretty scary,’ said Kanae, patting the wild part of her hair back into a more regular shape. ‘Your compassion, I mean.’

‘Shut up, child.’

‘It’s settled then,’ cut in Misora quickly, tapping the table with her nails. ‘I’ll play the nurse monk, you two can wait outside for my successful return.’

‘Or the alarm indicating failure,’ replied Ichiko, folding her arms.

‘Or the grope attempt by passing ashigaru,’ muttered Reiko.

‘Or my grope attempt of them,’ said Kanae, laughing as she finished sorting out her wild-girl hair. ‘If they’re ripped...’

‘Idiot.’

‘...and soulful-looking.’

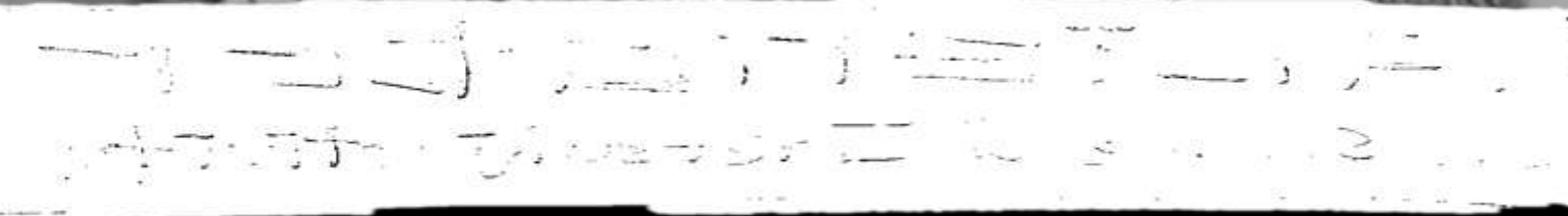
‘How about you wait in the lake?’

Misora smiled and raised her cup, clinking it with Reiko’s and letting out a dilettante’s whistle as Kanae ignored etiquette and flushed it straight down.

‘To the mission,’ she toasted, downing her shot.

‘And your questionable acting skills,’ added Reiko, already reaching for the bottle, winking at Ichiko as she did so.

‘Idiots...’



## CHAPTER 36

# EIGHT-TAILED KITSUNE

It looked kind of like water.

A little murky perhaps.

But it was in an ordinary artisan-made cup and didn't have fumes rising off the top.

And the Suwa guard who'd brought it in was the same one who'd shoved them into the cell earlier [and called the katana a rusty piece of green shit], so he was unlikely to be a spy.

'Miho,' Akira whispered, reaching out an elbow and accidentally connecting with his young fellow prisoner's cheek as he turned his head in lax response. '*Kuso...*'

'Why are you using your elbow?'

'Forget that. Drink the water.'

'Me? I was waiting for you guys to drink first.'

'Ah...good. Finally, you discover cynicism.'

'Personal habit, actually. My father said it was rude to drink before others. Why aren't you drinking?'

Akira picked up the cup and forced it into Miho's hands. 'I insist.'

'Okay. If that's what you really want.'

Miho put the cup to his lips and took a sip, then offered it back to the squinting ashigaru.

'Drink a bit more.'

'Are you sure? We haven't got that much.'

'A third each. You can take yours now.'

Miho nodded and did as he was told, a rogue voice in his brain telling him that Akira was only worried about being poisoned, even though all his enemies were back in Kai and the guard had spat in the cup when he'd delivered it, which would be an odd thing to do if you were trying to poison someone.

'How do you feel?' asked Akira, eyes following the projected path of the liquid down Miho's throat.

'Less thirsty.'

'Give it to him next.'

'I think he's asleep,' replied Miho, looking over at the slumped figure of Daiki in the other corner of the cell. There was a rat slumped next to him, possibly dead, so if he wasn't asleep then he was

extremely tolerant of disease-associated animals. Not that Miho believed any of that propaganda. His rat back in Nambu had been fine, always bathing in the little tub he'd made for it. Completely non-plussed at crumbs that used to drop down from the dinner table.

‘Probably trying to tempt us into killing each other,’ muttered Akira, almost but not quite under his breath.

‘What’s that?’

‘Nothing. How do you feel now?’

‘Fine.’

Akira made a tutting noise and studied the cup, then switched to the cell door. If he'd been a four-year old waif, he could've possibly squeezed through the bars. Then crept up the narrow, annoyingly sloped, windowless passage and been stabbed with his own katana by the two guards with unusually alert eyes on the tatami platform at the end of it. Apparently, they never slept on duty - at least that's what they'd said in their opening spiel - and if any prisoner ever felt sick then they would have to just sit there and either die horribly or ride their way through it.

And even if he did make it beyond those two, there was another passageway beyond the door with four more guards, also incapable of feeling sleepy on duty.



Basically, this place was an actual dungeon compound. Surrounded by samurai barracks and the usual maze-like system of courtyards and blind alleys and sudden rock gardens. Absolutely no hope of escape...unless it came from inhumanly talented help outside.

Which in his case meant...what? A surly girl with no real survival skills who despised him?

Ah, there was a chance she might feel sorry for Miho...but sorry enough to infiltrate this pit and commit suicide trying to break him out?

‘If I could get to my bag,’ said Miho, snapping Akira back to the immediate foreground and the live rat who’d just appeared next to his comatose foot.

‘What?’

‘There’s something in there that could help us.’

‘A dagger?’

‘No, a small rock.’

‘Gods on a washing line,’ the ashigaru said, kicking away the rat. ‘Just give me the fucking cup.’

‘You want to drink now?’

‘No, I want an unorthodox hat.’

‘Unortho-’

‘The cup. Please.’

Miho ignored the dripping sarcasm on the *please* and held out the water to Akira, who swiped it off him and downed the whole thing.

‘What about him?’

‘He can get first dibs on the rat.’

Possibly hearing the comment and feeling annoyed, the live rat came back to Akira’s foot and tried to nibble at his toes...forcing the ashigaru to launch the cup at it.

His aim was solid, but the rodent was too fast, darting to the left and scurrying into a crack in the wood-lined wall as the cup skidded across to Daiki’s leg.

The mage woke up with start, hand reflexively grabbing the red and white ribbons in his hair.

‘Gods, still this hole...’

‘Thanks to your stubbornness,’ answered Akira, stretching out his arms.

Daiki loosened his grip on the ribbons and then let go completely, glancing down at the dead rat next to him.

‘Nothing to say for yourself, magic man?’

‘I don’t think we should start arguing again,’ said Miho, leaning over and whispering into Akira’s elbow.

‘Why not? Nothing else to do.’

Akira used the cell wall as leverage to push himself up, flinching a bit at some of the jagged wooden splints, then continued his stretching routine.

Miho followed his lead and positioned himself as a buffer between the two men, adding more whispers about how the mage had saved Akira from drowning and maybe he should focus on that part of things, not the monk incident.

‘Yeah, I’m afraid that was cancelled out by getting me stuck in this shithole.’

‘Really?’

‘Basic samurai code, endangerment carries twice the weight of expected rescue.’

‘But you’re an ashigaru...’

Akira’s arm stopped mid rotation, and the live rat popped its head back out of the crack in the wall. They both held their pose for a while, at least ten seconds, then the ashigaru started laughing. Not a huge laugh, but a relieving one.

‘Ah, I’m too tired to start anything,’ said Akira, walking to the cell bars and leaning against them.

‘How the hell did we end up here?’ said Daiki to himself, clutching scalp ribbons again.

‘Stubbornness,’ replied Akira, irritated.

‘The orange-haired monk,’ corrected Miho.

‘Can’t believe I let you talk me into all this. And for what? A few cheap magic tricks. Praise from people who think a fucking tree is looking out for them, guiding their crops and love life. Ah, my love life. That’s gone now too. Might as well become a monk. What’s that?’

‘Sorry?’ asked Miho, glancing at Akira, who just shrugged.

‘Yeah, in a fucking dungeon cell, very hygienic. And he’s got the ethics of a belt merchant. Gods, I miss sleeping with men who are easily impressed by my magic. No, it is me. Almost all of it. What? I do the showmanship, the hand flourishes. All you do is hide. Can’t even see you most of the time. No, I don’t want to. Yeah, I tried. What? No, I did, I genuinely tried, but...sorry, I just don’t find foxes sexy. Yeah? Well, maybe you should do that. After I’m executed and you’re stuck up there in my fucking hair forever.’

Miho backed into the cell bars next to Akira, and turned to him. ‘Are you hearing this?’

‘Madman’s gone mad.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Talking about sexy foxes...no doubt about it.’

Daiki seemed to catch their words and opened his mouth to possibly call them sexy too...but that was stopped from happening by a sudden flash of turquoise light, succeeded by the materialisation in the middle of the cell of something that couldn’t realistically be there...yet actually, visually was.

A fox the size of an nine-year-old child, eyes matching the turquoise light, left paw stroking the tips of eight extremely well-combed tails.

‘The fuck was in that water?’ asked Akira, staring at his own hand as if the cup were still there.

‘Hello,’ mumbled Miho, taking half a step forward.

The fox glared at them both but didn’t care enough to hold the pose as its body spun round and pounced on the mage, who just sat there like a bag of salt and let his collar be gripped.

‘Inept layabout,’ the fox yelled, in perfect Japanese.

‘Tiny stowaway.’

‘Eight months and you’ve gotten us nowhere.’

‘Got us into the castle...’

‘The dungeon.’

‘...which is what you said you wanted.’

‘Plus the orange monk debacle.’

‘Gods, you’re pedantic.’

‘Three weeks of surveillance and then this coarse oaf barges in and captures him in not even one day.’

‘Why don’t you go camp in his hair then?’

‘Yeah, maybe I will.’

‘Go on then.’

The fox turned back around and sized up the ashigaru, who was doing the exact same thing to him. Miho too, though he seemed to be focused on the fox’s ass.

‘What are you staring at?’ the fox said, adding an echoed growl.

‘You’ve got eight tails,’ said Miho, confused.

‘... ..’

Akira tilted his head, counting them out. 'He's right. Only eight. Where's the other one?'

‘Ah, not completely green then. Good. I hate dealing with that brainless, surprised koi expression. Very irritating.’

‘I didn’t do that either,’ said the mage, pulling himself up to his feet. ‘And stop putting comrade eyes on the ashigaru. He’d last about five seconds with you on his scalp.’

‘My ears are closed to you now,’ answered the fox, switching focus to Akira, who leaned against the wall and folded both arms. Then pushed forward and rubbed his back, muttering a curse at one of the stumpy wooden struts sticking out behind him.

‘So you're not a myth?’ he said, barely a question.

‘Myth is a human word. But you are correct. I am very much real.’

'Demon?'

'Again, a human word. But yes...you could call me that.'

‘Gods, did someone leave the whole cave unlocked? That’s four in the last week...fifteen if you count the monk as twelve separate guys.’

‘Yes, I saw your performance with the palak demon. Quite impressive. Compared to some others who we don’t need to name.’

‘He got lucky,’ cut in Daiki, walking over and attempting a half-hearted shove on the fox’s shoulder.

'Bold would be a better word for it.'

'Bold?'

Daiki buffered for a few seconds, then tried another shove, this time connecting with the fox's neck. It was a firm grip, as was the fox's on his ankle, and the two of them toppled over into a big, chaotic mess on the dungeon floor [narrowly missing the rat who'd come out for another supply run].

'Speaking of lucky...or bold,' interrupted Akira, tapping the bars of the cell. 'How about we skip the petty squabbling and use our new demon friend to get us out of here?'

Both the fox and the mage stopped, the latter with his hand on one of the fox's eight tails, the former with his paw on the mage's ankle.

'You're not exactly the right size, a bit chubby, but...with some of that demon magic...and a lot of shoving...'

'... ..' replied the fox, extricating himself from the scuffle.

'...it shouldn't be that tough. What?'

'... ..'

'Is that a yes?'

'... ..'



'Great. Let's get started then.' Akira rubbed his hands together, sizing up the full shape of the fox. 'Hold your breath, see how thin we can get you.'

Daiki laughed, sinking back down against the wall. 'Still wanna jump ship?'

'I hate humans,' muttered the fox, using its tails to lower itself down onto the dungeon floor, far from everyone.

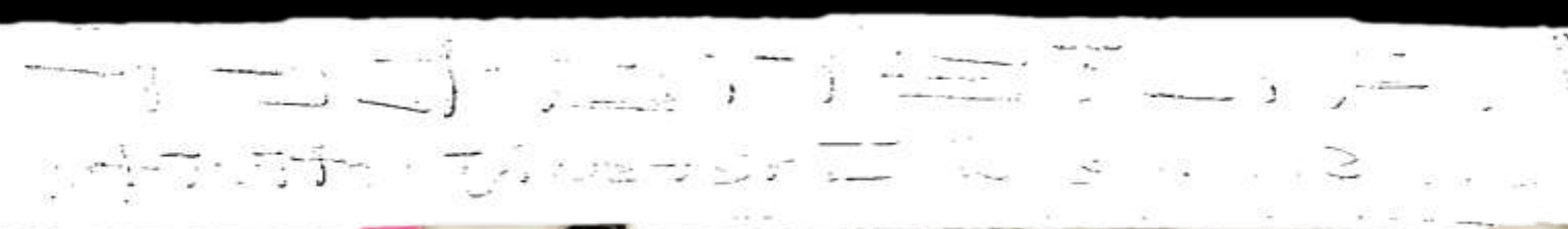
'Huh? Are we trying this or not?'

'Ashigaru the most.'

'What?'

# CHAPTER 37

## A ROCK BY ANY OTHER NAME



*Give me some of  
your love, all of it*

The purple tendrils of vapour swirled around the cracks of the chamber wall, drifting in and expanding the holes a little, then apparently getting cold feet and floating back into the room again.

I could do it, thought Atta Noe, keeping her yukata sleeve positioned at head height.

No, I should do it.

Open up a window-sized gap, let the sunlight stream in.

Open up a door-sized gap and swagger out...right up to that little runt's governing hall...slice his throat open and let all the blood spill out on to the map as I drag this insipid clan into the glorious times it barely deserves...then ditch it like a fox carcass when I inevitably get bored.

She focused on the largest of the wall cracks, glaring purple fire at it for a few seconds.

Then dimmed the flame, and closed her eyes.

Outside the room, she heard a series of violent coughs, followed by the other guard telling the cougher to do that hacking shit out in the trees.

Two ashigaru...stationed outside her chamber...to do what?

Keep her pinned in?

Tadachika wasn't a complete fool, he knew what she was and the acts she was capable of in mist form. Two lumps of human meat wouldn't even make her break swirl. Yet, still, he positioned them there.

She shifted to pure vapour and drifted over to the door, rematerializing with one ear to the rice paper panel.

Of course, if she did slaughter them, there would be consequences. That was the flaw of this cursed domain. Rules, punishments, bureaucracy.

Unless she had someone on her side, a human ally who would protect and move her box. Justify to other clans, other retainers, what she had done, how it was beneficial to their ambitions. But here, in Nishio...there was no one.

'Just what you wanted Yukio Ka,' she muttered, breathing purple mist at the door panel. 'Palakkji wretch.'

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For the next two hours, Atta Noe killed time by acting like a human.

Lying on the futon, staring at the ceiling, staring at her box, reading poetry that had been left on the pillow by someone signed as 'Wild Heart', drinking water [which did actually have some minor replenishing qualities for Atashhka like her].

Plotting out imaginary revenge scenarios.

The latter was made quite easy by the nonsense written on the rice paper, lines and lines of rock garden description, the beauty of a mountain peak covered in a concubine hat of snow, the rising and falling of a woman's breasts, the judicious yet kind authority of youthful daimyō rulers, the meanness of the old-

She stopped, smirking at the last line, as it was clearly aimed at the poet's father. Maybe even their elder sibling.

Ah, that's who this *Wild Heart* was...the Sakai youngling. Overlooked due to his age and not best pleased about it.

That could be something.

If she mapped out her moves carefully.

The rice paper stayed in her hand as she looked to the door panel again. Apart from the occasional coughing fit, it was pretty quiet out there. Perhaps, they were resting?

Funnelling upwards in a stream of purple, Atta Noe directed herself in a long strip at the underside of the door panel, filtering a little bit through at first, to test the waters.

When there were no shouts or wails from the guards, she pushed the rest of her mass through and, after performing a couple of cathartic rehearsal swipes on the two sleeping ashigaru slumped homo-erotically against each other, drifted to the entrance of the shack and reformed as the human Atta Noe on the pebbles outside.

Ah, sunlight, my old friend, she mouthed, looking up directly into the distant yellow mass. Feels like weeks since you bathed me.

Far too long.

Far, far too long.

Even if it was only three days.

Tightening the sides of her yukata, she scanned the surrounding area, making sure there weren't any covert eyes or arrowheads pinned on her "illegal" movement.

No, seemed clear enough.

Just a rock garden, and the large rear side of a newly constructed *ni-no-maru*, with the few guards visible all pointing the wrong way. Apparently, Tadachika hadn't expected her to disobey him as early as the second day. Or he hadn't instructed the guards to act like that was the case, at least. Or maybe he just never expected an attack from the forest. Hard to tell with imbeciles like him.

Checking the tree line, just in case there were surprise guards buried in the canopy, she rubbed her palm and started towards the nearby path.

Right. First things first.

Locate that flowery fop, Wild Heart, and massage his inferiority complex. Say kind words about his poetry. Nice simile, metaphor, lyricism, comma placement etc.

She put a hand inside her yukata and spread out the sides, revealing the bare skin around her collarbone.

Maybe a bit of seduction too.

To a degree.



It didn't take long to work out that the poet who wrote about the beauty of rock gardens might be sitting in the rock garden, though it was slightly odd that he was only staring at one particular rock.

And holding a blank sheet of rice paper too.

No, not blank...there was one line, near the middle. *The rock is like the passing of classical time...*

Just sketch the fucking thing, Atta Noe flash-thought to herself as she closed in on her prey from the rear. But she didn't say it out loud as that would put up a barrier. Make him feel like she didn't value his art. And she couldn't let that happen.

Instead, she stopped a few feet behind him, bent down and stared at the rock in unison. As with most rich kids, he was so lost in his own bubble that he didn't notice her at first, not until she shifted closer and said, 'nice rock,' and, even then, he took the time to finish the new line he was writing.

'Ah, what a relief,' she continued, placing a hand softly on his shoulder, making him flinch a little. 'I thought it was a sketch you were making.'

‘That is a relief?’ the Sakai boy asked, turning his narrow, almost rectangular face towards her and almost dropping his brush when he saw who it was he was looking at. ‘Wah, you’re the purple lady.’

‘I wasn’t aware I had a badge.’

‘Sorry?’

‘You recognise me, yet we have not met before.’

‘I...there wasn’t-...’ He coughed, straightening himself on his rock seat. ‘There aren’t many other women in the castle. And my brother informed me that you had arrived.’

‘How kind of him.’

‘Though he said you would be confined to your chamber. I didn’t know he had permitted-’

‘I am not the type to be confined.’ Atta Noe smiled, the same one she’d used on the farmer who first “discovered” her in this world. The original custodian of her box. Before she’d heard of Shingen and...all the other things she’d had to do to progress in this backward netherworld. ‘Tell me, is it your poetry that was left on my pillow?’

The Sakai boy, technically a young man of seventeen and next in line to the clan throne, looked down at the pebbles, then at the rock he was writing about, all the while stroking the ponytail stump at the back of his neck. ‘I’m sorry, I did not mean to be intrusive.’

‘No need for remorse. It was quite soothing to read something so...alive. Especially after meeting with your brother.’

‘You liked my words?’

‘Words? That is what the mundane world calls them. To me, they are feelings, connective tissue captured and recorded for lonely, exquisite souls.’

‘That’s...pretty.’

‘Thank you.’

‘So are you. Your face-...it is not what I expected.’

‘Then, you gifted your poetry to me without knowing my appearance?’

The Sakai boy looked down again, using the brush to scratch his neck. ‘I thought you might be lonely...being so far from home.’

Atta Noe lowered herself onto the rock and took the Sakai boy’s hand in her own, garnishing the surface of her skin with the thinnest layer of vapour. ‘You are a very noble soul. Very kind. A quality that I feel all great leaders should possess.’

‘Err...I suppose you’re right.’

‘Saito...isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am very happy that you left your captured feelings on my pillow yesterday, Saito. They comforted me greatly. I hope, one day soon, you can read them to me...perhaps in my chamber, if you do not consider it beneath you?’

‘No, no...beneath me? Of course, not. I believe we are all equals in this world, that is the meaning of my poetry. I would love to read to you...in your chamber...err...’

‘Noe.’

‘Noe. Lady Noe. I would like that very much.’

Atta Noe dipped her head slightly, held his hand a moment longer then pulled away and told him she had to go now.

‘Ah, it is a beautiful day and you have seen nothing of our grounds. Do you wish to visit the cliffs? I can show you, it is not far. We can walk the trail down to the beach and-’

‘Perhaps some other time, Saito. I have duties to attend to first. Advice to deliver to your brother. If he is willing to listen to the words of a mere woman.’

‘Wah, impossible, man or woman. The only person he listens to is himself.’

‘Ah, it is as I thought then.’

‘I mean, he does possess some qualities, but-...’ Saito’s mouth froze suddenly, as did the rest of his face, which could only mean one thing.

Atta Noe turned and bowed almost imperceptibly to an armour-less Tadachika, and then at his obedient pet Gen’ichiro close behind him, as they arrived next to the increasingly busy rock seat.

‘You are not in your room?’ the Sakai daimyō scolded in the guise of a question.

‘A predictable approach.’

‘Explain yourself. Why are you not there? If you’ve harmed the guards in any way, even the slightest nick of their skin...’

‘Of course not. They were fast asleep, so I decided to come out for some fresh air. Appraise the castle grounds.’

‘That was not my order.’

‘Apologies, *decided* is the wrong word. *Had to* is more appropriate. Did you know, without access to fresh air, my kind will perish.’

Tadachika glanced back at Gen’ichiro, who nodded without expression.

‘That would be difficult to explain to Shingen, would it not? His favourite advisor, dead one day after arrival. Much more challenging than simple confinement.’

‘How long?’

‘What?’

‘For you to die from a lack of air.’

Atta Noe checked on Gen’ichiro, who seemed fascinated by Saito’s rock poetry as that’s where his eyes were fixed, then adjusted back to Tadachika. ‘A little over two days.’

‘Then we’ll install a window panel in your room. The size of a rice box should suffice.’

‘With a sleeping guard outside?’

Saito giggled, shutting it off instantly with a hand over his own mouth when his brother glared down at him.

‘I will allow you to amble about this garden, for an hour each day,’ Tadachika continued, left hand resting on his katana guard. ‘For ceremonial activities, you will appear at my side, and pour the first shot of shōchū into my cup. And the second, and the third. And the tenth, if I so require.’

‘You have a poor understanding of the role of an advisor.’

‘If you fail to do this, your window will be removed. And your box will be relocated to Kaji Island two kilometres off the coast. Out of range, out of sight. Out of thought.’

Gen’ichiro took a step forward, whispering something into Tadachika’s ear and then getting a grunt back in return.

Atta Noe glanced at the two impotent men – Saito and Gen’ichiro - with their eyes on atoms of arbitrary air nowhere near the little, petulant daimyō, and let the tips of her fingers swirl into faint mist. ‘I will appear at your side, or close to it, but I will not pour your drink.’

‘We shall see. Tonight. When Lord Imagawa arrives.’

‘He’s coming here?’ asked Saito, looking up, eyes panicked.

‘That is what I just said. Lord Imagawa and various retainers. From what I have heard, his exploratory mission into Owari Province did not go well, so his mood is likely to be dark. Hopefully his idiot uncle will take the brunt of it as is usually the-’

‘An actual daimyō, coming here,’ interrupted Atta Noe, losing the purple glow. ‘How interesting.’

Lord Sakai stared down at his advisor’s arm, hand grating against his katana guard.

‘Perhaps you should run and put your armour back on, young lord. Show him how fierce you can appear.’

‘Gen’ichi...’

‘Yes, daimyo,’ replied the general, hand flinching at the sudden bark.

‘Take the witch back to her chamber. Induct into her the expected protocol for tonight.’ Tadachika took the hand off his katana guard and stepped closer to Atta Noe, his eyes only slightly above hers. ‘I may call on you afterwards. If Lord Imagawa declines to take you for himself.’

‘Suicide can be a relief, for the easily fearful.’

Tadachika reached out his right hand and stopped half an inch from the front of Atta Noe’s yukata, then ran an invisible line down a dragon tail to her waist.

‘Until tonight,’ he said, finally turning and, in the face of verbal protest only, dragging Saito back inside by the sleeve of his yukata.

‘This way,’ instructed Gen’ichiro, when his master had gone.

Atta Noe declined to nod, but she did follow his gesture, ambling at her own glacial pace around the bends and swishes of the pebble path. Gen’ichiro followed two steps behind, eyes on the distance between them instead of the ground directly beneath.

As they got to the entrance of her shack, the purple demon stopped and spoke softly to the door panel.

‘Tell me, Gen’ichi, would you really allow that fool to move my box to that little island?’

‘It is not my decision to make.’

‘Would you not protest it?’

‘Advise against such an act. Yes. Protest? No.’

‘A strange answer.’

‘It is my duty...Lady Noe.’

‘Hmm. Were you not close to one of my kind before? Or did I misinterpret that relationship?’

Gen’ichiro reached forward and slid open the door panel, his arm brushing against the side of Atta Noe’s yukata. The two guards, now awake and leaning against the wall inside, gawped at them both, then,

clearly feeling awkward [or possibly ashamed to have fallen asleep], turned and gawped at the door panel they were allegedly guarding.

‘Do you feel uncomfortable talking to me?’ Atta Noe asked, ignoring the two buffoons.

‘No.’

‘Your body language implies otherwise.’

‘It is not my place to converse with a god.’

‘Ah, that’s what I am. But did you not talk before, with the other god?’

‘No.’

‘Really? Not a single word?’

Gen’ichiro gestured forward with his hand, then added a separate signal to cool down the guards, who were half reaching for their katanas. ‘You should go inside. Prepare yourself for Lord Imagawa’s arrival.’

‘Yes, the ceremony. Protocol.’ Atta Noe placed her hand on Gen’ichiro’s wrist, moving her fingers slowly down onto the back of his hand. ‘I think, Gen’ichi...if it really came down to it...you would do more than advise against. More than protest. For a pretty god like me.’

The flesh of her fingers dissipated and cascaded into purple mist, running soft rings around Gen’ichiro’s hand.

He closed his eyes, stifling what sounded like the beginning of an orgasmic moan.

‘I’m certain of it,’ she whispered into his neck, the particles of her breath floating out luminous purple, a darkened shade.



at least Satan's
never around
when you need him

CHAPTER 38

ONE MORE FOR THE DUNGEON

Picking up the dead rat by its tail, the eight-tailed fox dangled it briefly over his jaws then, without any hesitation or sighs of *this is what it's come to*, let it drop.

The poor rodent opened one eye as it fell, glimpsing a sharp fox tooth on the brink of puncturing its guts, and realised it had made a serious miscalculation. All that time playing dead, just to avoid being stamped on by a panicked human. If its paws could hold a brush, it would've scribbled an angry poem about it, the stupid, erratic nature of idiot humans, but that time had passed.

Ah well, it thought, looking down at its body being torn in two, at least it's gonna be quick.

And it was.

Two more seconds then gone.

Unfortunately, its rat friend on the other side of the cell wouldn't be so lucky. Watching the massacre of the only rat that had ever listened to him, that had tentatively backed his idea to build a floating restaurant in the dungeon gutter, was bleak, enervating and, above all, a sign of what was in store for him at some point in his own life. Rats didn't just die in their sleep. They got slaughtered. Consumed. Ripped

apart by foxes with eight tails that had the temerity to grimace after eating his friend and say, ‘tastes like old *zori*.’

Gods of rodent kind, wasn’t there a way out of this hell?

As an immediate answer, a large *zori* dropped from above and squashed the rat witness into mush, ending its short stint as a nihilist.

‘Got the little bastard, finally,’ crowed Akira, inspecting the underside of his *zori* and then the rat mess on the dungeon floor.

‘Killing for any reason beyond survival is immoral,’ mumbled Daiki into his red and white ribbons.

‘Yeah, save the fake piety, that little wretch was gonna nibble on my feet soon as I nodded off. Could feel it in my gut.’

‘No, he’s right,’ said the fox, swallowing down the remains of the other rat.

‘Who is?’

‘Should have let me deal with it.’

‘You mean magic man, he’s the one who’s right?’

‘What? Yes, of course.’ The fox hesitated, burped up rat gas, then continued. ‘Who else would I be referring to?’

‘My name is Daiki, actually. As I’ve told you seven times since you got us dumped in here.’

Akira opened his mouth to begin relitigating, but was stopped by the sound of Miho hitting his zori against the bars of the cell.

‘Instead of arguing again, how about we find a way out of here?’

‘A rational thought,’ muttered Daiki.

‘Were you asleep just now?’ asked Akira, walking over to the bars. ‘The fox is too fat to fit through these things. Even with me pushing him. And the iron's lodged in too tight at the bottom for his claws to get leverage on.’

‘I know, I saw all that, but-’

‘And even if I could fit through, there’s nowhere for me to go,’ added the fox. ‘Maximum range from the ribbons is about ten metres.’

‘Ten? That’s not very far.’

‘It’s usually sufficient. Long as my vassal is mobile. But this lump...in a confined place like this...’

‘Wait a second,’ cut in Akira, holding a hand over Miho’s mouth to stop any more pointless questions drooling out. ‘What if we lure the guards down, from inside the cell?’

‘And then what?’

‘Call them names,’ said Daiki, picking up a bit of grit from the floor and throwing it at the collapsed rat art opposite.

‘Are you all idiots or what? We get the fox here to hide under a dōbuku near the bars, then, when they get close enough, he bites their legs, they drop, we cut their throats and grab the key. If we're lucky, it might even roll down the slope right to us.’

Miho mumbled something from under Akira’s hand, so the ashigaru lifted the restraint and let him repeat. ‘Would that really work?’

‘With strategic, rapid biting skills, yes.’

‘Nope,’ countered the fox, moving over to the rat remains and prodding them with his paw. ‘Gods, going through the rules again, twice in eight months.’

‘What rules?’

‘Irritating ones. Okay, here’s the short version...and I should force Daiki to say it, really, as he’s the one who messed all this up, but, as he’s entering one of his classic moods, I suppose I’ll have to do it.’

‘I’m not in a mood,’ replied Daiki, throwing another bit of grit, this time at the fox’s leg. ‘And they’re not classic.’

‘Your face looks like bonfire ash.’

‘Because I’ve been heckled constantly for the last eight months.’

‘Directed, not heckled.’

‘Okay, you two weirdos,’ interrupted Akira, tapping Miho’s zori on the bars. ‘Just give us the rules. And no patronising tone, we’ve already seen other demons, we know generally what’s going on.’

‘Ha, an expert in my kind.’ The fox skipped over to Akira’s leg and kicked it. ‘How did that feel?’

‘*Kuso*...what are you doing, you little-’

‘Just an example.’

‘Of what?’

‘Rule number two. Only that which believes in me can be interfered with tangibly.’

‘Eh?’

‘You mean...’ started Miho, then stopped when he realised he didn’t know himself what he meant.

‘If I try to attack those guards, nothing will happen. I’ll drift right through them.’

‘Bullshit,’ spat Akira, still rubbing his leg.

‘Nope. Real shit.’

‘But...that didn’t happen with the other demons,’ offered Miho, looking left at some scrawled graffiti on the wall telling him to eat his

own feet. Either written in red paint or blood. Probably blood. ‘The green guy almost bit my whole cheek off.’

‘Yeah, and that purple witch killed five ashigaru...one of them my friend. Well, kind of a friend. Didn’t hate him at least.’

The fox stretched open his jaw into an O shape, gasping. ‘Wah, I did not know that. Right then, I guess I can attack people who don’t believe in me.’

‘Are you being caustic?’ asked Akira, his expression indicating that he already knew the answer.

‘You have no idea,’ said Daiki, chuckling to himself as he threw another bit of grit.

‘Shut up, wombat face,’ shouted the fox, waving a paw to dismiss his vassal. ‘Of course I’m being caustic, cos you’re saying stupid things. The other demons can do things I can’t, and I can do some things they can’t. That purple witch you talked about, yeah, she can swirl about and cut you to pieces...in this realm, at least...but only if some pleb is carrying her box. And she can’t do it indefinitely, or even out in the open. Rules are tightly enforced for her kind. Me, on the other hand, I’m what you call an independent contractor.’

Daiki’s laughter filled the whole cell with that line, the whole corridor even, making the two guards at the other end shout back, ‘hey, no jokes allowed.’

‘Yeah, keep laughing, those ribbons aren’t glued on, remember? I can switch any time.’

‘To another pleb, and only if they agree to it...yeah, very independent.’

The fox muttered something presumably in fox language then used its paw to throw some rat flesh at Daiki’s face. The mage didn’t bother to dodge, or wipe it off, he just kept laughing, altering the volume slightly so the guards wouldn’t shout at him again.

‘Okay, so what exactly can you do?’ asked Akira, gesturing at the cell around them. ‘Anything useful?’

‘Yes, I’ll definitely tell you with that tone.’

'Turn into mist?'

'Ah, now it's guessing time. Can't even wait for me to respond.'

'Can you do anything useful, yes or no?'

'Sure. Can you?'

Akira swore at the zori [Miho's] still in his hand and threw it at one of the many [pointless] wooden struts sticking out of the wall.

‘Gods, this is endless.’

‘Then switch cells, ashigaru.’

‘Or maybe I’ll just empty out this one.’

‘Ha, a pathetic threat.’

‘Why? What can you do to stop it?’

The fox raised its tails up, the eight tips glowing silver for a second...then powering down quickly as a door opened at the higher end of the corridor and a soft, female voice asked the guards if she could pay a visit.

Akira turned and leaned against the bars, with the fox and Miho joining him, all three prisoners observing carefully, religiously, as a tall woman in a plain brown yukata and bizarro, poorly-tied head scarf shuffled serenely down the sloped corridor towards them.

‘Not Aya,’ Miho whispered, sinking down with a released breath and reclaiming his zori.

‘Not a demon,’ said the fox, stroking its claws.

‘Not spiritual,’ said Akira, moving away slowly from the bars as the woman reached the cell, pulled out a bottle of clear liquid from her basket and offered it forward to the condemned.

Miho squinted at the bottle, thinking it had to be water, but he didn’t get time for further analysis as Akira was pulling him back, almost ripping his yukata sleeve when he didn’t accede.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’

‘Bodyguarding,’ Akira hissed back, finally giving up on the yukata and seizing Miho by the flesh of his arm, then dragging him over to the Daiki side of the cell.

‘Prisoners,’ began the woman in a gentle tone, putting both her weaker hand and the bottle through the gap in the iron bars. ‘I bring you water blessed by the Northern Suwa Shrine.’

‘That’s where you’re from?’ asked Miho, looking at the woman’s eyes and spotting some pink lightning streaks. Then blinking and seeing that they were still there.

‘Northern Suwa is where my duties lie,’ she replied, blinking slowly, incredibly slowly, almost as if she were in the middle of having a stroke.

‘The same place as that orange-haired monk?’

‘I’m sorry, child, I do not know who you refer to. Our shrine is one of limited hair. In this way, we are able to access the wisdom lines of the higher realm.’

‘You have hair.’

‘Yes, with which to fulfil my sacred duties. Commoners feel confused by women with no hair, so I have kept mine as you see it now.’

‘And you just randomly decided to come here, today, at this moment?’ asked Akira, eyes narrowed on the small bottle still jutting through the bars.

‘There is no need for negativity or alarm, brother. It is the time of *Onbashira*, when I must visit everyone who is in need. If the cells were empty, I would offer this water to the spirits of prisoners already departed.’

‘She’s lying,’ said the fox, dipping its paw in the rat blood.

The woman flinched, looking for a brief moment at the space where the fox sat, then correcting herself and turning back to the boy and the ashigaru. ‘Please, come closer and receive the blessing.’

Akira glanced right at the fox next to him, whose eyes were flashing tiny dots of silver, then pushed himself to his feet and headed over to the bars. The supposed shrine woman smiled as he approached, peeling off the rice paper lid of the bottle and pushing it forward another inch.

‘Does look quite tasty,’ said Akira, fixing eyes on the liquid...then, quick as a bear cub in a human-run bear cub adoption agency, shifted weight and shot his left hand up towards the woman’s neck.

The guard three feet behind her didn’t move an inch, barely even registered the move, but the woman was a different breed; her spare

hand, the stronger one, was up instantly by her throat, guarding against the attack that had already been aborted.

Akira took a step back, then another, keeping his eyes on Misora, who tried to salvage the situation by scratching her neck and muttering, ‘pesky mosquito,’ but it was too late.

The ashigaru had sniffed her out a mile off, and now Ichiko would never let her hear the end of it.

Unless she could still get to them...a needle throw perhaps?

She mapped out the cell, the positions of the boy and the ashigaru, ignored the drunk-looking guy and the weird silver shimmery thing in the opposite corner, possibly a demon, possibly her own fatigue, then concluded that it would have to be one hell of a shot.

The boy...no problem, he was clearly too dozy to react, but the ashigaru. He was already a good three metres away and...*kuso*...was sliding down next to the drunkard, blocking eighty, ninety per cent of her line of sight.

‘Are you praying?’ asked Miho, standing up and taking half a step towards her, before Akira yelled at him to get back down.

‘It is a ritual, before the blessing is-’

‘What is the meaning of this?’

Misora cut the line instantly and tried to pull the head scarf tighter round her face as the tall, familiar figure of the Suwa general, Lord Jun'ya, appeared beside her, repeating the same question.

'The prisoners,' she started in reply, softening her voice a little, 'it is my duty, during *Onbashira*, to visit here and-'

'She's a Shingen spy,' shouted Akira, throwing a bit of grit at Misora's yukata and hitting the bottle instead. 'Here to poison us with whatever shit is in that bottle.'

Kuso on top of other *kuso*, Misora thought. And that was pretty much all she could think as her body switched to survival mode.

'A Shingen spy...poisoning you...' muttered Lord Jun'ya, his speech as slow as a Mandarin kindergarten teacher.

'Don't parrot me, arrest her...quick.'

'Is this true?'

Eyes on the ground, face maintaining a bland mask of serenity, Misora started a new line about, 'finding forgiveness in the unlikeliest of places,' then spun fast, pushing the needle slipping out of her yukata sleeve up towards the Suwa General's throat.

After this, she'd have to take down the nearest guard, who was already reaching for his katana, and then find a way to-

Her thoughts stopped, the brain finally sensing that her hand was stuck and there was something metal in her own neck.

Falling back against the bars, she dropped the bottle and tried to lift up her other arm but...it was too hard...too much effort...and what she really wanted to do was lie down, sleep a while.

Kuso, again.

Lord Jun'ya guided Misora down onto the stone floor, then extracted the needle from the side of the inept spy's neck.

'Put her in the other cell,' he said to the guard, who, to his credit, didn't stutter a response or gawp at what had just happened, but just bowed and dragged Misora by the arms across towards the vacant cell on the left hand side.

'Nice reflexes,' said Akira, clapping twice then stopping when the Suwa General pointed the needle his way. 'Out-flanking a trained ninja.'

'A kunoichi, I believe. And you might've wished her to succeed...murderer.'

'Yeah? Because you're worse?'

Lord Jun'ya rose to his feet, tucking the needle beneath the sleeve of his dark blue yukata, and was about to answer when his eyes shifted, focusing on the spot where the fox had been a few minutes

earlier. The rat corpse lay there still, which could have explained the sudden attention, but then that seemed to get boring too as the General moved on to Daiki, bobbing his head slightly as he watched the mage squeeze the red and white ribbons in his hair.

‘Should I repeat my query or what?’ asked Akira, waving a hand at the cell bars and the bearded, indigo-eyed bear of a man behind it.

The Suwa General picked up the words, and the sarcasm, and refocused [with a cough] on the ashigaru. ‘Tomorrow is an auspicious day for you. Festivities by the lake in honour of your head being lopped off. And your little boyfriend too.’

‘Boyfriend?’ Miho looked at Akira, puzzled.

‘He’s quite big, actually,’ replied Akira, patting Miho on the thigh.

Lord Jun’ya blinked, as if it were the first time he’d ever heard such a joke, then looked over at the other side of the cell again. Daiki had stopped squeezing the ribbons and was now stroking them, and, when the mage realised he was being observed, lifted his whole body up and stared back.

‘You like the hair accessories?’ he asked, finally, when their connection started to border on trance-like.

‘Those ribbons...’

‘From a stall in Uehara. Very cheap. Wanna touch?’

Propping his forehead against the bars, the Suwa General continued his study, ignoring several coughs from the guard behind as he returned from dumping Misora into the other cell.

Then pulled back and nodded to himself.

‘Made a decision yet?’ asked the mage.

‘The shrine that you claim to be affiliated with...will be contacted tomorrow. We will see then what is to be done with you.’

‘Great.’

‘And you,’ continued Lord Jun’ya, turning once more to Akira and Miho. ‘Tomorrow, your souls will be cleansed of all sin.’

‘That’s a nice way of putting of it.’

Grunting in approval [at his own words], the Suwa General faced the guard lingering behind and told him that, under no circumstance, was anyone to go near the cell doors.

‘Err...dinner time, water?’

‘You will slide it in from a distance of at least ten metres.’

The guard muttered *ten metres* back to himself, clearly not understanding much of anything.

‘Do you understand your orders?’

‘Yes, General,’ said the guard, switching to autopilot.

‘Even if they appear to be choking to death, do not go near that cell.’

‘Ah, choking...that part’s quite similar to existing protocol, General. The sickness ploy. No problem on that one at all. We won’t lift a finger.’

‘Good.’

Turning back to the mage one last time, Lord Jun’ya muttered something under his breath then strode off up the sloped passageway in long steps and barked at the other guard to stop fiddling with his eyelids and open the door.

Then he was gone.

Into a corridor with a hundred per cent wood and tatami.

Soaking in the silence of the cell, Akira put his head back against the wall and looked up at the last ceiling he’d ever see. Unless the executioner was very bad at aiming a katana.

On the opposite side, Daiki flicked at his ribbons several times until they glowed silver and the fox re-materialised next to the rat puddle.

‘There goes the plan,’ it said, dipping a paw in the blood.

‘Pessimist,’ muttered Akira, holding the self-pathos for a good few seconds before eventually giving in to a long, stuttered laugh.

‘She’s really a ninja?’ asked Miho, pointing at the slumped form of Misora in the adjoining cell.

‘Go back to sleep.’

‘A real one?’

‘Please.’

Miho walked into the middle of the cell, shaking his head, accidentally stepping in some of the rat blood. ‘Wah, she wasn’t very good, was she?’

[illegible]

蛇有蛇路

生 工

ARHITGA RSGAIZYKATG

It wasn't their usual stomping ground, or marching ground, but ever since the old community land had been uprooted by the humans for that nightmarish mega structure, they'd had no choice but to seek out greener pastures.

Which is why a team of forty-eight scouting ants was currently walking in eight lines of six towards the dipped turf on the very edge of the cliff that dropped abruptly to a watery abyss below.

Seems relatively stable, said the lead ant telepathically to his five lieutenants, tapping his leg against the dirt.

We could erect a barrier close to the edge, replied one of the five, to prevent any drunken tumbles or non-endorsed suicide plunges.

Excellent idea, number four.

And it's unlikely the humans will build anything this close to the edge, added another ant, stepping forward.

That is true. For the most part. Yet there have been cases of-

Before the lead ant could lay out the rest of its counterpoint, a giant zori slid across the turf towards their group, smearing half instantly into the dirt and sending the rest of them spiralling down into the sea.

Re-adjusting himself and apologising to his superior nearby, the servant picked up the shōchū container he'd dropped on the grass and continued on towards the unlikely banquet table set up nearby.

‘And the fool just stood there,’ boomed the seated yet swaying figure of Lord Imagawa, a bottle of shōchū raised high in his left hand, ‘gawping at these seven barely competent assassins, waiting for someone else to do something.’

‘They ambushed us, daimyō,’ whispered the older man next to the wildly-bearded drunk, ‘as I have already explained countless times.’

‘Nonsense! Ambush is a word used by defeatists. The excuse for not understanding basic strategy. And at night time, too, the most obvious expanse for a smaller force to attack, when everyone’s drunk and busy fondling themselves. Gods on a fish tail, it’s only been done about a hundred thousand times throughout recorded history.’

The older man, who was in fact the uncle of the twenty-four year old Lord Imagawa, coughed in protest, yet refrained from adding anything else.

As did the other eleven around the slightly chilly and increasingly windswept cliffside table.

Instead, they simply sat straight, laughed at the appropriate moments and sipped in moderation from their over-sized cups of shōchū.

And, in the cases of Tadachika and Atta Noe, who were seated beside each other, they both said absolutely nothing while, inside their heads, playing out the dream-like scenario of the drunken, boastful Lord Imagawa sitting at the same table with a katana-wielding Lord Shingen.

‘No, next time it will be very different,’ continued Lord Imagawa, punctuating his utterances with swigs from the giant shōchū bottle. ‘Very, very different. Victory for me and heads on a spike for those sneaky Owari wretches. Four heads, one spike, perfect. Assuming my military strategist here can switch his brain on. No, forget that last part, it won’t be necessary, I’ll simply expand the circle. Bring all the vassal clans to my bosom, cross the river with heads perched high, and deal with this nagging threat once and for all. Think of it, all my allies, perhaps a regiment from Takeda too, the octopus banner of the Imagawa...maybe modify it with some dragon fangs or some such thing, make it more intimidating...octopus is too vague, a mysterious creature...more akin to hugging with those big tentacle things than outright killing a man...nowhere near brutal enough...yes, fanged octopus banner, good idea.’

Lord Imagawa paused for an extra-long swig of shōchū, which got even longer once the alcohol stopped pouring out. Holding the bottle upside down, he grunted for a servant to come and refill, and the poor kid who came over almost got bowled off his feet by a huge gust of wind swarming in kunoichi-like from the cliff-edge.

‘Gods in a bear’s snatch, what is wrong with you? It’s a gash of fast air, that’s all. Nothing worth falling on your ass over.’

The servant pulled himself up and bowed seven times, finally handing over the new [giant] bottle with a trembling hand.

‘Ah, don’t be afraid, I’m not going to punish you. I’m the people’s daimyō...unlike that tyrant over in Owari Province. Be thankful he’s not here asking you for more shōchū. Then you’d be in trouble.’

The servant bowed again then backed off...and got bowled over by another strong wall of *fast air*.

‘Lord Imagawa,’ interjected Tadachika, glancing at his empty cup and then at Atta Noe, who stared impassively back. ‘It is a little strange to be dining outside, in such disagreeable weather. Perhaps a swift relocation to the main hall at the top of the honmaru...’

‘To sit in stale air and weaken into Heian aristocrats? No, the elements are here for a reason, to sculpt us into warriors, to construct character and resolve. We shall stay and drink and be merry. And tomorrow, by gods, we will plot our revenge.’

‘If you insist,’ replied Tadachika, taking the bottle nearby and pouring out more shōchū.

Lord Imagawa nodded at his own line then scanned the table, doing a double-take when he reached Atta Noe. ‘Ah, it is you, isn’t it? The purple lady. I was certain I glimpsed you when I first sat down

but...my thoughts were clouded, that damn ambush...but now that I see it is you, objectively you, Lady Noe...gods, I have to say, it is a great pity it was not Sunpu you were sent to. A great, great pity.'

Atta Noe dipped her head slightly, acknowledging the compliment.

'You know, it was this young lady who suggested the change of leadership,' said Imagawa, opening himself up to the ten other retainers and generals at the table. 'The push for it at least. Because she recognised the strength in youth, its vitality. Is that not true, Lady Noe?'

'I am not aware of how it has been described by Lord Shingen, but...yes, I did advise a firm approach.'

'Ah, modesty, very admirable. Shingen truly has uncovered a gem. Which makes it odd to see you here of all places, playing shepherd to a tadpole like Lord Tadachika.'

'Temporary guest is the phrase I was given,' interrupted Tadachika, eyes burning an invisible hole in his cup.

'Guest? Ha, only a fool would waste such a talent as this young lady.'

'Lady...is not entirely accurate.'

Imagawa either didn't catch the barb or didn't care as he swivelled a redundant inch and focused all his attention on the smoke demoness. 'Tell me, is it true that you can refashion yourself into

purple mist and glide effortlessly on the wind? I would very much like to see that, if it is true.'

The words came out at the same time as another gust of wind swept in, so the other ten at the table pretended not to hear it, and the surrounding servants stopped just short of covering their ears with their hands.

'It is quite a public place,' replied Atta Noe, finally, putting a hand out across the table in the direction of Lord Imagawa. 'Perhaps later, when we retire to the honmaru.'

'Ah now, don't be coy,' said the daimyō, waving his shōchū cup at the surrounding servants. 'They've heard the stories, we all have. And I've been in an onsen with that Atta Ka Yukio fellow, before you arrived on the scene...'

'You bathed with him?'

'In fact, the very first thing I asked him...those two creepy boys there, always lurking nearby, what are they for? And he told me everything. Vessel or vassal or some other phrase...and then he told me about all your other types too.'

Atta Noe glanced at Tadachika's cup, then, for the first time that night, at Gen'ichiro on the opposite side of the table. As usual, he was borderline useless, head down towards the rice bowls on the table, with the occasional glimpse out at the stormy sea-scape to offer token variety.

‘Oh, very well...if you’re that concerned about it.’ Lord Imagawa waved a hand and told the servants to turn around. Then added a threat that if any tried to peek or said anything about this then they’d be thrown into the sea.

Satisfied, he finished off his bottle of shōchū and spun back to Atta Noe. ‘Now, you’re all free. Mist, please.’

Hesitating more out of habit than desire, the purple demon took a few preparatory breaths and then held up her arm. To blank faces and stifled gasps, it disintegrated into particles of lilac dust, at first, swirling in spirals that suggested beauty of an ineffable kind - the type Shingen the Elder may have appreciated if he’d been present - then forming a dagger shape and cutting a diagonal line through the cup in front of Tadachika.

‘Ha, fantastic,’ yelled Lord Imagawa, clapping his hands and knocking over his own bottle.

‘A flourish just for you, daimyō,’ Atta Noe replied, reforming her arm into a human approximation and smirking at the two halves of the cup laying broken on the table.

‘A costly one,’ replied Tadachika, taking Atta Noe’s cup and pouring himself another shot of shōchū. ‘Your newly installed window will be removed at first light tomorrow. And you will craft me a new cup by your own hand, without the assistance of your purple tricks.’

‘She will do no such thing,’ boomed Lord Imagawa, leaning across the table and seizing the cup away from the startled retainer. ‘You...Tadachika...will treat your new advisor with the appropriate respect. And what is this talk of a window? Where have you put her exactly?’

‘An old storage shack at the rear of the castle grounds,’ answered Atta Noe, with Tadachika still staring abjectly at the lost cup now being placed back into her hand.

‘Gods on a fisherman’s vest, what are you doing in there? That’s unacceptable. Sakai, what the hell are you playing at?’

‘You misunderstand, daimyō. It is the normal residence we use for temporary guests.’

‘For horses and lunatics more like. You will move her tomorrow, to a large room in either the *ni-no-maru* or *honmaru*. With a clear view of the sea. And no guards outside to make her feel uncomfortable. Understand?’

Tadachika stared at his own hand for a few seconds before etiquette finally fought its way back in to his brain, and he lifted his head to say, ‘yes, daimyō.’

‘Good, because I will check before I leave. And visit the room myself to see that it is of sufficient size.’ Lord Imagawa reached his hand under the table and groped at the air where he thought Atta

Noe's thigh should've been. Then smiled, when her knee appeared in that exact spot.

'Lord Shingen is wise to fear you,' she said, leaning in close to his neck, lowering her voice almost to a whisper. 'You are strong and decisive, and much more desirable as an ally than...something not so close.'

'Shingen fears me?' spluttered Imagawa, little globs of spit and shōchū shooting out.

Atta Noe put her hand under the table and took hold of his, stroking the back of his fingers. 'There is a difference between perception of strength and real strength and it is undeniable that you possess the latter.'

'He said he fears me, out loud?' repeated Imagawa, pulling away his hand.

'Not in words, exactly. However, I have a talent for psychology, the meaning between the text.'

Lord Imagawa moved back, so abrupt and careless that he almost fell off his stool. Glancing around from retainer to retainer and, finally, to his tired-looking uncle, he cleared his throat and examined the nearly empty bottle of shōchū. 'It seems to me...that for the sake of my future victory in Owari...and seeing the traitorous nature of their ranks...it is more important than ever to value our allies. Uncle...on our return to Sunpu, you will arrange a gift of salt and

minerals...to be sent to Kai Province...and other places, of course. Tell our allies that standing with the Imagawa Clan is beneficial for all.'

The Uncle General postponed the confusion and nodded, probably just glad he wasn't being insulted again for mistakes he didn't even make. And the rest of the table went back to their shōchū.

Apart from Tadachika, who waited for another gust of wind before muttering curses inaudibly, and Atta Noe, who drew her hand back to her waist and let the thing she'd kept all the way from Kōfu slide down and out of her yukata sleeve.

'To future victories,' shouted Lord Imagawa, raising his bottle and then tilting it diagonally downwards to lap up the remaining few drops.

'To future victories,' echoed the rest of the table.



I love to be annihilated

CHAPTER 40 SHŌCHŪ PERSUASION

Coming out from a nearby alley, the tallish man finished smearing the dark cream on his face, affected a hunch, slipped his right arm under uncountable layers of rags, and started scanning the street ahead.

There were a couple of tourists leaning on the bridge, both men, both mean-looking. A family by the *Onbashira* totem souvenir stalls, gormless enough, but there was a chance the young boy would attempt to pull at his rags.

Besides, parents were often overly-protective of strangers appearing near their children out of the blue. Like the sponge-animal salesman last spring, beaten to death for offering a sponge fox to a four-year old.

No, what he needed was someone alone, with a kind face, ideally without muscles or kids, or an inferiority complex...

He scanned farther to the left, reminding himself that this was all just temporary and soon he'd be a respectable life insurance sales executive in Kyoto again.

If he could just get enough starting capital to open a storefront, even a basic one, perhaps hire one of the cheaper prostitutes to function superficially as his secretary...

His head stopped, so abruptly that his neck bone creaked.

Ah, perfect, he thought, eyes honing in on his next target: a young girl, on her tiptoes, peeking into that shrine woman's izakaya. And alone too.

Giving his face one final rub, the man smoothly transitioned into a hobble and moved forward, yapping insanely about a brutal attack in the alley, with all his belongings taken.

As he got close to the girl, he put phase two of his plan into action, feigning a trip on loose stones, making an 'eeeeeeeyyy' sound and stumbling head first into the side of her waist.

Unfortunately, Aya had just begun to turn around at the same exact moment and was given just enough time to yell, 'wah,' as the beggar's face disappeared into the bottom half of her yukata.

'What the hell are you-' she started, then stopped as he collapsed to the dirt on the ground and held up his only functioning arm in apology.

'My feet...rogue stone...attacked by thugs.'

Aya frowned, then nodded and dusted herself down. Checked on her waist. Looked again at the gap where the man's other arm should've been. Made a pity noise.

'Didn't mean to-'

‘It’s okay. Don’t exhaust yourself. Relax. I understand.’

Out of somewhere in her yukata, she pulled a few coins and handed them to the man with mud smeared all over his face.

‘You are too kind, too kind,’ he replied, bowing as if he were trying to snap his own neck off. ‘But all my belongings, gone, stolen, nowhere to stay...’

‘Err...I don’t know if I have anything else.’

‘No, no, of course. You have done more than enough. I’m sure I will survive the night...tomorrow night, maybe...if the weather is favourable.’

Aya looked down at the sorry figure and then back at the window she’d been peeking through. Reiko and the other, stern-looking woman were still talking, quite intensely it seemed. No drink break or impasse to give her a chance to go in and ask for help. If that was even a good idea. Looking at the tomato colour of Reiko’s face, probably not.

‘Arghhh, the nagging pain,’ moaned the man with only one arm, reaching an arm out for the wall as both his legs buckled.

‘Constant...non-stop...’

Aya glanced back, moving her hand out to stabilise him, when she noticed a fat mosquito land on his left cheek. In an instant, it was flattened by a miraculous right hand, a little pocket of blood mixing together with the dirt of his face.

‘Hey...’

Realising his mistake, the man quickly shifted the newly discovered arm back under his rags and tried to shuffle off...but Aya was too fast, grabbing the end of his robes and yanking him back.

He spun round with a dagger out, pointing it vaguely at her throat. ‘Back off, girl.’

‘Wah...’

‘I’ll stab if you make me.’

‘Stab?’

‘You heard it. Hey, a bit of distance, please. Come on, back the fuck off.’

‘Gods, you’re just like him,’ she muttered, mentally attaching a sketch of Akira to the dirt of the man’s face as she complied with his demand.

‘Right. Good. Now, I’m just gonna walk peacefully down this street and you’re not gonna follow, okay?’

‘Maybe worse. At least he didn’t pretend to have one arm.’

‘Fine, keep talking to yourself. I’m leaving. And no screaming out...or I’ll scream too.’

Aya shrugged, looking at something past the man’s shoulder.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

It could be a trick, he thought, maintaining a straight line of sight with his possible opponent, or it could be a bunch of ashigaru with their katanas out, self-appointed town security, ready to do their scummy little tactic of slashing the back of someone’s calf and-

‘Kuuuuuuusooooo,’ the man yelled, falling to the side, dropping the blade, snatching at the air around his left calf.

‘Is this man bothering you?’ asked the stocky ashigaru, blood-specked katana aimed downwards at the whimpering figure on the ground.

Aya turned instinctively back to the window, seeing both Reiko and the other woman looking over at her, clearly alerted by the sudden death cry.

‘He’s a thief...tried to rob me,’ she stuttered, backing away from the izakaya wall and trying not to register all the random faces staring at her.

‘My fucking leg,’ the conman cried, trying to stop the blood seeping out with his sleeve. ‘Gonna bleed out, do something, help me.’

The ashigaru stuck the tip of his katana in the dirt next to the conman’s stomach then bent down. ‘Would you like me to ease the pain?’

‘Yes...obviously,’ replied the conman, face scrunching up in sudden hesitation. ‘Wait, ease how? First aid?’

‘What do you think, young lady?’ asked the ashigaru, slowly turning, ‘mercy for the wicked thief who tried to steal from you?’

The words were soft, mildly threatening and, ultimately, futile as Aya had already gone.

Not completely out of sight...about halfway across the bridge, pinballing through the crowd so hard that she knocked a huge basket of mountain asparagus off a farmer’s head [that or a guy who really loved asparagus]...but far enough to make the ashigaru growl in mild frustration, and bark, ‘what?’ at the figure of Reiko appearing at the Izakaya entrance.

‘That girl...what did she say?’

‘Nothing of interest. Why? Do you know her?’

Reiko looked at the writhing thief on the ground, the katana standing upright next to him, the shrinking shape of Aya on the other side of the bridge, then said no and walked back into the bowels of the izakaya. Then came out again and grabbed a hypnotised Ichiko by the sleeve, telling her it was rude to stare.

‘This one time,’ the kunoichi answered, seizing back her yukata sleeve and sliding the door panel shut behind them.

‘What?’

‘Touch me again and I’ll-’

‘Oh that. Forget it. Just part of the performance.’ Reiko moved over to the counter, pouring herself the last drops from a bottle of shōchū. ‘Probably should’ve chased after that little sneak. I’ll never get my money back now.’

‘Perhaps if you hired more trustworthy staff.’

‘Yeah, thanks for the advice, regional manager. Anyway, it doesn’t matter that much, not compared to the other issue.’

‘That has already been discussed.’

‘Yeah, and your solution is to do nothing.’

‘I am merely following the logic of the situation. To panic would be a grave mistake. A professional kunoichi waits for the right moment to strike, even if that becomes a decade. Though I will concede, it is debatable how much that applies to someone of Misora’s character.’

Reiko downed the shot of shōchū, then reached under the counter and opened up a new bottle. ‘Okay, fresh compromise. If she’s not back by midnight, we go and investigate.’

‘That would also be a grave mistake.’

‘Not attack, just moderate surveillance, see what’s happening around the castle. Gather some information. That shouldn’t be too frightening to a professional kunoichi like yourself.’

Ichiko’s right hand went to the left sleeve of her yukata, with pretty clear mutterings of *monster disrespect* coming from her lips.

‘Yeah, call it what you want, you know it’s a fair plan. Besides, if Misora has been captured, then your two targets might get spooked and start talking. And then you’re in a whole new pit of trouble. Me too...all of us, in fact.’

‘Enough speculation. We remain here until the morning.’

The shōchū bottle tilted and Reiko poured out another shot.
‘Technically, 12:01 is the morning.’

‘That is my final decision.’

‘*Final* can often be a transitory word.’

‘Stop...adding your nonsense asides.’

‘What’s all the commotion out there? Someone fighting?’ asked Kanae with zero leash on the volume, coming down the stairs two at a time in nothing but a semi-open kosode.

‘Nothing of consequence,’ replied Ichiko, sitting down at the table and folding her arms. ‘Where’s your yukata?’

‘Mine? Upstairs. I think. You sure there’s nothing going on out there? Sounded kind of like a fight. Woke me up from my nap it was so loud.’ Moving over to the counter, Kanae took the cup of shōchū that Reiko had just poured out for her, toasting it with another invisible cup in the air. ‘Hey, that reminds me. I just had the weirdest dream. Misora was at the castle, all drugged and woozy, and trapped in a massive shōchū barrel with the ashigaru guy, you know, our target, that guy, and the two of them were front on front, naked, and

the main guard comes in and orders them to fondle each other. And the guard's face looked like Lord Shingen's...a little bit. And the whole thing was really weird, so detailed, so specific, like even the label had been scrubbed off the side of the barrel and the guards broke for lunch at one point and...yeah, it was weird, my mum always said dreams were connected to real life, so maybe it means she's in trouble, Misora...been captured for real and...I don't know, what do you think? Should we go and check, see if she's okay? It has been almost a whole day.'

Kanae finally bowed to the limits of human nature and took a breath, then pulled an innocent child face as Ichiko rubbed at her yukata sleeve, glaring at the neck veins of her supposed comrade.

'I think...you may have a point,' replied Reiko, holding up her cup.

'Great, so we better get over there. I'll go upstairs and put on my dark gear, make myself a bit more shadow-like.' She finished off the cup of shōchū and headed back to the stairs, stopping halfway up and turning back to the two women. 'Hey, you haven't seen my dagger lying around, have you? Think I left it down here before.'

'We'll keep an eye out,' said Reiko, smiling, somehow suppressing something much stronger.

'Thanks, you're so kind. And always in a good mood, too. Actually, if I weren't in the kunoichi business, I'd probably ask if I could work here...seems so relaxing.'

‘Maybe after you retire.’

Kanae nodded to herself and continued on up the stairs, the footsteps morphing into an off-key whistle, possibly a melody of some kind.

‘I think...’ started Reiko, licking the rim of her cup, ‘someone in your recruitment division has a very perverse sense of humour.’

‘Suicidal,’ muttered Ichiko, still glaring at the stairs.

‘But her idea’s still a good one. Shall we prepare?’

‘No.’

‘It’s two against one.’

‘The rookie is irrelevant. We’re staying.’

Reiko tipped the bottle and re-filled her cup, plus one more to the side.

‘I’m not thirsty,’ said Ichiko, spreading her arms out across the table.

‘For me, not you.’

‘Two cups?’

‘To fortify my nerves for the night ahead.’

‘I told you, we’re not going.’

‘Sure.’

‘That is final.’

‘Under...stood.’ Reiko picked up both cups and downed them at the same time, slamming them on the counter as an exclamation mark. ‘How about a sweet cup of flower water?’

CHAPTER 41

LUDICROUS DUNGEON GODDESS



‘Harder...’

‘Quiet.’

‘More teeth, come on...’

‘You’ll alert the guards.’

‘Bite...it’s only iron...’

The fox stopped digging into the iron of the cell bars and whipped back to Akira, growling at him. Then shifted to Daiki, who was still slumped against the wall to the left, and ordered him straight, ‘skip the gentle chiding, just gag this fool.’

‘Gag me? I’m trying to support you here, demon...’

‘Put an end to his insipid stream of nonsense.’

‘...which is more than your sulky hair witch is doing.’ Akira pulled himself up from the crouching position he’d been in and rotated his shoulders, wincing at the cracking noises of his own bones. ‘And the guards can’t hear me, they’re asleep. Obviously. Otherwise we wouldn’t be trying to escape, genius.’

‘They’re standing up, actually,’ muttered the sulky hair witch, Daiki, throwing a bit of dungeon grit at what remained of the rat corpse nearby. ‘And they never sleep on duty. It’s what Suwa guards are known for...besides the manic superstition.’

Akira jabbed a finger at the two distant figures propped up against the far-away wall, completely immobile. 'Yeah, apparently that was all bullshit.'

'They're probably just pretending. Toying with you.'

'Sure. Faking it.'

'No one ever escapes from here. Or castles in general, to be honest. Better just to get some rest, conserve energy.'

'Until my execution in the morning. Thanks, what wonderful advice.'

'Ignore him,' said the fox, rubbing one of its side teeth. 'He's sulking as usual.'

'Actually, I feel quite tranquil.'

'Yeah, cos you're not the one getting executed.'

Daiki shrugged, rolling a bit of grit around his palm. 'Executions aren't that bad. They drug you beforehand, so you won't feel anything. I've heard some people say it's even quite euphoric, a kind of mystical return to...whatever is...whatever was...'

'Euphoric?' cut in Miho, taking a break from his own attempt at escape, sanding down the bottom of a cell bar with his fingernail, hoping to loosen it from the wooden base.

'Apparently.'

'Because of the drugs?'

‘I’m half-tempted to request it myself. Beats lounging around in this shithole. Or out in that shithole. Yeah, the drugs. Mellows you out. See, they don’t want you frenzied when you present yourself to the gods in the next life. Very superstitious area, Suwa.’

Akira stretched his eyes out, making a very poor attempt at *awe*. ‘Wah, I didn’t realise it was such a transcendental experience. Maybe I could ask for my katana to be scented, or have some Sakura petals laid out for my head to land on.’

‘Don’t think they’ll use your katana,’ replied Miho, confused.

‘Their katana for me, *kasu*. The one they’re gonna use to euphorically lop off our heads. In about another seven hours.’

‘Ah, I get it now...’

‘Which is definitely gonna happen if magical fox here doesn’t get his teeth going and munch through these fucking bars.’

‘Fox teeth aren’t that sharp,’ said Daiki, throwing another bit of grit, this time at his own foot.

‘Gods on a geisha’s tit...’

‘His are no different, despite the magic factor.’

‘Okay, I’m warning you, curb the negativity or I’ll have to smash your brains out on that wall...’

‘And the bars are made of *Shimane* iron.’

‘...make you look like your rat friend down there.’

‘He’s right,’ interrupted the fox, running a paw over the almost imperceptible teeth marks on the cell bar. ‘It’s not gonna work.’

‘Wah, you too...’

‘And even if I did cut through, we’d still have the guard problem to deal with.’

‘Just...continue biting. I’ll handle the fighting part.’

The fox stared at Akira’s weapon-free hands, making a *hmm* sound as one of the standing guards stirred in the background. Stretching out both arms, yawning silently, he remembered where he was and checked the cells at the end of the corridor slope, nodding to himself when he saw that all the prisoners were slouched against the walls, either sleeping or in a deep trance. Then sat down on the raised tatami platform and closed his eyes again.

Akira waited a minute, maybe a minute and a half, before pulling up one eyelid and aggressively whispering at the fox to get back to work on the bar.

‘I told you, it won’t work. My teeth are not built for this kind of activity.’

‘Then use your claws.’

‘What, to itch the iron?’

‘Scratch it, slice it, I don’t know...do something.’

A staggered laugh sounded out from the cell next door, Misora sliding out from the shadows and over to her own bars, flicking a nonchalant fingernail against the iron.

‘Don’t know what you’re giggling about,’ mumbled Akira, a fleck of spit sailing out of his mouth and landing on the stone floor.

Misora seemed to notice it, raising an eyebrow. ‘That’ll be your head in a few hours.’

‘Swiftly followed by yours.’

She smiled, flicking the bar again, switching attention to the fox, and the grey cloud that was Daiki behind him. ‘An impressive duo. One melancholic wretch, and one idiot demon trying to eat his way through *Shimane* iron...’

‘I’m not melancholic.’

‘Ah, you can see me now.’

‘...cheered on by an ashigaru dumb enough to cling to the old Shingen, even after his retirement.’

‘Says a fool who pretty much walked into her own cell.’

The fox stretched out the line and got a grunted laugh from Akira for his efforts. A snigger from Daiki too, though he quickly culled it when he saw the fox looking at him.

‘You know,’ continued Misora, moving her fingernail onto another bar, ‘I thought I saw you earlier. But then, it couldn’t have been you because...why would you still be in the cell?’

‘The moody atmosphere.’

‘Unless you’re one of those impotent demons who can’t really do anything. Yes, that must be it. Impotence. Quite sad, really.’

‘She’s got you there, fox,’ said Akira, smirking.

‘Sad for you too, ashigaru. Stuck with an ineffectual demon, about to be executed. If only fate had landed you with an Atta Noe instead. She would’ve ripped this place to shreds hours ago.’

‘Atta who?’

Akira coughed, disguising a curt *kuso*. ‘Shingen concubine. Misty purple psychopath.’

‘Ah, an Atashhka.’

‘You mean the woman thing who tried to kill us?’ tagged in Miho, rubbing his neck in some kind of sense-memory move, even though he hadn’t been attacked there. ‘That’s her name?’

‘Atta Noe or box bitch. Personally, I’m leaning towards the latter.’

‘You insult her when she’s not around,’ said Misora, flicking the iron bar, ‘but a quick swish of lilac on this bar...a few slices across the necks of the guards...your necks...your guts. Finished.’

‘Sure, as long as some human dupe’s lugging her box along,’ shot back the fox, who was now trying to pick bits of iron dust out from between his teeth.

Misora flinched, one of her nails skidding off the bar. And she wasn’t the only one. Behind the fox, Daiki dug the tips of his own fingers into the grit on the floor, glaring at his supposed comrade’s eight tails, mumbling back the word *dupe*.

Akira coughed, breaking the brief silence. ‘Where is old box bitch anyway? Nearby?’

‘Typical ashigaru...’

‘Wah, she’s not the one who sent *you* after us...is she?’

‘Truly no idea about anything.’

‘Or was it Shingen?’

Digging into a lower part of the cell bar, Misora returned to the fox, forcing him to put a halt to the teeth picking. They exchanged bitter stares for a few seconds before the kunoichi held out a finger and traced a very transparent outline of the demon’s form, counting out one to eight as she did so.

‘What happened to number nine?’ she asked, miming a swishy tail sketch.

Each one of the fox’s eight tails tightened in response, tucking in behind the demon’s rear.

‘I asked him the same thing earlier,’ said Akira, tilting his head to study the fox’s ass. ‘My guess is an ex-lover. Axe to the stump.’

‘... ..’ replied the fox, presumably in its native tongue.

‘What’s that?’

‘... ..’

‘Okay, fine. Be mysterious. Long as you get back to biting that iron. Or slapping it in two. Snapping it. Gods, I’m tired. Of all of this shit. Maybe those flower drugs wouldn’t be so-’

A cough came from the left, the noise so abrupt that Akira almost fell the other way onto the rat’s blood. It was Miho, for some reason, with his hand raised.

‘Wah, do you have to do that so loud?’

‘I just wanted to ask,’ he said, putting his forehead against the bars and facing Misora in the other cell, ‘is the purple mist lady still angry with us?’

‘No, of course not. She’s completely forgotten about you.’

‘Really? She seemed pretty upset at the time...’

‘Gods...’

‘...all the swirling...and the death threat she gave me.’ He paused, reading Misora’s face. ‘Ah, you’re joking. Aren’t you?’

‘I’m going back to sleep.’

‘Me too,’ said Akira, throwing an imaginary katana at Miho’s mouth, then shifting himself into a more comfortable position.

‘Wait...we’re not escaping?’ asked Miho, gesturing towards the bars.

‘Later.’

‘But-’

‘Doom monger mage over there is right. Bars are too dense, fox is useless, might as well try to jump the guards when they come in the morning. Or just lie back and try that happy death he’s on about. Either way, I’m exhausted.’

‘Wake me up when you’re about to be executed, ashigaru,’ came from the shadows of the adjacent cell, the tone as barbed as ever.

‘Don’t wanna miss the squeals.’

Akira grunted, muttering the worst insult he could think of, then closed his eyes.

Welcomed in the void, soaked in it, refashioned it.

Played out a dungeon scuffle with the witch kunoichi, snapping her neck, cutting her legs off, screaming at her, ripping her yukata open and kissing her breasts, spitting in her eye, licking between her thighs, fucking her, slapping her, smoking a rolled-up version of Atta Noe, setting fire to her box, apologising, fucking her too, riding out her yells, cursing as the walls caved in.

He opened one eye, waiting for more noise.

The cell was still there, as were the other two inmates. No sign of the fox. Shadow only in the kunoichi's cell. Two standing guards at the higher end of the corridor. Asleep? Probably. Didn't matter, still no way out. Execution pending. Drugged and then gone. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad...being out of all this...

His eyelid slid down again, bringing the void.

Not the kunoichi, not the kunoichi, not the kunoichi, not the

He pictured an onsen.

Added a random girl, naked. Got in the water and let her splash some shōchū on his chest.

Then Miho appeared, wearing a yukata with the god of death on its back.

Told him the onsen was big enough for a hundred Kumamoto chickens.

The annoying kunoichi agreed, her head rising up from behind the naked girl, who ripped off her own face to reveal the glowing purple madness of Atta Noe.

She's got purple pubic hair too, said the eight-tailed fox, sitting on top of an unlit okiandon nearby.

And a lovely decorative box, added Daiki, draping his arms over Akira's chest, running his fingers down beneath the water, touching the tip of his-

Wait, not in front of-

The void rushed in, then the cell, Akira lashing out with a reflex left arm and clipping one of those ludicrous wooden struts on the wall.

‘Kuso,’ he whispered to himself, rubbing his hand, taking stock of his surroundings.

It was quiet, a ghost dungeon.

Everyone else still asleep.

Shifting his body to the left, he checked on the guards at the top end of the corridor slope.

What-

It wasn’t perfect light, but the only okiandon that was lit presented a bizarre scene. One guard laid out on the tatami platform, possibly asleep, and the other flailing around like a lunatic, trying to swat at something irritating in the air.

Then that stopped and he was on the floor too.

Just like at the ryokan...the Jewel of Kai...dropped like a bored hawk right out of the sky.

Was this real?

Slapping himself hard on the cheek, twice, three times, Akira pushed forward onto both hands, then forced his tired limbs up into a standing position. Miho was about half a foot away, which was easy

kicking distance, so he kicked him, told him to wake up, and then quickly moved over to the cell bars.

Miho made some murmuring sounds, said, 'not there, Yuki, that's River Bitch's chair,' and went right back to sleep.

'Useless,' whispered Akira, keeping both eyes open and fixed on the guards who had just been knocked down to the floor.

Whoever had done it had to be close.

In the corridor somewhere.

Yet as a minute passed, then two minutes, then ten minutes, then twenty...not one soul stepped into the okiandon light, and Akira rubbed his eyes, starting to wonder if he'd just imagined the whole thing, and what he really saw was the guards sleeping in an unorthodox place, possibly from exhaustion.

No, just them being asleep didn't help anything.

He needed them closer, within arm's reach, so he could grab the keys.

Maybe the fox could do it, he thought, sliding hands down the bars. Bite properly through the iron just enough to squeeze through, and then scoot over.

Somehow break past that ten metre spiritual barrier thing he was on about.

And then they could go to the lake and...wade into the soothing water...with the annoying kunoichi as their hostage...and Aya in a revealing kosode, telling us to hurry cos there wasn't much time, the guards would-

His eyes shot open again, an instinctive *wah* half a second behind.

'Not so loud,' said Aya, standing next to a now very open cell door, dressed not in revealing kosode but a servant's yukata, with the Suwa mermaid emblem stitched onto the right breast.

He blinked furiously, grinding knuckles into his eye sockets.

'It's okay, it's really me.'

'Can't be...'

'Not a dream.'

'How...'

'I'll tell you later, when we've escaped. Quickly, wake up the others.'

Akira caught the words, understood what had been said, but still didn't move an inch. Luckily, Miho had heard their exchange and was now going through the same routine the ashigaru had just slumbered through, while Daiki and the eight-tailed fox were already on their feet, apparently not surprised at all.

‘I brought some servant yukatas for you to wear,’ Aya continued, pointing at the two robes on the floor.

‘There’s three of us,’ said Miho, confused.

‘It’s all I could find. Besides, Akira’s too fierce to be a servant. And now that I see his current mood, Daiki too.’ She stepped aside, letting an ecstatic Akira out of the cell, then told him to get off when he pulled her into a bear hug and declared her a ludicrous dungeon goddess. ‘Both of you can put on the guard uniforms. Assuming they fit.’

‘Ah, great idea. And my first act as dungeon security...will be to take care of the trash.’

On the last word, he turned to face Misora, who was watching from her own bars with a blank expression as the whole adjacent cell of to-the-death adversaries emptied out into the corridor, then a slightly less blank expression as Akira rushed up to one of the guards and came back twenty seconds later with a green katana gripped in his claw.

‘Coward,’ she said, spitting on the floor by his feet.

‘Tactician,’ he corrected, taking the keys from a puzzled-looking Aya and opening the cell door.

‘We’re taking her with us?’ asked Miho, equally confused.

‘Go down there, get the yukatas on,’ Akira ordered, pointing with the katana to the end of the corridor.

‘Who is she?’ asked Aya, eyes on both the blade and the serene female face just beyond it.

‘I’ll be there in a second.’

The ashigaru glanced at the fox, hoping for some back-up, a comrade in that which had to be done, the abject, bloody stuff, but the silly creature was too busy scanning Aya’s legs. No, not scanning, sniffing them.

Aya half-noticed and stepped away, her attention quickly shifting back to the ashigaru she’d just rescued advancing into the cell, with the green katana aimed diagonally at the poor, unarmed woman crawling desperately back towards the far wall.

‘Wait, what are you doing?’ said Miho, seemingly figuring out what was about to happen and following Akira into the cell.

‘Removing a threat.’

‘You can’t do that, she’s...’

‘...a ruthless assassin.’

‘...unarmed. Akira, please, I saved your life, you owe me...don’t hurt her.’

‘Gotta be done. Now back off, tadpole.’

The order was clear enough, delivered with no compassion whatsoever, yet it wasn’t enough as Miho darted round the side of the

ashigaru and placed himself directly between Misora and the tip of the katana.

It was a bold move, and a brief one, as Akira lowered the weapon and elbowed Miho in the side of the head. Then grabbed him by the arm and threw him on the stone floor.

‘Doing us both a favour here,’ he growled more than spoke, turning back to the target and growling for real as now there were two obstacles in the way, Aya and that fucking mage.

‘You can’t kill someone who just saved your life,’ said the ludicrous dungeon goddess, pinching the sleeve of Daiki’s yukata and shifting him slightly in front of her...just in case Akira could in fact do that.

‘It’s not at all necessary,’ added the mage, accepting Aya’s nudge.

Akira groaned, almost growled, and jabbed his green katana at the air to the side. ‘Idiots. Naïve fucking-...she’ll kill us all if she ever gets out of here.’

‘We’ll all be long gone by then.’

‘Better to be sure of it.’

‘No, it isn’t.’ Daiki took a breath, drifted into a series of rhythmic head dips that the temple had taught him long ago, then reached his hand slowly out towards the tip of the katana. ‘Let it go, Akira...’

Prone against the wall, Misora watched the scene play out, vetoing her plan to win over the boy, slowly loosening her fist and letting the dust from the floor spill back out, smiling internally as the ashigaru acquiesced to the mage's ridiculous zen ploy, pulled back his oddly-green katana into a resting position, shouted and cursed at the walls, and, finally, stormed out of the cell in irritated defeat.

'Sorry about that,' said Aya, doing the tiniest of nods at the woman she didn't even know, then saying sorry again as Akira locked the cell door behind them.

'Good luck,' added Miho, slipping into the servant's yukata, smiling like a loon when Misora started chuckling and shaking her head in theatrical disbelief at him.

'You're all a bunch of fucking rabbits,' said Akira through the most gritted of all teeth, grabbing both Aya and Miho by the sleeves and dragging them off down the corridor.

'Not a dungeon goddess anymore,' mumbled Aya.

'And I'm gonna remind all of you of this moment when that psychopath escapes and corners us somewhere. Well done, you let her live. Good job. Thanks for getting us killed so pointlessly.'

Letting go of their arms, Akira took the uniform that the fox had already removed from the guard's body and began roughly putting it on.

‘Don’t suppose there’s a quiet way out of this place,’ muttered Daiki, pulling on the other guard’s outfit, the sleeves a little short on the arms.

‘Actually, as the two of you are dressed as castle security,’ started the fox, putting its claw against a row of shadowy white teeth.

‘Wah, there’s no way you can possibly know this castle.’

‘I may have visited a few times before.’

‘Huh? When?’

The fox ignored Daiki’s questions, as well as his mildly alarmed expression, and focused on the door panel ahead. ‘There’s a secret passage behind one of the banners in the *ni-no-maru*, leads down and out to the supply gate. If we move quickly-’

‘Lead the way, comrade,’ finished Akira, taking a last look down at the cells, shaking his head at Misora’s face between the iron bars, then re-focusing on Miho and Aya who, for some reason, were peeking into the village boy’s travel bag. ‘You two, bleeding heart ninja lovers...stop whispering, move it.’

‘Just checking that my rock’s still here,’ answered Miho, pulling out said rock and holding it up like it was Queen Himiko’s crown itself.

‘Great, beautiful, now put it back and get over here. Might still be some guards in the next corridor.’

Nodding at the ashigaru, the fox slid open the wooden door and peeked out into the next corridor. Then came back and gave the signal that everyone assumed was demon code for *let's go*.

‘No guards?’ asked Akira, surprised.

‘Only the invisible ones.’

‘You’re sure they’re not hiding behind something?’

‘Come on, follow me. And try to keep up, I scurry fast.’

The five of them shuffled out...got about three metres down the beautifully wooden corridor...then shuffled quickly back into the dingy dungeon as Misora’s piercing scream of *Guards* bounced off the walls.

‘*Kuso*,’ shouted Akira, taking out the green katana, pausing, handing it to Aya with another *kuso*, taking the cell keys, then marching down the corridor slope and socking Misora in the temple just as she was letting out her fifth yell.

The kunoichi fell back, eyes switched off, deathly silent.

‘Really gonna regret this,’ Akira muttered, closing the cell door again and turning the key in the lock.

‘Don’t think anyone heard her,’ said Miho, as Akira re-joined them on the tatami platform.

‘Ah, they heard...and probably thought it was torture noise.’

‘Or aggressive sex,’ countered Daiki, mouthing a quick *sorry* to Miho and Aya, who just stared back him, puzzled.

‘Yeah, now about this secret passage...’

The fox nodded at Akira and slid the door panel open again. Checked for invisible guards. Then gave the one paw signal to move out.



CHAPTER 42

CASTLE OF MANY TRICKS

‘Come on, out you come. Don’t be shy. Noisy man has gone, just me here now. No need to be scared of anything or-’

The guard jumped, his finger scraping against the side of the wall-crack as a scream careened out of Lord Jun’ya’s chamber and down through the length of the corridor.

‘*Kuso*...no numbing herbs?’

The scream dissipated, scattered out over the castle grounds for other guards to gulp at.

Pulling his finger out from behind the wooden strut, the guard did a quick check for cuts, weathered another scream from the hell room, then pushed it cautiously back in.

‘Don’t pay any attention to that...just random noises.’

Another scream broke out, this one much more guttural.

‘Nothing to be frightened of.’

Followed by the crashing of something, glass or ceramics, presumably on the non-tatami part of the Suwa General’s floor.

‘Come on, little one, where are you? Hiding further up again? There’s no need for all that, it’s just my finger. Nibble on it if you like, I don’t mind.’

And, finally, a sound that started as a scream then rapidly degraded into a death wail.

‘Yes, I know, I know...it’s not usually this loud. But it’s okay, it’s nothing to do with you or me. We’re perfectly safe out here in the-’

The guard jerked his head upwards, almost twisting his finger clean off as he turned to see who was making the heavy footstep sounds behind him. ‘Hey, where you lot off to? This is Lord Jun’ya’s private area.’

Akira carried on one extra step past the guard, who rose up fast, yet, luckily, was either too lax or too dense to reach for his katana.

‘We were ordered to come up here,’ he replied, crafting an impatient tone, irritable even.

‘By an idiot, no doubt. No, Lord Jun’ya already has his snack for the night. He won’t need another.’ The guard shifted eyes left, studying the smiling figure of Miho in his servant’s yukata, then moved on to the po-faced canvas that was Aya’s face and frowned. ‘Why is she wearing that?’

‘That...’ started Akira, quickly trying to figure out what the problem was, and blanking almost immediately.

‘Uniform shortage,’ cut in Daiki, pointing at the Suwa mermaid emblem on the breast of Aya’s yukata.

‘Wah, what’s all that red and white stuff in your hair?’

‘Festivities. Respect to the local shrine.’

‘Braided in by a palak monk,’ added Akira, getting his wits back and running a slightly patronising show-finger through Daiki’s red beads.

The guard shrugged, then straightened up as the door panel at the end of the corridor slid open and a wooden trolley was wheeled out.

‘Like I said, Lord Jun’ya has already been served tonight.’

‘Understood,’ replied Akira, taking his fingers away from Daiki’s hair, and then blowing out morgue-in-Hell-Town breath as the trolley passed by, the thing laid out on top of it only barely recognisable as human.

Or ex-human.

Limbs distorted, dark red patches all over the torso, facial expression similar to one of those Portuguese God paintings he’d seen in a back-alley izakaya one time.

Gods, it was obscene...ethereal...vicious...the wounds borderline impossible.

He coughed, disguising a sudden urge to retch.

What the hell kind of thing would do that, or even could do that?

A human?

The Suwa General’s pet tengu?

‘Well?’ prompted the guard, staring at the four statues.

‘Must be mixed communications,’ Akira responded, along with a final cough, glancing left at a pale-looking Miho, Daiki with his eyes closed, and a completely nonplussed Aya, who either didn’t see the trolley horror or had some Kyushu meditation trick up her yukata sleeve to avoid contemplating it.

‘And?’

‘We’ll go back down, return the servants.’

The guard breathed out longer than was necessary and then did it again, shaking his head as the four incompetents turned and walked incredibly stiffly back down the corridor.

‘Bunch of drunks,’ he muttered, bending down to the crack in the wall and re-inserting his finger. ‘Don’t blame you for hiding when that’s what’s lurking about. Stupid peanut brains. But it’s okay, they’re gone now. Just me and my finger. Want a little nibble?’

~~~

‘I fucking knew going up was the wrong way...’

‘That corpse...’

‘...and to the Suwa General’s chambers. What the hell was that all about?’

‘...the face...’

‘Some kind of pre-arranged trap? A suicide run?’

‘...not even human.’

‘Well, fox, you gonna explain yourself or not?’

Akira waited until they were safely through the tiny courtyard and into another *maru*, made sure there were no signs of any guards, then grabbed the red and white beads on Daiki’s head and started tugging aggressively, only letting go when they decided to glow silver. The mage himself didn’t seem to notice, still muttering to himself about the dark patches on the body, the look on the poor man’s face...

‘Stop moaning, get back up there,’ barked the fox, the words coming out milliseconds before its physical form materialised.

‘You tricked us, you little rat.’

‘Quick, before they realise we’ve escaped.’

‘You said it was the way out.’

‘Yes, yes, the window. We go in, kill the Suwa General pretending to be Lord Jun’ya, climb down the wall to the rear courtyard, escape through the supply gate. Now, get your katanas out and get back up those stairs, stab that weird guard, move, go, come on.’

‘This fox is insane,’ said Aya, peeking back through the door to the previous courtyard, and breathing out in relief.

‘Keep out of this, liar, or I’ll fix you too.’

‘Hey,’ said Miho, instinctively stepping in front of Aya and getting a kick in the shin from the fox as a reward. ‘Can we just go out a normal way, get away from this castle?’

‘Excellent idea,’ replied Akira, gesturing them forward through the corridor, pointing at an open doorway at the far end.

‘That’s the way out?’

‘In a modern castle, who fucking knows? But there’s a good a chance as any.’

‘Long as it doesn’t take us back to that trolley,’ muttered Daiki, following the ashigaru along the wooden walls.

The fox made a hissing sound and, when that didn’t stop anyone, clacked its nails against one of the struts. ‘Stop, stop, stop, stop...I’m so close. Right up those stairs. Come on. Get back here.’

‘Right up those stairs to suicide.’

‘Daiki...listen, all you have to do is get me close, I’ll do the rest. You don’t have to do anything violent. Daiki...’

The mage blinked, half-hearing his name.

‘Yes, you...wake up. What’s wrong with your brain?’

‘That boy...the trolley...’

‘Exactly, it’s terrible, this fake Suwa General’s a monster, sucks them dry, no feelings or remorse whatsoever. That’s why he’s on the

list, see. Cos he's evil, wicked. And that's also why we have to get back up there and kill him.'

'Kill?'

'Won't be easy, but if you guys can pull a convincing enough distraction.' The fox paused, studying the shrinking backs of his audience, the ashigaru almost at the next courtyard. 'I mean, it won't be easy for me either. This Jjanna demon's a tough character, experienced, vicious, but not unbeatable. If we work as a team. You...Miho. You're a moral person, aren't you? Yes, I've seen it, you protected that ninja wretch in the dungeon. You can't let a monster like this Jjanna...this pretend Suwa General...just get away with such horror. And you...err...'

'Liar?' finished Aya, raising an eyebrow.

'You can be useful too. Assuming you don't want me to tell them how you knocked out those guards.'

'Huh? Poison. I told you that already.'

'Delivered how? In what form?'

Miho frowned, nudging Aya in the side. 'What's he talking about?'

'Fresh demon bullshit,' answered Akira, taking Miho and Aya once again by the yukata sleeves and pushing them out like wasteland bulls into the new courtyard. Then turning back to Daiki and tapping his beads. 'If I were you, I'd cut this trash off. No more headaches.'

‘Cut them-...you ignorant little-’ the fox started to yell, but it was too late, the ashigaru had already caught up to Miho and Aya, and even worse, Daiki was right behind him.

There wasn’t much it could do, but the fox folded both arms and crossed all eight tails anyway, stubbornly holding its ground until ten metres had been covered and the silvery stream of particles started to appear, the gravitational pull sucking the irate demon towards its fleeing vassal and, with a final popping noise, back into the beads.



During Heian times, castles had been built for ceremony, for aristocrats to wander around pretty gardens in designer robes and point at random koi in the ponds, then to yawn and slip their arm around a concubine, or servant boy, and say, ‘hey, I know a great place where we can view the moon tonight.’

When the Kamakura bakufu took the reins, castles were dug into the sides of mountains and used as rudimentary intimidation structures. Which worked okay, until one guard dropped a loose cigarette and the whole edifice burnt down.

By the time the Sengoku era arrived, however, wood had improved and castle design became a hundred times more elaborate...devious even. Courtyards within courtyards, trick courtyards, blind alleys, rivers blocking off access to other courtyards, signs giving false directions, samurai dressed as trees, trees decorated as samurai, fake gates, fake daimyō.



In short, maze warfare.

And Suwa Castle stood as one of the exemplars.

Which was why, after crossing through a courtyard and its connecting stone garden, Akira found himself at the end of a tree-covered path, hacking at a wall that hadn't been visible when they'd first come out.

And then, ten minutes after that, why Miho was asking out loud how anyone could be weird enough to put a river in this part of the castle.

Why Aya punched down a *SUPPLY GATE – 10 METRES* sign.

Why Daiki suggested they were probably in Hell.

And why, after another five courtyards of wrong turns and abject confusion, all four escapees were half tempted to try the eight-tailed fox's plan and get out the demon suicide way instead.

But then the fox appeared, with an insanely condescending grin on its face, and they instantly changed their mind, heading into what Akira promised had to be the *maru* closest to the supply gate.

'Don't know how many more times we can pull off our lost guards routine,' said Daiki, stopping behind Akira as he prodded the door leading outside.

'This one's it,' replied Akira, 'I'm certain of it.'

‘And if it isn’t?’ asked Aya, still rubbing scratch marks from the branches they’d traipsed through two courtyards earlier.

‘Then we call it a night and retire to our dungeon.’

‘Very funny.’

‘It looks clear out there,’ said Miho, poking his head out the gap in the door panel.

‘No guards?’

‘Not within the first five metres.’

‘Great, then let’s go. Miho, Aya, you two first.’

‘Again?’

‘Servants are less noticeable.’

‘Right,’ muttered Aya, nudging Miho a little bit ahead, then taking up position almost behind him.

‘He wants to use you as human shields,’ said the fox, reappearing by her feet. ‘Which is despicable. And something I would never do.’

‘Shut up, fat rat,’ barked Akira, attempting a swipe at the top of the fox’s head and missing by several inches.

‘Fat?’

‘Are you coming or not?’ hissed Aya, turning back.

No one replied, which she took as a yes.

Apart from the fox, who was looking at its waist, using paws to measure from side to the other.

‘Normal-sized,’ it muttered to chilly night air, as the others slowly, cautiously shuffled forwards.

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Outside, in what they realised by the mountain treeline was the rear courtyard, things were still, visibly, very much post-festival.

Two low-energy guards on the far gate, counting creases in each other’s uniforms, another guard comatose in the reserve water trough, somehow not drowning himself, and a male servant either sewing up a tear on another male servant’s yukata pants or surreptitiously sucking him off.

As the four escapees, plus a still moaning fox, got closer, they realised it was the latter. Daiki coughed slightly, hoping the sucker would stop and maybe switch to him instead, but that thought died quickly as the image of the drained corpse from upstairs popped yet again into his head, and...that was that.

‘Feel ill,’ he said, looking away from the two guards and focusing on the mountains in the distance, beyond the castle wall.

‘Not the trolley thing again.’

‘I can’t stop thinking about it.’

‘Just do what I said before,’ whispered Akira, patting him on the shoulder, ‘think of it as a life-sized doll.’

‘It’s just-...I’ve never seen a face so...deranged.’

‘Hey, can we not talk about that right now?’ asked Miho, pointing at the supply gate coming up ahead.

‘Wah, fantastic,’ answered the fox, stepping over towards the wall. ‘The ashigaru brainbox has just led us round in a complete circle.’

‘What?’

‘Here...this wall is the other side of the fake General’s maru. Which is good news as it means we can climb up, sneak in through the window, kill the Jjanna psychopath, climb back down, escape. Simple as crossing a dried-out moon canal.’

‘No one’s listening, fox.’

‘Ah, but you will, ashigaru, when I mention the reward.’ The fox stiffened, all eight tails shooting up in solidarity. ‘Wait, that’s it...why didn’t I do this earlier? You’re a money whore, aren’t you?’

‘Not if I have to commit suicide to get it.’

‘Yes, the money from my world, a decent amount, but converted to your baby coins, a small fortune. What do you say, ashigaru...Akira-San? Me and you, partners in justice, comrades in demon slaying. Deal?’

Akira turned to Daiki, asking the hair beads directly. ‘Does it ever shut up?’

Still in a self-directed haze, the mage stared back at Akira's neck, muttering that the castle could be cursed.

‘Okay...this is getting exhausting.’

‘Akira,’ whispered Miho, prodding the ashigaru in the back. ‘The guards. They’re looking at us.’

‘Staring? Right now?’

‘Yes.’

Raising his left hand, Akira cuffed Miho on the side of the head and shouted at him to know his place.

‘Wah, what was that for?’

‘Silence...servant.’

Turning to the guards, who had both abandoned their crease-counting game and were, as Miho had correctly stated, staring intently at the four strangers stood in front of them as if they were a *spot the difference* sketch, Akira gave a curt, professional nod, and then added a side grunt that, with luck, would pass as a commanding version of *hello*.

‘Who are you?’ the shorter one asked, hand creeping towards his katana grip.

‘Temporary hires, for the festival.’

‘It’s not end of shift yet.’

‘For us it is. We got let off early.’

The taller guard stepped forward, waving a hand in front of Daiki's face. 'What's up with this one?'

'Exhaustion,' replied Akira, raising his voice to try and break through the hypnotic-field enveloping Daiki's brain.

'Tired,' the mage drawled, half coming round.

'This one looks quite agile...how much?'

Akira turned, coughing when he saw the shorter guard with his hand on Aya's shoulder. 'Not for sale.'

'Ten *mon* for five minutes behind the gate there.'

'Sleazy wretch,' mumbled Aya, shrugging his hand off and grabbing Miho's bag as a makeshift weapon.

'What did you say, witch?'

'That's my sister,' blurted out Akira, moving across to Aya's side and using his left hand to pinch her on the waist. 'You wanna fuck her, you have to marry her afterwards.'

'Wah, forget it then. She's not that agile.'

'Yes, I know. Sadly, she's all I've got. Hence the marriage condition.'

Aya used her own hand to pinch back, twisting Akira's skin a little and making him eke out another grunt.

'Wait a second...who exactly let you off early?' asked the taller guard, now scrutinising Daiki's beads.

‘The General, of course.’

‘You mean Lord?’

‘Yeah, Lord General. Upstairs...in that chamber.’ Akira aimed a tentative arm at the castle, unsure if he was getting the right place.

‘One of those chambers.’

‘Ah, Lord Tsukamoto.’

‘Yeah...him.’

The taller guard exchanged looks with his comrade and then both lowered hands to their katana grips.

‘No...not Tsukamoto, that guy,’ spluttered Akira, realising something had gone wrong, ‘...walking past the gate, right there.’

‘What?’

‘Who? Where?’

‘Wah, he looks really pissed off.’

Neither of the guards really wanted to turn and look, they knew the ruse well, but at the same time, some atavistic part of their psyche couldn’t resist, and with the left side of their brain screaming *nooooo*, they both edged their shoulders round and looked at the space through the gap in the supply gate.

And instantly realised they’d messed up.

‘Thank you,’ said Akira, slicing the calf of the shorter guard first, then redirecting quickly and running half a green katana through the

gut of the other. Both men fell, one dead, the other in shock, and then wailing like a child as Akira stepped closer and stabbed him clean through the neck.

‘Wah, you didn’t have to-...’ Miho protested, but was quickly told to stop yapping and start running as the two servants by the far wall had stopped fucking each other and were now yelling at more guards to come and do something.

To the Suwa Clan’s credit, the response was fast, four guards rushing out from another maru, three of them fully dressed, the other shirtless with his chest painted green.

However, when they reached the supply gate, their two clanmates were dead, and the intruders had already fled, absorbed into the darkness of the surrounding mountain trees.

‘Get the General,’ said the shirtless one, looking up with a nervous intake of breath at the honmaru moon-viewing balcony, and then waving awkwardly as he saw Lord Jun’ya himself standing there, eyes fixed blankly on the murder scene, mouth and cheeks dripping viscus blue fluid.

CHAPTER 43

DIDN'T NEED THAT ARM ANYWAY



To drop.

Or not.

To drop.

Or not.

To drop.

Atta Noe paused, the vial in her hand tilted like a snapped human head, the pale green liquid inside on the verge of spilling out.

‘You know, don’t you?’ she whispered to the spider that was also paused, halfway across the futon that she had no use for. That had been placed there to taunt her. *Acquiesce or I’m taking you under the covers.* Typical child daimyō logic.

The spider maintained its frozen state, clearly aware of the threat hovering above.

To move.

Or not.

To die at the hands of this giant god formation.

Or not.

‘Don’t worry, little one,’ Atta Noe said finally, putting the lid back on the vial and sliding it under her yukata sleeve, then cocooning it in lilac swirls as she transferred herself in one swift, hazy movement onto the tatami. ‘It’s needed elsewhere.’

She looked down at her box, picturing it in a grander room. Inside the honmaru. Next to the erratic coward Imagawa, no doubt.

Or, if the young Sakai wretch got his way, out on that shabby little Kaji island.

Pushed to the bottom of the sea.

Lost. Forgotten.

Water-logged.

There were footsteps in the passageway, something being knocked over, followed by one of the drunk louts blurting out, ‘it’s okay, we’re going in there anyway.’

Atta Noe straightened up, staying instinctively close to her box.

Two juvenile amoebas, she thought, hearing the Sakai wretch give a hushed reply. Come to play with their self-claimed toy.

Okay, then, little ones.

Three can play that game.

She counted out another five seconds, betting with herself that the Sakai lord would be the one to slide open the door panel, and she was quickly proven right. In fact, he pulled it open so hard and fast that it

whacked against the wall frame, causing a noise that half the castle must've heard.

‘Knock, knock...’ Tadachika blurted out drunkenly, stumbling into her chamber and looking around at the décor as if it were his first time seeing it. ‘Wah, this place looks like shit. Who’s the architect? Let’s cut off his talentless, ugly head. Make sure he bleeds enough to...scare the fool into...not do it again...yeah.’

The sentence was ended with a cough, then a hacking noise as the young daimyō tried to clear stubborn phlegm from the back of his throat.

Outside, the second toy player was busy running his paws over a fallen salt sack, shouting into the room that it felt like his favourite concubine’s tits.

‘Get in here, you idiot,’ Tadachika yelled back, finishing up the throat routine, pulling down the creases on his shōchū-stained yukata, then slowly moving eyes around the chamber until they rested on the white and purple yukata of Atta Noe. ‘We are mind-numbing our entertainment.’

Smirking at the words, Atta Noe put eyes on the space just to the side of Tadachika’s head. ‘You are drunk, human.’

‘Ha, you spoke...Gods on all the farms...I just told Yosh you’d do the silent act all night. After the dinner tension awkward thing...yes, I do remember it, my cup, slicing it like a melon

thing...but that's the past stuff...all forgotten. I am reborn and revived...ready to merge with the colour purple...my colour purple...no, my *sweet* colour purple, if that's the kind of talk you're after? Is it?'

'It is late, I will rest now.'

'Wah, the walls...like a prison cell,' slurred Tadachika's friend, stepping in exaggerated astronaut steps onto the tatami. 'Pretty bleak place to fuck...if she doesn't swirl all that purple shit around...like at the dinner thing before...'

'Stop spinning so much,' replied the Sakai daimyō, reaching over and grabbing at the air near his friend's yukata sleeve. 'Atta Noe...this is one of my loyal retainers, Yoshihiro...of the nearby province clan.'

'Retainer? Making me sound like a prop. I'm daimyō of the only clan with-...' The young drunk stopped, his face finally staying still long enough to take in the form of the purple demon about a metre in front of him. 'Gods in a see-through kosode, your face...even more beautiful than two hours ago...the banquet...weird cliffside thing...but that table was really long and you were all the way on the other end and...wah, you're really letting me have her first?'

Tadachika nodded with his eyes closed, then reopened and studied the reaction of his demon advisor.

Perhaps it was the environment, the confines of both the room and Nishio Castle, but she did not appear enthused at the prospect of frenetic, clumsy daimyō sex.

If anything, she looked spiteful. Annoyed.

But that couldn't be right, he thought, pushing his loyal friend and retainer, Yoshihiro, over to the untouched futon. He already said he'd forgiven her for the banquet insults, the obliterated cup, and as soon as he was sure her body wouldn't melt his dick off if he put it inside her, he'd get rid of Yoshihiro and give her at least three hours of continuous pleasure play. Cos he was a good guy at heart, and there was nothing worse than drilling a concubine who made those fake moaning noises...or the ones who just lay there and took it. No, he was a Heian-era guy in that sense, a romantic who was perfectly willing to go down on his lovers as long as they were sucking him off at the same time.

Would she suck him off?

Did she have the teeth for it? And down below...was there a triangle patch of purple pubic hair? Or faint swirls giving her cunt a misty façade? Did her body-forming powers make it possible to change the size of her breasts at will, to match his desires?

Would she get bored of him afterwards?

Depressed?

Did she understand that this was just a game he was playing, not the way he really wanted to-

Tadachika blinked, realising his balance was a bit off and readjusting. Wait, the room had changed. Yoshihiro was away on the futon, topless, tugging on the yukata belt of Atta Noe, ordering her to whip them out, and she was staring back at him, right in the eye, mouthing something...

‘The futon, you fucking mutt,’ he commanded, tilting his head to check if the demon’s yukata was coming off. ‘Let her come to you.’

‘I’m trying...but she won’t budge...won’t show me the goods.’

‘The futon.’

‘It’s like it’s nailed on or-’

‘Now.’

The tone sailed out strident and utterly useless as Yoshihiro was too drunk to understand anything except the yukata he was trying to peel off, and the odd thing was that the demon witch hadn’t said no yet, or tried to resist, or given a warning that she’d kill him if he persisted, which, in his drunk mind, meant she liked him, and deep down wanted him to-

His thoughts fractured, the yukata of his target dissipating into a purple blur, his right shoulder feeling oddly lighter.

‘Wah...’ he said, staring moon-eyed as Atta Noe’s face reformed, then said *wah* again as he looked down at the spot where his right arm used to be.

‘Try the floor,’ the purple demon said softly, gesturing downwards with a dip of her head.

Yoshihiro followed the direction and squinted at the fleshy thing leaking blood all over the tatami.

The fleshy thing that looked identical to his arm.

Right down to the soup stain on his yukata sleeve.

‘But that’s...’ he started, running through all possibilities until his brain finally burst through the drunk barrier and told him to start shrieking in pain.

And that’s what he did, clutching the stump that was left, then switching quickly to Atta Noe’s throat.

‘If only you weren’t you,’ she replied, blank as a Saitama landscape, the flesh on her own hand degrading into purple muons and up quarks and swarming forward.

‘Cryptic fucking witch...’ Yoshihiro spat out, the sound of the last word mixing with the crack of his skull hitting a wooden slat on the floor.

Returning her hand to human form, Atta Noe took a step back from the stream of blood seeping out from the fresh corpse and then straightened up, refocusing on Tadachika.

Unsurprisingly, his face was still stuck, the shōchū-soaked brain trying to piece the arm to the head to the blood lake to the friend to the room to the sexual molestation of a minute earlier.

But then something clicked.

Reality broke in.

And he laughed.

Pointed at the head of his loyal retainer, Yoshihiro, and laughed. With coughing sounds and tears.

‘Are you mad?’ asked Atta Noe, keeping her arms guarded.

‘His arm...the head...’

‘It was deserved.’

‘...they’re on the floor. Sitting there. Separate. On the floor. Wah, just...his face...when you cut off the arm, no warning...the gormless look on it.’

‘I do not give warnings.’

Tadachika moved to the futon and collapsed down, laughing into the bedding for another minute, two minutes until he finally got his wits back and stopped. Then propped himself up on his elbow, looked over at his friend’s head on the floor and started laughing again.

‘If you’re done with your games,’ Atta Noe said, stepping towards the edge of the futon.

‘No, no...it’s too much.’

‘It is late.’

‘You killed him. Just like that. My loyal retainer...annoying *kasu*...I told you that...big consequences...and you killed him.’

‘I am not a toy.’

Tadachika turned onto his back and waited for the laughter to splutter out, then stared up at his purple nemesis. Stared for a long time. Until it morphed into full on surveillance.

‘What?’

‘You are insane.’

‘He irritated me.’

‘Beautifully, recklessly insane.’

Atta Noe flinched, pivoting towards the door panel to check on any incoming guards.

‘Wah, my head is spinning...too stationary,’ muttered Tadachika, pulling himself up into a sitting position.

‘Try a stroll by the cliff.’

He rubbed his head, laughing at the remark. Then asked if a horse was nearby when he heard loud footsteps hurrying down the passageway.

‘Get up,’ Atta Noe barked, grabbing him by the sleeve and pulling him into an awkward bear hug just as the slightly sweaty figure of Gen’ichiro appeared in the doorway.

Being relatively sober didn't help much as it still took several seconds to process the scene in front of him – the head, the arm, the expanding pool of blood, the hugging enemies – and when he finally got the whole picture, all he could say was *how?*

‘The man went crazy, attacked us both,’ answered Atta Noe, pulling Tadachika back by the hair and puppeting a nod.

‘You killed him?’

‘No, my fault,’ cut in Tadachika, pulling himself out of the purple demon's hair grip. ‘I wanted to fuck her, tested the waters first, Yosh got ahead of himself, bit of yukata tugging, dead. *Kuso*, my head...like a kappa's dancing in there or-...’

‘What?’

‘I really need to walk a bit. By the cliff.’ He glanced at Atta Noe, smirking, then leaned forward and kissed her on the shoulder.

‘Respect kiss only. Don't slice.’

‘This is the young Lord Soto,’ said Gen'ichiro, approaching the bloody mess on the floor, half crouching to get a better view, then thinking better of it. ‘What are you going to tell his clan?’

‘Ah, anything. Slipped on a twig, landed on his own katana. Little runt only had about ten men anyway. No natural resources or road control.’ Tadachika stopped, closing his eyes and hitting the side of his temple hard with the palm. ‘What are you doing here, Gen? You heard the screams?’

Gen'ichiro stared down at the corpse, then up at his daimyō, confused.

‘Do you have something to tell us?’ asked Atta Noe, releasing her grip on Tadachika...and then grabbing him again when he started to wobble.

‘Sorry, I forgot. The daimyō...Imagawa...Lord Imagawa. He wants to see you both in the hundred-mat-room.’

‘Who?’

Atta Noe shifted her head, moving away from Tadachika's erratic head swaying. ‘He wants to see us now, tonight?’

‘Yes. Within the hour.’

‘What are you saying?’ demanded the Sakai lord, trying and failing to straighten himself out. ‘Tonight? About what issue?’

‘He did not say.’

‘*Kuso*...doesn't that man-child have a concubine to play with? It's almost one in the morning.’

‘When did he tell you this?’ asked Atta Noe, stepping around the blood leaking from young Lord Soto's head.

‘About fifteen minutes ago. I came straight away, but it is a long walk down to this...chamber.’

‘The hundred mat room...I believe that is within my range.’

Gen'ichiro moved towards the box, also manoeuvring around and between the various blood patches. 'I can assist, if you require it?'

'Unnecessary. I have explored the castle. There is only one room on the western side of the grounds that is beyond me. And it did not have a hundred tatami mats.'

'Can't believe this is happening,' moaned Tadachika, walking a full lap of the chamber, pausing by the futon, walking another lap, treading his zori in some of the blood before planting himself in front of Atta Noe. 'One in the fucking morning. Like this. Gods, you'll have to do all the talking. Intervene if I start mumbling or vomiting...'

'I will do no such thing.'

'Teamwork, that's the way through it. Me and you. Lord Sakai and the purple assassin queen. Huh, what did you say? No help?'

'You have forty minutes to sober up.'

'Wah, some advisor. Fine. Sober up then. How?'

Before the syllable was out, an ice-cold hand had already struck him across the cheek.

'Wah, I meant water or herbs...not skin.'

Atta Noe nodded and slapped him again, this one with the back of her hand.

'Stop...hitting...me. Gods on a-'

‘Fine. Stay drunk then.’

Tadachika rubbed his cheek and looked over at a very stoic Gen’ichiro...then down at the remains of his loyal retainer, Lord Soto the gormless.

And laughed again.

Then coughed.

‘Okay. One more slap. Then water. Agreed?’

Atta Noe answered with another swipe to the cheek.

‘But only cos I’m drunk. You do this kind of thing tomorrow and I’ll...’

‘Slip on a twig?’

‘...do something...daimyō related. Okay?’

Atta Noe put a fingernail on Tadachika’s upper arm and ran a curved line across, smiling.

‘I’ll take that as agreement. Right. Where’s that fucking water?’

liar liar liar



$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$

CHAPTER 44

ACID INTERROGATION

‘Are you drunk?’

Lord Jun’ya flinched, seemingly annoyed at the air in front of him. Then turned his head to the guard with the vial of mysterious liquid, checking to see if his hand was shaking.

‘Not him, you,’ corrected Misora, shifting her arm as much as she could within the wooden wedge restraints, trying to gesture towards the blue stains on the Suwa General’s chin.

Curious, the guard with the vial followed her clumsy pointing.

As did the two other guards at the cell door.

‘What was it, grape and shōchū?’ continued Misora, one eye on the vial. ‘Or one of those new muscle building things? Bit of blueberry, bit of Indian herb, lot of desperation...’

One of the guards at the back chuckled, quickly morphing it into a cough when the neighbouring guard elbowed him in the hip.

‘Enough distractions,’ whispered Lord Jun’ya, running a fingernail along his own chin, possibly aware of the faint shade of indigo it was displaying. ‘How did they escape? The truth, this time.’

‘We’ve just been through all that.’

‘Yes, with lies.’

Misora sucked in air and dust, held it, blew it back in the Suwa General's face. 'There was a young girl, she appeared by the cells, somehow had the key and let them all out. And because you're still busy messing around in here, with me, they'll probably stay out forever.'

Lord Jun'ya bent down and, without ceremony or restraint, grabbed Misora by the cheek. 'Do you wish to have your skin ripped off? Melted?'

'A young girl. Appeared by the cells. Had the key. Let them out.'

'Pedant...'

'It's the truth.'

Releasing her cheek with a reverse pinch and rising back up, Lord Jun'ya flicked a hand at the guard nearby, sending him in as a replacement. 'A few drops on her fighting hand.'

The guard nodded...then paused, switching eyes between both of Misora's wrists trapped in the wooden block [a new device, just imported from China].

'Right hand,' clarified the Suwa General, adding ominous synth as he breathed out. Or *frustration synth* and ominous because of that.

'Yes, General,' replied the guard, seizing Misora's good hand [and the wooden block] and tilting the vial over the back of it.

'This is completely unnecessary,' said Misora, eyes watching the rim of what she suspected was an acid delivery system, possibly one

of those new European things. ‘You’re a seasoned interrogator, you must know by the tone of my voice that I’m telling the truth.’

The guard paused, waiting for a second confirmation.

‘Conditions must be set,’ answered Lord Jun’ya, raising his own right hand, dropping down a finger at a time...then dropping the final one with a flourish.

‘Wait...there’s no need, I just-...

The last half of Misora’s sentence dissipated into a muzzled moan as three drops from the vial landed on her hand, instantly creating a sizzling smoke effect. And then the faint aroma of burning flesh.

‘... ..’ she slurred in Kai Province slang.

‘Now that we understand the limits, let us try again.’ Lord Jun’ya stepped forward, putting a hand on the guard’s shoulder, who carefully stood back up with both eyes and both hands fixed rigidly to the vial. ‘How did the prisoners escape?’

‘You could’ve used my other hand.’

‘Did the guards help them?’

‘Now I can’t eat properly. Or drink. Or throw stones in the river. Or at your head.’

‘Did they have a secret tool, hidden?’

‘Can’t even pick a stone up...or a pebble.’

‘Was there someone else in the cell?’ said the Suwa General, overpowering her *pebble*, and adding a flick of azure flare to his eyes.

‘Someone else? Yeah, an eight-tailed fox, annoyingly caustic, weird silvery glow, bit through the lock and then put it back together again so you wouldn’t know about it.’

Misora let out a long, irritated breath with the residue of her sentence, trying to rub the acid burn with her elbow, half expecting another dose.

But it didn’t come.

Lord Jun’ya was too busy staring into the other cell. For over a minute. Then, when staring from a distance clearly wasn’t enough, he swatted the two corridor guards aside and marched right in there. Stared at the graffiti on the walls. Dipped the heel of his zori into the rat remains on the floor. And, as a final act of weirdness, got down on his knees and crawled back out, his nose sniffing dust and zori scuff marks on the old stone.

‘Okay, now you’re definitely drunk.’

The Suwa General didn’t respond. Instead, he pressed the tip of his index finger into random parts of the stone floor, then brought it back up to his mouth and licked it.

‘Any fox trail?’

After another minute of self-deliberation, he got back to his feet, looked up the slope towards the end of the passageway like it was an

ambush militia, then came back into the torture cell, pushing the guard aside and grabbing Misora by the hair. ‘Who was the fox attached to?’

‘Wah, you believe that part but not the girl...’

‘The ashigaru? The monk?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did it speak to you?’

Misora pulled her head back, away from the glare of the giant Suwa face with weird blue stains, and now the weird azure eyes, and then got yanked right back again by the iron grip on her hair.

‘If I tell you, will you let me go?’

‘Yes.’

‘Err...okay. That was surprisingly quick. Can I have some kind of writing to back that up?’

‘No.’

‘Then how can I really trust that you’ll-’

Abandoning the hair vice, Lord Jun’ya switched to double-handed, taking both of Misora’s cheeks and squeezing hard into the bones. To enhance the creepy, supernatural possession feel, his eyes started glowing, just like her old ex-friend Atta Noe.

Fuck, she thought, compartmentalising the cheek pain, another demon. Didn't they have anything better to do? Didn't their own world have entertainment, a Hell version of Kabuki or something?

Atta Noe had said it was deeply boring and heavily regulated, but that was Atta Noe, the master of being bored. This guy though...if it was a guy...probably not...but this guy, did he really get anything out of being second in command to a human? And a lunatic Suwa one at that?

There was no way to know, and no neurons willing to do the requisite digging as the pain increased three-fold and her cheekbones started to crack.

'The monk...' she managed to eke out, among all the groans.

The squeezing stopped instantly, and the glowing eyes powered slowly down to zero as Lord Jun'ya asked, softly, if she was certain.

'In his beads...the monk's hair...they talked about it, the fox staying in there.'

The Suwa General stood up and straightened out his uniform.

'If you let me out, I can catch them for you.' She looked at the three guards, the one with the vial still watching the rim like a hawk. 'Faster than any of these vegetables could.'

'Yeah, with your gammy hand,' muttered one of the guards at the door.

‘And woman legs,’ said the other, getting a *huh* and *my sister’s pretty fast* from his colleague.

‘You two, with me,’ barked Lord Jun’ya, walking like an exhibition blade through the middle of them, shouting back at the acid guard to stay by the main door.

‘And the prisoner?’

‘Do not go near her cell. She is far too dangerous.’

The guard frowned, clearly unconvinced, but obeyed anyway cos if he didn’t, he’d be in a cell of his own, getting the same vial of acid poured on his genitals. And his eyeballs. And then down his throat.

Such was the life of a Sengoku-era prisoner.

‘You’re lucky it’s only the hand,’ he told Misora, closing the cell door panel and hovering by the bars for a while.

When she only mumbled *hhrrrrrr* in response, he said it again, adding that he’d once seen the Suwa Daimyō himself splash acid on a concubine’s breasts, and then force her secret lover to lick it off.

‘And that was just round one of the punishment.’

Misora nodded mostly to herself. Looked at the guard. Took a dusty dungeon breath. Scrutinised the melted patch of skin on her right hand. Flexed the fingers on her left. Sucked in more dust. Let it out. Then moved over to the gap in her yukata.

‘It’s quite hot in here,’ she said, pulling it apart just enough for the guard to see the side slope of her breasts.

‘Feels normal to me.’

‘If I could just get this yukata down a bit...’

The fingers of her left hand continued plucking at the edge of her robe, as much as they could with the wooden restraints impeding them, but that was actually a good thing as revealing too much would instantly dilute the eroticism of the act, and if she was to have any chance of getting out of this cell, she would need the guard to be on the verge of complete, pornographic-

Wait, where did he go?

She looked up, seeing the bars of the cell empty.

Kuso, a puritan?

‘Sorry, but you’re not that pretty,’ echoed the guard’s voice from somewhere deeper in the dungeon.

Wah, maybe not that extreme...but definitely disciplined. That was probably why he was stuck in the dungeon with a female prisoner while the other two perverts had been ordered away.

Kuso, kuso...

Giving up on the yukata striptease, Misora went back to her injured hand, using the pain from the wound as a motivational tool to come up with a new plan. Somehow, she had to get the guard, who

had apparently poured ice water on his genitals pre-shift, back into the cell and close enough for her to incapacitate him. With only her left hand.

She held up the wounded paw and tried wiggling the fingers.

It worked, they danced, but...

Painful.

Far too painful.

Accuracy and competence not at all guaranteed.

She switched focus to the wall opposite, studying the scrawled red text that said DEATH IS before trailing off into meaningless squiggles.

Was that blood?

Probably.

Kuso.

Down the passageway, or up the passageway considering the slope, the door panel opened and a heavily disguised female voice asked if the guard was feeling lonely on such a damp and grey morning.

Wah, was that...

Misora pushed onto both knees and crawled awkwardly with her wounded hand and wooden block over to the cell bars, just in time to see the guard grab a very underdressed and stern-looking Ichiko by

the upper arm, and tell her that she looked like a miserable cunt. However, as luck would have it, he loved miserable cunts and, as long as she didn't have a triangle patch downstairs, they were good to go.

‘Not a puritan then,’ muttered Misora, half-smiling.

‘Is it just you here, or do you have some friends we can play with?’ asked Reiko, pulling her yukata so far across her chest that she almost flashed a nipple.

‘You two stay outside,’ barked the guard, pulling Ichiko over to the rest bench at the side. ‘This one is mine.’

‘Yes, but is there another guard we could approach? Your colleague on duty here perhaps?’

The guard removed his hand from Ichiko's shoulder, dropping it slightly towards his katana belt. ‘Why do you keep asking that?’

‘We are working girls, customers are our life blood.’

‘Based where? Under who's authority?’

‘Suwa, of course. Independent operators. Which means all payment goes directly to our purse. Now, where is the other guard? We really need to-’

‘Back against the wall,’ ordered the guard, unsheathing his katana and pointing it in the same direction as the geyser of blood that had just burst out the front of his throat.

‘Ichiko!’ shouted Reiko, staring back at her sullen accomplice, the guard’s blood dripping reluctantly down her face.

‘He’s alone,’ she replied, wiping her dagger on the guard’s uniform, then pushing his still upright, still-bleeding-out body down onto the rest bench with one finger. Then nodding in approval as it slumped off onto the elevated tatami platform.

‘We don’t know that for sure.’

‘I think I’ve got some of his windpipe in my eye,’ moaned Kanae, pulling the collar of her yukata up to wipe it off.

‘There’s no one else here. And we just saw three of them go out. Besides, this whole charade was demeaning.’

‘Seduction is a kunoichi fundamental. You yourself told me that.’

Ichiko tutted, then strengthened it into a growl. ‘Pulling your yukata off and spilling your breasts out is not seduction. If you’d trained longer, maybe you’d realise that.’

‘Ah, it’s okay, it’s just a bit of flesh,’ said Kanae, pulling out a chunk of red stuff from her eye. ‘Not bone.’

Both Reiko and Ichiko glared back, bemused, then the brains switched on again and they shifted, scanning the passageway ahead.

‘Check the cells, see if she’s here.’

‘At the end,’ came a shout from down the slope, ‘in the empress suite.’

Reiko rushed ahead, shouting *Miso, is that you*, while Ichiko crouched down and took the keys from the guard's belt.

'Was wondering when you were gonna turn up,' Misora said, holding up her wounded hand.

'Are you waving at me?'

'No, it's a wound. Acid burn. From the guard I assume you just killed.'

Reiko squinted through the bars, then nodded when she saw a dark yellow patch on Misora's skin.

'Where are the others?'

Right on cue, Ichiko appeared out of the shadows, dagger in one hand, cell keys in the other.

'Wait...there is only one guard on duty here, right?' asked Reiko, looking back down the passageway and seeing nothing except for Kanae wiping more blood off her face.

'At the moment, yes. All the others are out looking for the escapees...who have a demon fox with them now. And a girl who...I don't know what she did exactly, or how, but she got in here, and helped them get out.'

'And left you here, unharmed,' finished Ichiko, putting the tip of the dagger against one of the cell bars.

‘Bleeding heart moralists...the girl and the boy. Without them, the ashigaru would’ve gutted me.’

‘They saved you?’

Misora rattled her wooden restraints. ‘We don’t have time for this. The Suwa are already out there looking for them, and our targets...could be halfway round the other side of the lake by now.’

‘Not with all the security around,’ said Reiko, taking the keys off Ichiko and ignoring the cold stare back. ‘Assuming they went out the back gate, they’ll have to zig zag a lot to get down to the water.’

‘You know a faster way down there?’

‘Not exactly. But I know how to avoid the slowest.’

Misora answered with a head jab towards the cell door, and then let Reiko pull her up to her feet even though her legs were fine.

‘Acid?’ asked Ichiko, taking out a smaller key and, after a brief moment of hesitation, removing the wooden block around her comrade’s wrists.

‘Dished out by a deranged demon.’

‘What?’

‘The Suwa General. Lord Jun Something.’

‘Lord Jun’ya.’

‘Yeah, him. Blindingly blue eyes. Blue-stained mouth. Blue a lot of things. Or azure, technically. Psychotic demon.’ She kicked the

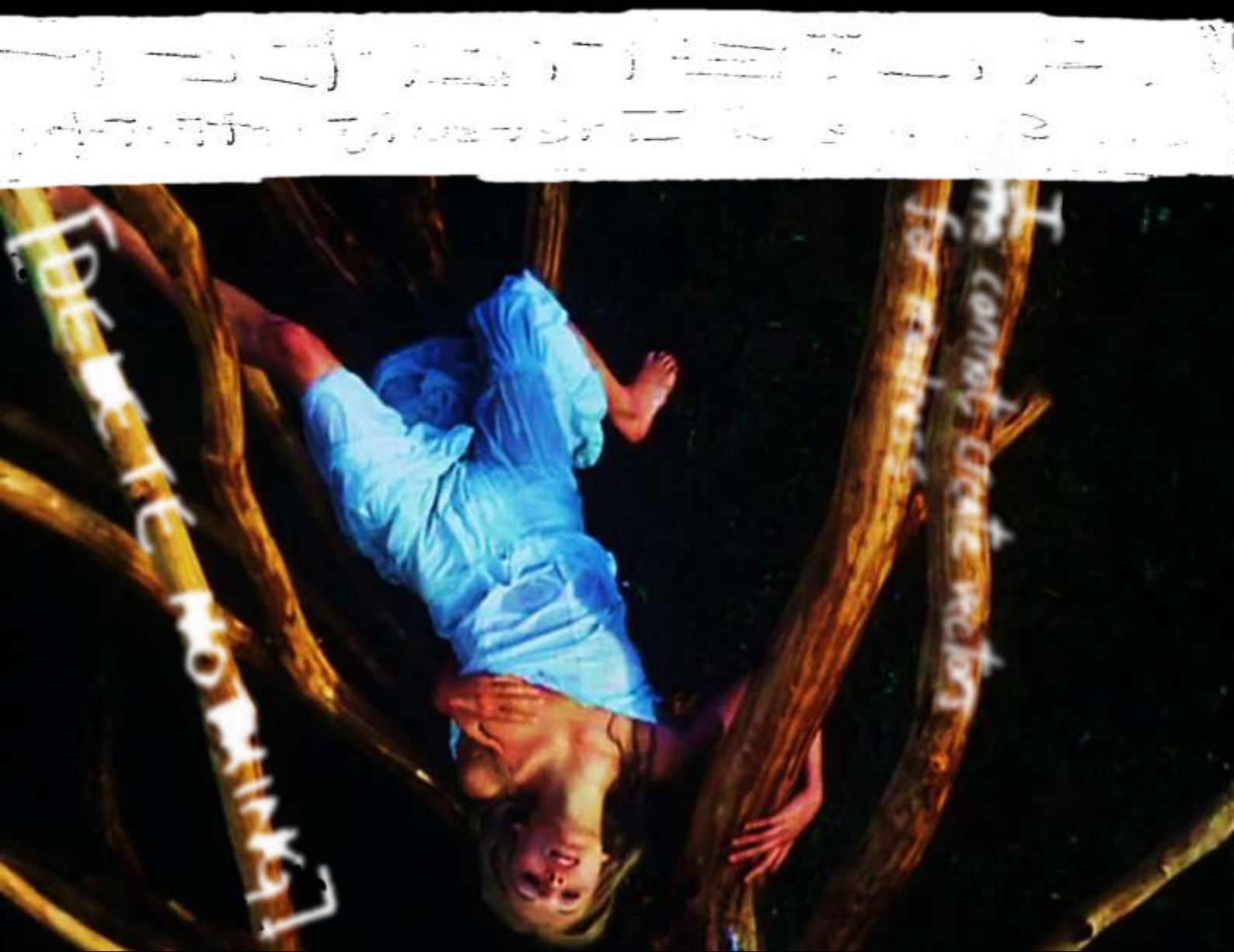
wooden block back into the cell and rushed ahead, shouting back, 'I'll tell you the rest when we're safely outside.'

'Another demon,' muttered Reiko, dropping the cell keys on the floor.

'Trouble-makers,' edited Ichiko, louder, slipping the dagger back inside the depths of her prostitute's yukata.

CHAPTER 45

BACKDOOR PORTAL



‘Are you sure this is the right way?’

‘Don’t ask him that, he doesn’t know.’

‘Feels like we’re heading up the mountain.’

‘Yeah, to avoid the guards we nearly bumped into just now.’

‘How long until we reach the lake?’

‘Must be somewhere near, we’ve been running for almost an hour.’

‘My legs are getting tired.’

‘Can’t believe you just let him go.’

‘Mine too.’

‘Top of my *mohtt* list and we’re just leaving him back there in the castle.’

‘Gods, not that Suwa General shit again.’

‘Can we stop a second, take a rest?’

‘What’s that giant black spot, up ahead?’

‘Suppose I’ll have to switch targets now. Something closer...that even a coward can’t say no to’

‘Or I can just rip out my beads and leave you here, how about that?’

‘Wah, the fake mage threatens again.’

‘Don’t push me, fox.’

‘Fox?’

‘Is it a black spot? Quite hard to see in this light.’

‘Well, it’s not the lake, I know that much.’

‘All of you...shut up!’

The last line was loud and reverberatory and Akira regretted it almost as soon as it left his mouth. Not the content, that was valid, but the fact that it might’ve just told nearby Suwa guards their location.

Lowering his voice to an angry hush, the flustered ashigaru jabbed at random trees on the non-existent path behind them and reminded the four moaners that they were in the middle of a life and death escape attempt and, in cases like these, it was not the most productive thing to lose themselves in petty squabbles and constant, irritating whines of *are we there yet?*

Of course, being exhausted and an ashigaru, he managed to sprinkle in some *kuso* and random gutter slang too, and, finally satisfied that the point had been made, he turned and walked straight onto phantom ground...swinging his right arm wildly as he plunged down into a giant hole that, in brighter daylight, he may have seen coming.

‘Not a black spot,’ muttered Miho, running to the edge and peering down into the darkness.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Daiki, keeping his voice low.

‘What the fucking hell?’ grumbled Akira, grinding his palms into the dirt at the bottom of the hole and slowly pulling himself up into a sitting position.

‘Do you need us to throw down some rope?’

‘Or a chain of our yukatas maybe, tied up,’ suggested Miho, looking at Aya for validation.

‘I’m not taking mine off, it’s freezing.’

‘You’ll survive,’ said the eight-tailed fox, taking a seat on the other side of the hole, placing a claw nail in its mouth. ‘In one form or another.’

Aya glared back, pulling her yukata in tighter.

‘Okay, how about a human chain then?’ offered Miho, switching to Daiki, who winced as he looked down at the dirt pushing into his zori.

‘Rope’s better.’

‘Do you have any?’

‘No.’

‘Then...’

The ashigaru half-heard the nonsense coming from above and, normally, would have replied with more *kuso* attacks, but the green, metre-long sticks poking out of the soil bed around him were proving a strong distraction.

Ritualism?

Measuring the depth of the hole?

He tried to grab one and pull it closer, but the thing was planted in tight. Defeated, annoyed, he crawled over and inspected the sides for marks or clues that might explain why there was a giant hole in the middle of the mountain slopes.

Nope. No marks, no clues, which left...nothing.

‘What is this thing anyway?’ asked Miho, walking around the perimeter above and almost knocking his foot into the fox.

‘Hey, watch it, human.’

‘Who would put a hole this big in the middle of nowhere?’

‘Probably a trap of some kind,’ replied Daiki, checking back on the trail they’d taken to get there, seeing nothing but slits of darkness and shadow between the tree trunks.

‘Dug by the Suwa guards?’

‘In case of attack, yes. I suppose the intention is to cover it at some point, let the invading army fall in.’

‘Can we go to the lake now?’ asked Aya, already by the next set of trees. ‘It’ll be sunrise soon and the guards are still out looking for us, remember?’

‘We have to get Akira out of the hole first.’

‘He can do it himself. It’s not that deep.’

Miho glanced down a second time [or third?], frowning at Akira trying to yank out one of the green sticks, then looked at the sides to see if they were scalable. Aya was right, there was a bit of slant to them, probably enough for him to crawl up and out. Though it was still about twelve feet deep, and he’d been running for the last hour, and stuck in a dungeon cell for a whole day and half a night before that, so...

‘Arrggh, *kuso*,’ yelled Akira, giving up on the green stick and pushing himself up onto his feet. ‘It’s a hole, just climb the fuck out, idiot.’

‘Are you talking to yourself?’ asked Miho, looking at the others.

‘I’m telling you though, if I ever find the guy who dug this...or ordered it dug...’

An abrupt laugh, like a demonic child finding an injured cat, then a slow fade into an aggravated sigh as the eight-tailed fox threw a clump of dirt at the ashigaru’s head.

‘What the-’

‘The guy who dug this is back at the castle...hydrogen brains.’

‘Don’t start that again.’

‘And, no, it’s not a defensive trap, or magic, or a mass grave. It’s an attempt to find a backdoor into my world. And a pretty egregious one at that.’

‘A backdoor?’ asked Miho, going with the question that everyone else wanted to ask but were too proud to repeat words from the fox’s own sentence.

‘I have to hand it to the Jjanna General. Or Lord Jun’ya as he calls himself. He does plan for all eventualities.’

‘But...why would he go back?’

Daiki nodded, fondling his red and white beads. ‘Good point. Isn’t he on your moth list?’

‘I don’t have the time or incentive to explain it to humans.’

‘Then why did you tell us?’

‘Or fake mages.’

‘Hey...’

The eight-tailed fox threw another clump of dirt at Daiki’s head, missed, then scooped up another and started reforming it.

‘I’m still your vessel, demon.’

‘Yeah, sure. If you really want to know, ask her.’ The fox threw the new ball of dirt at Aya’s servant yukata, managing a direct strike. ‘She knows just as much as I do.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You mean, about the hole?’ added Miho, squinting at the edge and flinching when he saw Akira’s hand appear and bury its fingertips into the ground.

‘The hole, the dungeon escape, how she managed to knock out two guards, where she vanishes to every night...’

‘She has trouble sleeping,’ answered Miho, leaning down to help Akira up while keeping his head aimed at a very stationary Aya, who wasn’t even bothering to wipe the crumbling dirt off her yukata.

‘Right?’

‘It’s not sleep she has trouble with, it’s maintaining human form. Ah, don’t glare at me like that, sessskat. You’re lucky I haven’t added you to my *mohtt* list. Though now that I think about it...the way the night’s going...maybe I should.’

‘Who’s a zesty cat?’

‘Yeah, what are you yabbering on about, fox?’ asked Akira, breathing raggedly, rubbing his dirt-covered hands on Miho’s yukata hem.

‘I’m not an encyclopaedia. Ask her.’

All three of the gang tutted in defiance then turned their heads towards Aya anyway. Not glaring exactly, but...

‘We’re staying still too long,’ she said, finally brushing some of the dirt off the front of her yukata. ‘The guards will come soon.’

‘Is the fox right?’ asked Miho, his voice more detached than usual. ‘Are you not human?’

‘He’s playing tricks on you, trying to get you to go back to the Suwa General.’

‘But...how did you get into the dungeon?’

‘I told you already, I dressed like this and sneaked in. Knocked out the guards with poison darts. Can we go now?’

Another laugh from the fox, loud enough to rustle the leaves nearby and get a grunt from Akira. ‘Gods, you’re still evading. Typical sessskat. Desperate to stay in your little fantasy world. What was it? Murder?’

‘... ..’ shot back Aya, a mix of hisses and slurs.

‘Ah, it was, wasn’t it? Maybe I should check the database, see if there’s a reward. Or better yet, just tag you now and make it a surprise claim. Yes, why not? You’re bound to be worth something to someone.’

‘What do you mean tag?’ asked Daiki, watching the fox grind its claw nails against each other.

‘Don’t get queasy, this is work of the highest morality. Sessskat are notoriously vicious back on my world. I’m doing us all a favour, trust me.’

‘Aya, what is he talking about?’ Miho took a step closer, half offering a hand. ‘Why does he keep calling you a sex cat?’

She looked past him, her own hand still robotically wiping the dirt stain off her yukata...but actually just rubbing it in deeper to the material.

‘Back off, human,’ ordered the fox, swishing all eight of its tails out into a decadent fan formation. ‘I’m gonna need a little space...’

‘To tag her?’

‘...and someone to carry me afterwards as I may be weakened. Ah, well-remembered, mage.’

‘No,’ mumbled Miho, legs forcing his body quickly over to Aya and parking it in front as a protective shield.

‘Don’t think I won’t drop you too, human.’

‘You can’t do this, she just rescued you...from the dungeon. Remember?’

‘Move aside.’

‘She’s not-’

‘Now.’

The eight tails of the fox started to glow a pale silvery light, exactly as they had in the dungeon, and Miho did the same thing he’d done when Yuki had held his head under the river surface, closed his eyes and braced for doom.

But doom failed to come.

Instead, there were moans and growls and insults of *you stupid fake mage* and other words in an unknown language and then the glow was gone and, when Miho opened his eyes again, he saw Daiki propped up against a tree trunk twenty metres away, the fox kicking out at his calves, telling him to walk back over to the sessskat or else.

‘I’m not gonna be complicit in murdering innocent young girls.’

‘Tagging, you fool, and she’s not a girl, she’s a-’

‘The Suwa General, fine. The others, fine. But not her.’

‘*Kuso*...you just ran away from the Jjanna! And the palak monk. In fact, the only thing you ever consistently do is run away...and drink. And pine for that silly bandit who left you to become a magician. A real one.’

On the branch above, a bird hooted right as Daiki’s eyes went nova. Then self-diluted almost in the same instant as he looked at his hands and saw he was weapon-less.

‘Okay, enough fucking drama,’ interrupted Akira, finally succeeding in the removal of all the dirt from his yukata. ‘We’re moving.’

‘Ah, the palak monk catcher,’ shouted the fox, tapping its claws together, running forward the full ten metres it was capable of. ‘Take the sessskat...the girl...and I’ll give you a percentage. And make you my new vessel.’

The ashigaru ignored the fox and moved over towards Miho, who was still standing guard in front of a catatonic Aya. 'You two as well.'

'She's not what she looks like,' continued the fox, adjusting its tone to something more sinister, 'if that's what's stopping you.'

Akira turned back, sharp, right hand reaching towards his katana. 'Would you stop your whining?'

'Relax, no one's coming here. It's too close to the Jjanna's hole.'

'Gods on a-'

'Don't be vulgar. I mean, the guards will have been ordered away from this spot as it's precious to the General. Even if they hear a girl screaming, they won't come near it.'

In his head, Akira knew it was a curse, knew that saying something so challenging out loud could only result in one thing, but the chances of the gods actually paying attention to this little scene and sending the guards in was-

'Hands down, move to the hole.'

Akira closed both eyes, muttering 'green fucking fool' to himself. He didn't need to look, he could tell by the footsteps that there were at least six of them, all armed no doubt.

'Don't try anything, we have you surrounded.'

Aya snapped out of her comatose state and took Miho's hand, whispering in his ear that he should get ready to run.

Which was a strange statement as eight Suwa guards were closing in on them from three different directions and the only route left open was suspiciously open and quiet.

‘We’re looking for the escaped prisoners,’ tried Akira, for some reason pointing up at the sky, but he knew straight away that the picture didn’t fit, and, when the guards switched from one hand on their katana grips to blade fully out and diagonal, he sighed and did the same thing.

‘Wah, it’s magical,’ blurted out one of the guards, transfixed by the green stain.

‘Nah, he just found it in the lake.’

‘Spilt ink on it more like.’

‘Quiet, all of you. Focus on the ashigaru, keep him by the hole,’ the lead guard commanded, flicking a hand at a spare man, signalling for him to watch Daiki by the tree.

‘You can’t shed blood here,’ said Akira, gesturing down towards the hole as he was forced back by seven slowly advancing guards, none of them breaking formation to attack, even when he stepped forward and feigned a weak lunge.

It was a well-trained move, the idea simply to shepherd him into the hole where there would be no hope, and hack him to death if he tried to single any of them out.

No, his only real chance was...*kuso*...something very deflating.

‘Those green sticks down there,’ he continued, using his katana to point into the hole that none of the seven guards could yet see.

‘Property of the gods. The entire hole, everything. You think they’ll be happy if humans stumble in and dirty it with their blood?’

‘Ignore him, he’s desperate,’ said the lead guard, taking another half step forward. ‘The gods are on our side.’

‘You sure about that? Cos I’ve communed with them. Had my blade blessed by their magic, and they told me...any human who interferes with our rituals, will be blinded...by a bright, silvery light.’

Nodding at his own words, Akira looked over at the fox and repeated the line, putting so much stress on the *silvery light* part that the lead guard stopped and asked, ‘which gods?’

The guard next to him leaned in, whispering that it had been a silvery glow above the canopy that had brought them there.

‘So now you need me, do you?’ said the fox, scraping invisible dirt off one of its claws.

‘The gods who speak with a very loud voice...and glow silver to attract nearby guards who wouldn’t have found us otherwise.’

‘If you’re appealing to my sense of fairness,’ the fox started, then trailed off into an annoyed hiss.

‘Which gods?’ repeated the lead guard, taking another step forward. ‘Answer or we’ll hack you down right now.’

Akira checked the lead guard's feet, saw an opening...then took a step back, right to the edge of the hole, as the flanking extras closed it up, all of them shuffling in tight to buttress their slightly isolated commander.

Kuso...too slow. Too many of them.

‘Are you deaf? Tell me, which gods.’

‘Ah, forget it. They would be stuck here anyway. With all of us dead in a hole, unable to carry them forward on their moth mission.’

‘Ha, ashigaru wretch, I knew you were lying.’

‘Trapped for eternity inside a bunch of ugly red and white beads.’

‘Advance, men, push him in. Hack if he tries to run.’

Akira breathed out, glanced over at Miho and Aya, who may as well have been invisible as the guards paid them no attention at all, saw her hand gripping the boy's sleeve...

Ah well, at least I can go down stabbing, he thought, raising his green katana and picking out the lead guard as his only target, the one who had annoyed him the most.

But if I see a fox in Hell, even a mono-tailed one...

The ashigaru's vision of chasing a bright silver fox round the rim of an irate volcano spurting out gargantuan chunks of lava was cut short by the ground at his feet glistening a faint shade of white, then

the katanas of the guards doing the same thing, then their uniforms, then their heads, then everything.

Akira closed his eyes and flung himself down into the hole, blocking out the blast of heaven assaulting him in seven hundred different directions.

Screams rang out on the ground above, then moans, then a yell of *help, a fucking fox is biting my-*

Akira waited for the light to fade and the whining to subside, then climbed back up the slope of the hole.

‘You owe me,’ said the fox, sitting on the corpse of one of the guards, chewing on a cut-out slice of neck meat. ‘All of you.’

Shaking his head without really understanding that he was doing it, the ashigaru scanned the massacre site, breathing out in clear relief when he saw Daiki still standing by the tree, shakily stroking his beads with an equally stunned expression on his face.

‘Miho,’ he muttered, switching to the empty space where the boy and the pretend human girl had been.

‘The sessskat and her useful idiot have fled,’ said the fox, swallowing down the last of its human meal and coughing out a few of the more unpalatable bits afterwards. ‘Probably halfway down the slope by now. Which means we’re back to the original *mohtt* list.’ The fox coughed again, patting its chest with a bloody claw. ‘You

know, I don't even like human flesh. Far too rough. No real flavour to it.'

'We need to go,' said Akira, giving little play slaps to his own cheek, then moving over to Daiki and doing the same thing.

'What...' slurred the mage, blinking like a village infant.

'That light would've been seen by all the guards in Suwa. We have about ten minutes, if that.'

Daiki held up a hand to veto any more slaps, then did what his brain was telling him not to and surveyed the Goya landscape laid out nearby.

His first reflex was to retch, but then he remembered the corpse on the trolley outside the General's chamber and, compared to that, a small clearing of eight dead soldiers with all their limbs intact didn't seem that awful.

And then one of them moaned.

Reanimated.

Both Daiki and Akira grabbed each other by the sleeves, both getting in each other's way, both giving up and just saying, 'wah, they're still alive.'

'Of course, I'm not a murderer,' replied the fox, licking the blood off its claw. 'Okay, not a mass murderer, before you say anything. Just felt a bit peckish with that one. And I'm kind of drained now, to be honest. Not a small thing, using that level of shine.'

‘Why didn’t you tell us you could do that...in the dungeon?’
asked Akira, scanning the murmuring bodies.

‘It was useless there. Obviously.’

‘But-’

‘Wah, no follow ups. I’m too tired for exposition. And none of you deserve it anyway, not after letting both the Jjanna and that sessskat get away.’

‘Gods, this is gonna be annoying,’ muttered Akira, refocusing on the gaps between the trees, the path they’d come from earlier.

‘What did you say, ashigaru?’

Another guard groaned, this one flipping over and waving a gloved hand around. This seemed to act as a signal, resuscitating most of the others. Except the one the fox had chewed on, he was still very much dead.

‘They’re all waking up,’ said Daiki, straightening out his yukata.

‘Yeah, with their friends on the way. Come on. And keep your eyes off the bloody one. Can’t afford to have you in that zombie state all night.’

‘I’m okay,’ the mage said back, refusing Akira’s outstretched arm then doing his own little series of slaps to the cheeks.

‘Finally, a backbone,’ said the fox, wiping its claw on the dead guard’s uniform.

‘Good. We’ll aim for the lake. Shouldn’t be too far.’

‘Miho and Aya?’

‘If we see them, fine. If not...’

Daiki dipped his head, doing another quick scan of the moaning bodies to see if he’d missed any non-soldiers.

Nope, all uniformed, all Suwa.

‘Enough dawdling, we need to go now,’ said Akira, shouting over from the other side of the hole, with the fox stuck halfway between them, doing exasperated paw movements to his still a bit dazed vessel. ‘Before they get their senses back.’

‘You heard him, get those beads moving.’

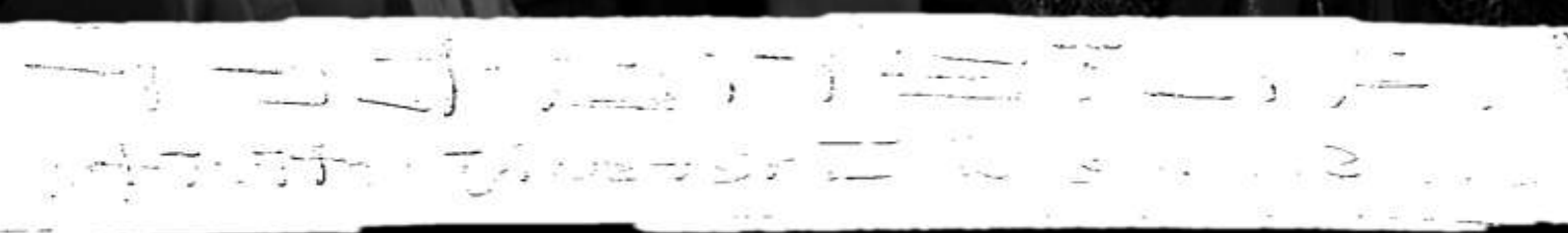
‘I’m coming.’

Stepping over one guard, then another, then the solitary corpse, Daiki followed the ashigaru’s trail round the hole and into the next crop of trees, shivering slightly as the silvery light flashed again and the fox got sucked with a faint ‘whoosh’ back into his beads.

None of us died, he repeated inside his head. Aya, Miho, Akira, me...

We’re all okay.

Somehow.



CHAPTER 46

PURE ANT SERVITUDE

‘Of course, they were not okay, they were dead. And those seven lunatics were hovering on the cusp of it, so now we’re going to have the Owari narrators, battle chroniclers, propagandists giving them the lion’s share of the credit, when, as I told you earlier, all those seven rank, cowardly opportunists did was stride forward accidentally, at the same moment the bodyguards of my second and fifth generals were bending down, fixing their superiors’ zori, and...I told you, didn’t I? I saw it myself, with my own eyes, from two hundred yards away...the strikes weren’t even clean, more like that of a blind woodsman...after his woodswoman has just left him...for an elderly beggar with no legs.’

Lord Imagawa paused, tapping the concubine’s hair pin on the low-lying table, eyes fixed on the flickering okiandon by the open window panel.

‘An edit, daimyō?’ asked the man kneeling beside him, a sheet of rice paper and brush in both hands, plus a messy-looking inking stone balanced perilously close to the edge of the same table.

‘Leave that last line, I like it. Did you get all the rest?’

‘The main bulk of the narrative, yes.’

‘Good. Now, where was I? Blind woodsman, the seven frauds...yes, I remember that part very well, saw it directly from the slope. Which I may add, was a poor starting position and one I argued against vehemently, yet, you know Uncle Uji, he always has to be in charge of initial troop set-up. Wah, I blame myself to some extent. Keeping things the same out of respect for the old man’s feelings, letting my own judgment be overruled...leading to this ridiculous stalemate that the Owari are already claiming is a firm defeat on our side when it is nothing of the sort...I’m still here, aren’t I? Fail to catch the daddy koi and you win nothing. Second and fifth ranking generals, okay, accepted, but that wasn’t any kind of tactical acumen on their part. People must be made aware of that fact, otherwise those seven frauds will become like...like golden bears...with hugely unrealistic katana skills and-...they’re already re-writing my first victory...those devious Later Hōjō Clan scholars and their lying tongues, lying brushes...pretending that it was inclement weather that forced them to turn back and not my superior-...wah, a knock at the door, it’s about fucking time. Where the hell have those two been? Sado Island?’

Strangely, the question wasn’t directed at the door panel that was being slid open by the bodyguard outside, but the two concubines on the futon, one male, one female, both below consenting age, both having olive green cream smeared over their necks and faces by two silent attendants.

Neither of them answered Lord Imagawa, though the female concubine did flinch when she saw Tadachika stumble over the door wedge, followed quickly by a piercing glare as Atta Noe glided serenely in after him.

‘What’s going on, were you two asleep?’ boomed Imagawa, his voice a shaky clone of an older daimyō’s bark, possibly his own father’s. Or one of those ancient warlords with far grander achievements and a mythically heroic death.

‘Night time stroll,’ replied Tadachika, moving straight to the wall on the left, leaning one hand against it to steady himself, then pretending to study the painting of a stone garden.

‘Together?’

‘No, no, no. No. I’m-...definitely not. It was by the cliff...separate, not together.’

Imagawa squinted at the Sakai daimyō, who was only a couple of years younger than himself, and then switched to the glacial form of Atta Noe. ‘And your version?’

‘I was in my chamber, daimyō. Alone. Staring at the salt sacks in the passageway outside.’

Tadachika laughed, turning it quickly into a loud cough.

‘Really. You weren’t in bed together?’

‘Us?’

‘I do not have use for a bed,’ replied Atta Noe, eyes drifting over to the two concubines on the futon, now having their hair clipped.

Sacrifice, she thought, detaching from the scene for a moment. The victims willingly offering their bodies for this...human manchild’s pleasure.

But no emotion to it. No joy. No fear. Just pure, ant servitude.

What a pathetic sight.

‘Ah, I forgot about that,’ continued Lord Imagawa, switching the hair pin to his other hand and hitting it against the chronicler’s foot. ‘Must be the form you take, very distracting. Ethereal almost. Tell me, is your box ready to be moved? I have a chamber adjacent to this one that has been cleared for you.’

‘That is appreciated,’ Atta Noe answered, mentally coming back to the table, one eye on the very tired-looking man prodding a brush on the rice paper. ‘Are you dictating a journal?’

‘Yes, yes, that. A war campaign, the recent stalemate. A counterweight to the inevitable lies of the Owari. Now, the room next door, it is not as large or as decorative as this one, but it does enjoy a similar view. Very pleasant for moon watching. I think you’ll appreciate it very much.’

‘Thank you, daimyō.’

‘And it will, of course, give us an excellent chance to spend more time together, to talk of war and love, life and poetry, sea and magical realism.’

‘Hope you like your arms,’ mumbled Tadachika to the painting that his nose was almost poking a hole in, adding a chuckle at the end. Then saying *kuso* when his head started to stab daggers at its interior again.

‘Tadachika, stop fondling that wall and get over here. I have news for you both.’

‘On my way, brother,’ he slurred, straightening up and wincing as his head carried on with the banging, legs somehow taking him over to Atta Noe and then, without any warning, calling it a night. The sudden loss of control sent him left, wobbling, then a sharp right to compensate, with both movements so erratic that he had no choice but to reach out a hand and clamp it on Atta Noe’s shoulder for support.

‘Nice yukata,’ he said, trying and failing to make it seem like a natural act, and quickly getting his reward as the demon’s eyes sparked bright purple and her own hands pushed him back towards the wall.

Unfortunately, the chronicler’s leg was in the way, the cap of his knee tripping the young Sakai daimyō and leading him down onto the futon. Into the female concubine’s lap, to be more precise.

‘Gods in Saitama,’ cried Imagawa, stabbing the blunt end of the hair pin into the tatami. ‘I’ve been prepping those two for an hour, the yukatas, their skin. Get off them, off there, you clumsy oaf, before you ruin everything.’

Lifting his head up, Tadachika put one hand on the female concubine’s neck, and the other on the male concubine’s crotch, and pulled himself up. Then rolled off the futon and back over to the table, giving the chronicler’s knee a sly kick as he went.

‘I’ll remember that,’ the Sakai lord whispered, putting his face against the back of Atta Noe’s hair. ‘You beautiful, insane witch.’

In response, the purple demon did nothing.

Let him hang himself, she thought, watching the chronicler rub his kneecap, the two concubines rub nothing, and the other child daimyō stab what was probably his mother’s hair pin repeatedly into the floor.

‘Stop sniffing her hair, you erratic dolt, and sit down. Both of you.’

‘Of course, Imagawa.’

‘That’ll be daimyō, or Lord Imagawa, if your shōchū-addled brain can remember titles. Now, lower yourself quickly, before my two concubines fall asleep.’

‘It is a very late hour to call on us,’ said Atta Noe, letting her legs disassemble into purple mist and then reform again in a sitting position on the tatami by the table.

‘Clearly, but this matter could not wait.’

‘What matter would that be?’

‘Another banquet?’ asked Tadachika, starting with a straight face then quickly losing it when his drunken brain showed him a re-run of Yoshihiro with his arm sliced off.

‘What the king of hell is wrong with you? Have you never drunk shōchū before? Control yourself.’

Tadachika nodded, cough-laughing his way back to normalcy. ‘Old memory,’ he muttered as a half explanation.

‘Well, I hope it’s not a habit, as I’m going to need you at your freshest next week. When you lead my revenge campaign into Owari Province.’

The chronicler stopped rubbing his knee, both concubines flinched, Tadachika ran back over the words that had just reached his brain, and Atta Noe stared down at the notes for the last campaign.

Fail to catch the daddy koi and you win nothing.

‘I can see by the stoic expressions on your faces that you’re intrigued, so let me go on. Next week, with the Sakai clan leading the way, my forces will march the coastal route back into Owari territory and take the most fortified castle outside of their home roost. Lady

Noe, with her experience and aggressive attitude, will advise the young Sakai tadpole here. In fact, I am relieving my uncle Ujiteru of his duties and putting you in sole charge of campaign strategy. What do you say, Sakai, Lady Noe? Speak. Don't be coy.'

Despite the direct command, Atta Noe took a moment to breathe an unnecessary breath, waiting for Tadachika to stumble in first. And he did not disappoint.

'Is this a joke?'

'Is this a joke, daimyō. No, it is not. You have one week to prepare your soldiers for the assault.'

'One week?'

'I assume your forces are kept in optimum condition at all times, like most clans. Therefore, one week is more than enough time.'

Lord Imagawa coughed, then reached out with the hair pin, poking the chronicler on his writing arm. 'No need to record this part. Yet.'

The exhausted man stared back, his brush dropping on to the table, until finally, his yawn had been quelled and he was able to eke out a faint, 'yes, daimyō.'

'One week,' Tadachika repeated, this time to the palm of Atta Noe's hand as the demon herself cleared her throat to speak.

‘You have just returned from a...disappointing campaign...a stalemate in Owari Province, daimyō. Is it wise to attack again so soon?’

‘Ah, Lady Noe...you do deliver doubt in such a soothing voice. I appreciate that. But the truth is, I can’t sleep. The last few nights, coming back here after my uncle did his-...started with an odd formation. It aggravates me. Knowing what the Owari will be saying about it, the things I’ve already heard from spies. Losing...with a stalemate...when I should’ve won handsomely.’

‘As the defensive force, they will have seen your retreat as a victory. And their forces will have confidence because of it.’

The hair pin slammed point-first into the table, missing the chronicler’s hand by less than an inch. ‘Exactly. And because of that confidence...that arrogance...a swift return will be the last thing they expect.’

‘Not the last thing,’ said Tadachika, glancing at Atta Noe and gesturing with drunken eyes at his arm socket.

Stupid child, she thought reflexively, but that was only one part of her brain, and another more playful cortex was picturing the drunken fool in her chambers, staring at his own arm on the tatami, blood dripping out from the wound and...before she could put a leash on it, a laugh sneaked out.

Coupled with a smirk.

Which would have set off Tadachika too, if his head hadn't started banging on the inside of his skull again.

'One week,' he mumbled, trying to keep it all in.

'A single week,' echoed Atta Noe, killing her own laugh dead.

Imagawa glared at them both, twisting the hair pin deeper into the table surface. 'I have no idea what's going on with you two...but you better get it out of your system fast. Failure...a second failure...will not be tolerated.'

'Of course not, daimyō.'

Tadachika mouthed the same words, eyes on the hair pin. 'Might be easier to avoid if we have a month to prepare before we-'

'One week. No debate. Training begins tomorrow morning at seven.'

'Tomorrow...the next day tomorrow?'

'In five hours.'

'That is not ideal,' said Atta Noe, face smoothed over like a kabuki mask again. 'I need at least six hours inside my box to recuperate from my-...from the activities of this night.'

'Well, you'll have to make do with five.' Lord Imagawa took out the hair pin from the table and looked over at the two concubines, who were now almost doll-like in appearance and, judging by the

bows of the attendants, ready to be serviced. ‘You can get seven hours tomorrow night to make up for it.’

‘Apologies, but that is still not ideal, daimyō.’

‘Well, it’s what I’ve already said. Accept it. And you, Tadachika...no hangover. I want you both fresh as a mountain spring. Understand?’

Atta Noe didn’t nod or bow, and neither did Tadachika. Instead, they both looked down at the tatami, at the daimyō’s tiny feet hidden under the table, then at the concubines on the futon, both the boy and the girl dressed up so tight in their ceremonial yukatas that it looked like they may suffocate before the actual fucking began.

‘You are both dismissed,’ said Lord Imagawa, pointing towards the open door panel, his yukata already peeled off one shoulder.

CHAPTER 47

HAVE TO FIND ANOTHER BOATHOUSE

[illegible]

好心着雷劈

This battle is tiring

‘Go on, you can do it, little guy.’

‘Kanae...’

‘A bit further.’

‘Kanae...stop it.’

‘Just a few more centimetres.’

‘Are you listening?’

‘Don’t worry, it’s not a big drop.’

‘Kanae...’

‘I’ll help you down if you like?’

‘Gods of Saitama...Kanae.’

The kunoichi trainee perked her head up, just in time to see Ichiko’s hand fly past from the left and smack down hard on her forearm.

‘Hey, you killed it,’ she whined, taking her forearm away and scanning for the corpse of the ant that had been crawling bravely across the surface. ‘No, wait...it’s not there. Wah, where did it go?’

The next slap hit Kanae on the side of the head, followed by a hushed bark to stop messing about and focus on silently watching the scene twenty metres ahead.

‘Nothing’s happening. It’s just a giant hole and a nutty ritual for some dead guy.’

‘Then focus on the silent part,’ hissed Ichiko, clipping her one more time for good measure then shuffling an inch closer to Misora and Reiko. ‘Any sign of tracks?’

‘We’ll have to get closer for that,’ answered Reiko, throwing away the leaf she’d been rolling up.

‘Good idea,’ added Misora.

‘Bad idea. There are too many guards.’

‘Where?’

‘Here. Right in front of us.’

‘Sorry, are we looking at the same place?’ Misora gestured with a cramped arm at the two very stationary objects that could be called guards, both clearly dozing off yet somehow staying on their feet by the dead body. ‘Those two?’

‘The monk could be difficult.’

‘What, with his totem sticks?’

Ichiko breathed out fierce, looking again at the ritual scene unfolding ahead. The monk may not have been a fighter, but he was

probably fast and agile and...they always did that face, when confronted with the threat of violence...the patronising, *kill me and no heaven* look that she despised and...what the hell was he doing anyway? Inhaling the smoke from those green slabs of wood?

‘I will admit though, you Suwa lot really are a weird bunch,’ said Misora, unwittingly agreeing with Ichiko’s thoughts.

‘There’s method behind the weirdness,’ replied Reiko, pulling herself up onto her knees.

‘Which part?’

‘All of it. Those green totem sticks there, they surround the corpse and act as a protective cloak, to stave off the demons trying to trick the departed into Hell. And they have to be lit in order to produce the herbal aroma that demons hate.’

‘You do this for all your fallen?’

‘Mid to high ranking. Mostly during *Onbashira*, when the fear level’s high. Ah, finally, muttering part’s over.’ Reiko switched from knees to feet, brushing loose dirt off the *dōbuku* she’d stolen from the castle. Then pulling it in tight to cover up the prostitute’s *yukata* underneath. ‘Action time.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To have a chat with the monk. Misora, you can be my assistant. From the West Suwa Temple. Come on, get up, follow me over.’

‘Wait...’ hissed Ichiko, holding out a hand to yank them both back, but it was a ghost grip and they were already halfway across to the weird worship hole anyway. ‘*Kuso...*’

She lowered herself back down, shifting over to a larger crop of grass as one of the stationary guards made a grunting noise and woke up.

‘So reckless,’ she muttered, as Reiko raised both hands in a sign of peace and sent them back into their trances.

‘Hey, I found him,’ said Kanae, smiling from down by her ankles. ‘He wasn’t dead, he was fleeing.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Quick-witted, little ant.’

Kanae put her hand out flat on the ground and let the creature crawl onto her palm and it was such a ridiculous sight that Ichiko had no choice but to get up, pull her own stolen dōbuku in tight and walk out towards the lunacy hole, mentally switching to her role as second assistant from the West Suwa Temple.

I’m here to bless the corpse.

No, too direct.

I’m here to assist Sister Reiko in blessing the recently deceased.

Better.

I'm here to track the same guys as you, only I'm gonna slit their throats on behalf of Lord Shingen.

No, no. Instant death. For the guards.

She exited her internal roleplay and pulled both shoulders in, making herself more spiritual.

For some reason, none of the guards seemed to notice nor care about her arrival, so she bowed at the oddball monk and Reiko, and then continued on until she was standing beside the edge of the impromptu grave, looking down at the same prints in the dirt that Misora was squinting at.

‘Only two,’ Ichiko whispered, following the tracks over to the treeline on the other side. ‘One small, one average.’

‘The girl and the boy,’ answered Misora, checking back on Reiko, who was now kneeling down by the corpse, serenely shaking her head. It wasn’t close enough to hear the words she was spinning out to go with it, but something generic like *oh dear, so tragic*, wouldn’t have been a terrible guess. Whatever it was, the monk appeared to be appreciating it.

‘What about the ashigaru?’

‘Gone a different way. Him and the fake mage, probably.’

‘They split up?’

‘Got split up more like. The tracks are over there.’ Misora pointed left, about five metres across. ‘Two large feet, and paw prints that vanish before the trees.’

‘A creature from the forest...’

Before Misora could answer, Reiko appeared, putting arms around both kunoichi shoulders and whispering that the corpse was partially eaten, either by a wild animal or a lunatic ashigaru running on herb fumes.

‘The demon fox,’ Misora muttered back, gently wiping some loose dirt off Reiko’s fingers.

‘That would make the most sense.’

‘Do you think it really-’ Reiko stopped, redirecting her eyes to the not at all disguised *HEY YOU GUYS* coming from the nearby treeline. ‘Gods, is she ever quiet?’

‘She will be once I cut out her tongue.’

Ichiko detached from Reiko’s arm, looked back at the guards to see if they’d heard the sound too, blew out stale air in relief when she realised they were still comatose, possibly from the green totem smoke, and then hurried over to the treeline to gag the rookie, maybe permanently.

‘I found some tracks,’ Kanae said, her right arm surprisingly fast enough to block Ichiko’s opening slap. ‘Down here, look.’

‘Then you wait for us to come over. Never shout out into a clearing, especially when there are enemy guards standing nearby. Understand?’

‘It wasn’t a shout, I was-’

Ichiko slapped again, this time unblocked.

‘Okay, fine. I won’t say anything. Ever again.’

‘Good. Now, what we need to do,’ continued Ichiko, as Reiko and Misora caught up, the group of four manoeuvring themselves behind a nearby tree trunk, ‘is divide into two groups. Reiko and Kanae, you go after the boy and his girlfriend, Misora and I will handle the ashigaru and the pseudo-mage.’

‘What about the fox demon?’

‘Simple. If it makes a move, stab it.’

‘Err...’

‘No arguments. I’ve followed your lead all night, now it’s my turn.’

‘Okay...comrade.’

‘No sarcasm either.’

‘Fine, we’ll split up.’ Misora glanced at Reiko, who appeared to be fascinated by the dirt on the ground. ‘If you do find the boy, let Kanae deal with him. The girl can go free.’

Reiko half nodded, then looked at Kanae, who had her palm against the tree trunk, waiting for the ant to crawl off. ‘Are you ready, kunoichi?’

‘Five more seconds.’

‘Kanae...we have to get going.’

‘I know, I’m just-...the ant is moving, five more seconds and it’ll...’

A hand flashed forward, crushing the ant’s body just as it stepped onto the bark.

‘...be safe.’

‘Now you can go,’ said Ichiko, wiping her hand on Kanae’s half-open dōbuku.

‘Sociopath,’ mumbled the young kunoichi, waiting for her two seniors to get at least ten metres in the other direction before saying it again louder, with ‘fucking heartless’ as bitter prefix.

‘It was a fine ant,’ said Reiko, deadpan, patting her new partner on the shoulder. ‘But we really do have to get moving.’

‘Yeah, I suppose...’

‘As a matter of fact, I may know a shortcut down to the lake. If my memory holds. With a bit of luck, we’ll get to them before the guards do.’

~~~

‘How many?’

‘Not sure.’

‘Five? Ten? Five hundred?’

Daiki adjusted position on the ground, sticking his head up a little higher over the half-destroyed wooden cart they were using as cover, and attempted another count.

‘Well?’

‘From what I can tell...about twenty of them. No, wait...there’s five more by the shore. Blended in with the signage boards outside the boat house.’

‘*Kuso...*’

‘I don’t think we’re gonna be able to get in there. And we can’t go up to the road again either. Far too many patrol guards.’

Akira hit the dirt with clenched fist, cursing a second time, then tapped on the red and white beads tangled up in Daiki’s hair. ‘Hey, fox demon, you still in there? We need you.’

‘It’s recharging, it won’t come out.’

‘There’s twenty guards in our way, blocking the boathouse, and if we don’t get past them then you’re never getting anyone on that precious moth list of yours. None. Not even that weird, orange monk who tried to drown me.’

A faint glint of silver put a stop to Akira's half-hearted threat, the eight-tailed fox materialising with the face and body posture of a plague victim. Even its tails looked deflated.

‘Gods in a cave, what happened to you?’

‘... ..’ slurred the fox, not in Japanese.

‘Looks like you’ve just crawled out of a leper’s ass crack.’

‘I’m recharging...as the mage just told you.’

‘Yeah, well put that on pause for a minute. We need you to do that bright, come-to-heaven light trick again, knock out those guards.’

‘Impossible.’

‘Just one blast, that’s all we need. Then you can crawl back into his mangy hair and recharge for as long as you like.’

‘I’m not a performing eagle.’

‘What, you’re saying you can’t do it?’ asked Akira, doing a faint trill of a whistle. ‘A legendary fox demon like yourself?’

The fox raised a paw, its eight tails tensing straight up behind...and then dropped it down onto the ground, exhausted. ‘It’s no good. You’re too far away to scratch.’

‘Okay, fine. You take a rest like a pensioner. I’ll go and look for a real fox to help us.’

Akira didn't move, but Daiki put a hand out to pull him back in anyway. Then leaned in to his ear and whispered, 'no point aggravating, it really does take about six hours to do a full recharge.'

'Then we might as well walk back into the dungeon ourselves.'

Daiki looked back at the small regiment of guards, some of them smoking festival crack sticks, and the boat house beyond. Akira was right, it would be impossible to get to it without the fox's light trick.

But maybe that's not the best way, he thought, switching to the eastern side of the shore. A boathouse is an obvious target. So obvious that the guards probably should've hidden inside and ambushed them. But they were out there now, in plain sight, and...it wasn't a boat house they needed, just a boat.

'I think I know somewhere,' he said, turning back to Akira and the sunken-faced fox.

'That isn't a dungeon?'

'Not too far from here. Off the map too.'

'Does it have a boat?'

'It did when I served there.'

'Served?'

Daiki nodded, padding down his robes. 'I wasn't always a mage.'

'Military?'

'Temple.'



‘Wah, so that shrine story you spun in the dungeon was true...sneaky, fucking monks.’ Akira tried to fake spit on the dirt, but some phlegm really did spill out so he did it again, hitting the fox directly in the eye.

‘You’re dead, ashigaru.’

‘Sorry, wayward shot. I’ll make it up to you later. When Holy Daiki here gets us to that temple. How far is it exactly?’

‘I don’t know for sure it has a boat...but it will probably be empty. No one lives there.’

‘Which means no one can rat us out or chop our heads off. Right. Good. Here’s the plan then. We crawl back to the treeline, get up slow, pretend to be a tree and then run. And this time don’t step on that drunk guy. Okay?’

Daiki answered by rotating and starting his crawl, while the fox glimmered just enough silver to get its body airborne and float back into the red and white beads.

‘That was easy,’ said Akira, taking a last look at the guard encampment and muttering *kuso* under his breath as he saw another figure arrive, this one tall, blue-eyed and fond of twisting up the bodies of young men into...something not very nice to look at.

Ah well, he thought, shifting himself around, at least the demon General’s over there and not hiding at Daiki’s temple.

Which better have a boat.

And no lurking guards.

Otherwise...



## CHAPTER 48

### SESSSKAT OR SEX CAT?

‘Why are you out here?’

‘My Lord?’

‘The boathouse, outside of it. Why?’

‘Err...’

‘Tongue. Speak.’

The lead guard who had stealth ambitions one day to be First General of the Suwa Clan looked around at his subordinates for help, for a distraction....and then mentally cut off their lips as each one in turn pretended that the dirt on the ground was more interesting than his immediate future.

‘Because you are an incompetent,’ finished the blue-stained figure of Lord Jun’ya, gesturing at the troop standing around the boathouse, at least two of them hiding a rolled-up, still burning herb joint inside their mouths. ‘Lounging around like Heian poets, advertising your presence to everyone and anyone in the entire province.’

‘General...’ The lead guard raised a hand, coughing to make it a little less challenging. ‘It was obviously not my intention to assemble outside in this fashion.’

‘Yet here you are.’

‘No, but when we arrived, we had to make sure the boathouse was clear, and...after that, I was going to give the order to conceal ourselves inside, wait for the prisoners to appear, ambush them...’

‘And yet here you are,’ repeated the Suwa General, emitting a warning flash of blue light at a nearby guard who had just started to leak out smoke.

‘Yes, but only due to the arrival of the ancillary troop. We came out to-...to tell them to be quiet, to hide inside and...things got a little complicated. And then, of course, you arrived.’

‘I understand.’

‘Err...thank you, General.’

‘You are weak *and* incompetent. And will be executed as soon as the ink on the order is dry.’

The lead guard told himself not to freeze, it would make him look even weaker, but his face wasn’t listening.

Not only did he freeze, but he stammered out a faint, ‘please, no,’ too.

‘However, as the rest of your troop is equally incompetent, I will give you one final chance to avoid your fate. Find the prisoners, bring them to me, and the punishment is rescinded.’

‘Rescinded...that means reversed? Not going to happen?’

Lord Jun'ya rubbed the dried-up cranberry juice, blue blood, battle paint, whatever it was on his cheek and then gradually turned it into a harder and angrier scratch the more he thought about what he was surrounded by.

Was this the best Suwa had to offer?

Incompetence and superstitious nonsense. Dragging those giant trees down to the temple gardens every year, digging in those green sticks everywhere, not having the brains to invent electricity, computers, space craft, TV serials, coffee machines, magi-bongs, guillotines, sex-bots, agoniser booths, the internet.

*Kuso*, he thought, looking to the trees. No feeding session is worth this. The quicker I find that backdoor portal the better.

‘General, what should we do now?’ asked one of the guards he’d dragged with him from the dungeon.

Lord Jun'ya stopped scratching and examined the fingernail. There was a deeper, moister shade of something blue on it...his own blood. Noticing the stares of some of the nearby guards, he quickly wiped it on his yukata and pointed over at the eastern side of Lake Suwa.

‘Send a group of six to the eastern road block, check if they’ve seen anything. And another two to the shoreline rocks. The prisoners may try to escape through the weeds.’

‘You think they’d risk it...Sir?’

Biting down on the top of his tongue, the Suwa General ran alert eyes up the shore and then slowly back down again. It was getting lighter now, dawn was almost breaking, and he could just about make out a dot in the distance.

‘Would they know about that?’ he muttered, mostly to himself.

‘General?’

‘That little pocket temple down shore, is it inhabited currently?’

‘Err...I don’t think so. The monks just go there to throw blessing salt on the water. The lake water, I mean.’

‘Does it have a boat?’

‘I’m...not certain. Probably not.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Would you like to send some men over there?’

It was a long minute before Lord Jun’ya answered, and when he did, the two guards with herbal rollies in their mouth finally lost the battle and spat them out.

‘Add those two to the execution list,’ the Suwa General told the lead guard, who was still in a slight daze from picturing his own head being lopped off the week after.

‘Yes, General.’

‘As for the temple, I will go myself. With the two of you, and three others. You may choose at your own discretion from among this wretched supply.’

The guard from the dungeon turned and did a quick head count of the troop assembled, checking to see that the numbers matched the new commands.

Luckily, they did.

But it meant there would only be eight guards left to keep watch over the boathouse. Including three who were now scheduled for execution. Not the best way to keep your men motivated.

But then he was just a guard, not a seasoned General from a province on the other side of Japan.

With a weirdly ill-fitting face.

And mysterious, blue blood.

No, he cautioned, slapping himself mentally. Don’t think about it. Obey the order. Follow your superior.

‘Well, are you broken?’ prompted Lord Jun’ya, already three gigantic strides down the shoreline. ‘Select the men and follow. Now.’

‘Yes, General,’ answered the dungeon guard, flinching as, for some reason, his brain showed him a picture of his own head bobbing on a Hell lake of roiling blue blood. ‘Right away.’



~~~

A few kilometres farther along the shore, where the treeline retreated deeper inland and a long patch of jagged rocks took its place, two silhouettes slowly morphed into the coloured-in figures of Miho and Aya as the sun crept over the mountains to the east.

In one way, extra light was an asset, highlighting the wet patches on certain rocks and preventing them from slipping into the lake. Or slipping and cracking their heads on other rocks.

But from the human aspect, it was trouble. More light equalled a much greater chance of guards spotting them from the treeline, or the shore to the south, which they'd just reluctantly left behind.

‘You think there’s anyone in there?’

‘The trees? No, not here. Too random. And the road’s not that close at this part.’

‘What about Akira and the others, you think they’re okay?’

Aya stopped, moving her right zori away from a slippery patch she almost hadn’t noticed.

‘I know I’ve asked it already, but...’

‘Seven hundred times.’

‘...I’m worried about them. They went the other way and...I don’t know...just feels like we should go back, try and find them.’

And get caught again, thought Aya, choosing a spot on the rock opposite and jumping across. Or worse, murdered on the spot. Or worse than that, murdered by that psychopathic fox bounty hunter.

‘You’re not answering,’ Miho said, his voice edging towards insistent.

‘We need to keep going, get to the north side of the lake. Put distance between us and the Suwa guards.’

‘And the others?’

‘They’re probably doing the same thing.’

‘You really believe that?’

‘Akira’s not stupid. Neither is the fox. And, unlike us, they have weapons.’

‘Yeah, the fox...’

Miho dangled his zori over a jagged shard of rock, losing himself in its sharp lines for a moment. Then looked across at Aya three rocks away, preparing herself mentally to jump to the next one.

Sex cat, he thought, knowing it was the wrong way to pronounce it. Not human and zero conscience, according to the fox, who had eaten a guard in front of them...well, partially eaten...borderline feral...but Aya, a sex cat, possibly on the run from a murder charge, responsible for getting them out of the dungeon, strangely calming to be around, princess of lies and no backstory.

It was confusing. Perhaps dangerous.

But also still Aya.

He blinked a few times, filling in the rocky scene, watching one of the only friends he had in this province jump across to another rock.

No, she couldn't be a murderer, it was impossible.

The fox was wrong.

Or misinformed.

Or manipulating them all.

'Are you pretending to be a totem?' Aya called over, careful not to put any depth on the volume of her voice.

Miho blinked again and instinctively jumped over to the nearest rock. And then over to another. And another. Until he was only one behind his comrade.

'We really can't go back for them,' Aya said, shaking her head to give it a visual cue.

'It's not that.'

Aya opened her mouth, possibly to say *what is it then*, then ran teeth along her bottom lip instead.

'The fox...'

'Ah, that again.'

‘...it said you murdered someone.’

‘Can we talk about this after we’re on the north side of the lake?’

‘Said that your type is sociopathic...the sex cat...that you don’t care about anyone else.’

Aya laughed, kicking a little rock fragment into the water.

‘Sessskat.’

‘Sesss kat,’ repeated Miho slowly.

‘Better.’

‘Sesss kat.’

‘Yes.’

‘Sessskat.’

‘Okay, okay, you’ve got it. A sessskat. Yes, that’s what I am. Not of your world. Not human.’ Aya paused, trying to look Miho in the eye, but holding it only for a second before glancing down at the water grating against the edge of the rocks below. ‘Every night, for around four or five hours, I turn into a...kind of mosquito...with toxin that can put humans to sleep. That’s how I knocked out the guards at the dungeon. If you were still wondering...’

‘A little bit.’

‘Well, now you know.’

Miho slouched down a bit, trying to catch her eye. ‘There’s nothing else?’

‘You mean my criminal record?’

‘Err...differences...between sex...sessskat and humans.’

‘No.’

‘Nothing inside...like blood colour or-’

Aya dug her heel into the rock, so hard it made a little white scuff mark. ‘I think that’s enough for now.’

‘But-’

‘If we get caught again, I’ll draw you a diagram, okay? Until then, just...I’m not human. That’s it.’

‘Okay.’

‘And not a murderer. Or a sociopath.’

The last line was spoken in a muttered voice, almost too faint to catch, but Miho was close enough to hear it and definitely close enough to call her a liar. Or to ask her to prove it. Or to turn around and start walking back the way they’d come, away from the demon Sessskat and her rhizome network of lies.

But he didn’t.

He took a breath, and jumped over to her rock, feigning a slip on a moderately wet patch and then letting her reel him back in with a surprisingly strong arm.

‘The more I think about it...the fox...is probably not the most trustworthy demon out there.’

‘That one? No. Not even close.’

‘You know others?’ he asked, switching back to his normal, *curious about everything* tone.

‘One or two.’

‘In Japan? Or...the other place...your land?’

Before Aya could respond, or make an excuse not to, an owl hooted from the treeline about fifty metres away. Both of them glanced over, expecting to see a pair of yellow eyes staring back, but then they realised it was sunrise and it probably wasn’t an owl, but a daytime bird.

A daytime bird coming out from the trees, cloaked in a Suwa-issue yukata, with a katana fully drawn.

‘Down, quickly,’ said Aya, pulling Miho by the dōbuku sleeve and almost sending them both into the water below.

‘*Kuso...*’

‘Quiet.’

Luckily, the rock was dry, and their zori could get a decent foothold.

‘You think he saw us?’ asked Miho, his nose almost touching Aya’s cheek.

‘I don’t know.’

‘His katana was out.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I think he saw us.’

‘We’ll have to wait. See if he comes over. Jump into the water and swim if we have to.’

Miho pulled away a bit from Aya’s face and took in the full spread of Lake Suwa. He wasn’t good at arbitrary measurements, but it looked at least a hundred miles wide. Maybe fifty. Or less. To be honest, he had no idea.

‘Just...stay quiet.’

Miho nodded, clipping Aya on the forehead as he turned back, forgetting how close she was.

‘Sorry...’

‘It’s okay. Not fatal.’

He edged his arm up, putting his hand on the spot he’d collided with, and started to gently rub.

For once, she didn’t say anything. Or try to curb it. She just sat there, wedged between two large rocks, and allowed herself to be rubbed by a human.

A human friend.

A human friend who had no idea who she really was...back in the other place...that she would never, ever go back to.

Not for anything.

finite
circle-like
distant stringy, you're
ferocious past
kaleidoscope forms of
sapiant
fickle cruel
crueller
cruellest

CHAPTER 49 IN THE RED CIRCLE



You're a prisoner, I think

The temple was more of a call-in centre than an actual place of spiritual worship.

Laid out with only the most basic of furnishings.

A listening bench.

Totem sketches on the walls.

Bar counter complete with seven approved variations of monk-made wine.

Two drinking stools.

A back room for meditation and atavistic yelling.

And a balcony at the far rear, with a tied-up boat, perfect for lake reflections under a full moon.

Or any shape of moon really.

The mood of the place was matched by the lack of human activity, or animal activity – even the ants couldn't be bothered with it - the slight breeze outside causing vibrations on the wooden structure responsible for the only noise audible to human ears.

Until, that is, the door panel slid open, in two centimetre shifts every ten seconds, and a grubby, exhausted-looking ashigaru poked his head in.

‘Seems peaceful enough,’ Akira whispered into the space behind.

‘Check the beams at the sides,’ replied his mage comrade, voice basically just breath with word muons drifting around inside of it. ‘If they’re hiding in the main room, that’s where they’ll be.’

Akira did as instructed, moving forward and left alongside the wall, green katana out at a low-diagonal angle, eyes in hyper-scan mode.

The first beam was clear, no sign of any lurking Suwa.

Unless they were lodged in the slats by the ceiling.

He looked up, pointing his blade the same way.

Nope, nothing. Not even a rogue owl.

Looking back at the doorway, he whispered for Daiki to follow him in and check the rear, but it was redundant as the mage was already well on his way.

Ah, good, a pro-active comrade. Much better than the traumatised wretch from the castle. Or that weird, melancholic version at the giant superstition hole.

Akira re-adjusted his stance, then moved left towards the second beam.

Though, to be fair, that first corpse was pretty bleak. Twisted, skin stained blue, partially eviscerated...

He coughed, keeping it faint.

No, don't wander off. The beam, focus on that. Then the boat. Then getting away from this cursed fucking region...Suwa and Shingen and ninja and lunatic demons...well, most of them.

'No-one here,' sounded out abruptly, so loud that Akira reflex-stabbed the tribute rug stretched out over the tatami.

'Kuso...'

'No broken boat either.'

Akira pulled the katana out of the rug and jabbed it vaguely across to the other side of the room. 'Keep your voice down, you fool. They could be hiding outside.'

'It's fine, no one knows about this place. Or if they do they never remember it.' Daiki moved to the bar and took one of the wine bottles off the shelf...and gasped in panic as the wooden slab tilted down and leftwards.

Reaching out his spare hand, he grabbed the nearest bottle that was about to slide off and then watched as the rest of them sailed off the edge and plunged without restraint down onto the floor.

Luckily, most of the area was covered in tatami so only half the bottles ended up smashed, but still...

'What the queen of hell are you doing over there?' yelled Akira, forgetting entirely about his own volume setting.

Daiki didn't respond; he just clutched the two bottles in both hands and stared at the doorway. Then the back room entrance. Then the doorway again.

After two, maybe three minutes, nothing appeared.

No guards charged in with their katanas out. And no one *sneaked* in with their katanas out either. No one dropped down through the roof or crawled up from the floor. No one poked their head in and said, 'did I hear a party, brother?'

'I think we're okay,' concluded the mage, finally, putting the bottles down on the counter and taking out two cups from somewhere beneath.

Akira shook his head, and the tip of the katana, disappearing out the front door for another minute before coming back in and saying that somehow, no one in Suwa province is reacting to the loudest bottle smashing in recorded history.

'Wasn't that loud,' mumbled Daiki, pouring out dark crimson wine into two cups and then downing both of them.

'Yeah, right.'

'And only half of them broke.'

'Let's just focus on getting that boat out, okay?' Akira walked over to the counter, sheathing his katana on the way. 'After you've poured another cup for me.'

'As you wish, *meijin*.'

Daiki tilted the bottle over the first cup and filled it almost to the rim, then switched to the other one, his head lifting up halfway through and freezing a smile, completely oblivious as the wine spilled out over the top and onto Akira's left hand.

‘Gods of-...’ stuttered the ashigaru, pulling his hand away. ‘What are you doing? Stop that.’

It was loud enough, but not for Daiki, it appeared, as his hand stayed at the same angle and the wine finally stopped leaking out only when the bottle was borderline empty.

Realising that something was wrong, probably to the rear, Akira spun round, pulling out his katana in the same motion and pointing it at the female figure framed in the doorway.

No, wait...he knew this one.

The izakaya witch.

‘You’re here?’ mumbled Reiko, left hand drifting slowly round the back of her waist.

‘Hands where I can see them,’ shouted Akira, darting across to the tribute rug in three strides. ‘Daiki, check the back, quick.’

‘No, no, no, it’s just me,’ Reiko answered, giving up on the back grab and bringing both hands roofwards. ‘No others.’

‘Right. No one. Just ambled along all by yourself.’

‘I’m telling the truth.’

Akira shifted onto his other leg, keeping the katana steady. ‘What *are* you doing here then?’

‘At my own temple?’

‘You’re not a monk. And it’s sunrise. Why are you here?’

Reiko watched as Daiki came out of his trance, and then smirked as the first thing he did was down the drink he’d just overpoured. Typical Daiki. Always time for a shōchū or ten.

‘Daiki, check the back...now.’

‘You don’t need to panic, it really is only me.’

‘We’ll see.’

‘I have no need to lie, ashigaru. And, yes, I do have a dagger tucked into the back of my yukata. I want to be very transparent about that. But it is just for general protection. Nothing more.’

‘Drop it on the floor. Slowly.’ Akira half turned back, eyes on the back room entrance. ‘Daiki...’

The mage re-appeared, shaking his head.

‘No-one?’

‘Unless they’re hiding underwater. No.’

Akira turned back and nodded in tentative approval as Reiko pulled out the dagger from her belt and held it up vertically in the air, showing that she wasn’t going to throw it at anyone, then let it slip out of her hand and drop handle first onto the tatami.

‘Over to the wall, slowly.’

Again, Reiko did as she was told, keeping both hands up even when she was seated on the listening bench.

‘You’re doing the monks a favour?’ asked Daiki, walking up parallel to the ashigaru, who was trying to keep his katana straight and ready, but was clearly starting to feel the burden of the night’s activities.

‘Regretfully.’

‘For the festival?’

Reiko finally lowered her hands, nodding.

‘But...why here?’

‘Someone has to do it. And I got the shortest straw. The very shortest, it turns out.’

Daiki glanced at Akira, following the length of his increasingly shaky blade. ‘She’s not our enemy. It’s okay.’

‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

‘Trust me, I know her.’

‘And I don’t.’

Reiko coughed. ‘That’s not entirely true.’

‘Was that sarcasm?’

‘Just a reminder note. That we have already met. And I allowed you to stay at my izakaya overnight.’

‘Probably to rob me while I slept.’

‘Nonsense. I could’ve done that while you were blind drunk.’

‘Gods, woman, are you trying to get stabbed?’

Reiko opened her mouth to let out more facetiousness then clamped it shut fast when she saw the green katana moving closer to her neck. And kept it shut until Daiki stepped in and put a surprisingly non-shaky hand on the ashigaru’s shoulder.

‘She is not a threat, I promise you. Put the blade down.’

‘Don’t buy it.’

‘Please, Akira.’

‘Too much of a co-incidence.’

‘Or not a co-incidence at all. Look, we’re all tired. She’s unarmed now. Let’s just get in the boat and go.’

Akira mouthed the words back to himself, expression still sceptical, green katana still arched aggressively despite his fatigue.

Not our enemy.

An izakaya owner.

In the heart of Suwa territory.

At a pebble-sized temple this early.

Oddly calm.

Did it make sense?

Not one bit.

But the boat was right there, and she did seem to be alone.

‘Fine, we’ll do it your way,’ he said, allowing the mage to shift a hand down to his wrist and guide the katana floor-wards. ‘But you have to knock her out first.’

‘What?’

‘Put her to sleep so she doesn’t run out and warn anyone.’

‘I won’t say a word,’ protested Reiko, raising her hands again.

‘Not talking to you.’

‘She won’t,’ agreed Daiki, bending down and picking up the dagger. ‘Duty requires her to stay inside the temple.’

‘Sure, if you believe that shit.’

Reiko coughed, half raising her hand. ‘It’s true, I can’t leave the temple grounds. Not without condemning myself to forty iterations of Hell in the afterlife.’

‘Forty what?’

‘And she’s my friend,’ added the mage.

‘Yours, not mine.’

‘A close friend.’

‘Close to death and betrayal.’

‘Akira...’

‘I know my own name, mage. You don’t need to repeat it.’

Daiki breathed out, frustrated, and looked towards the back room entrance. No sign of any Suwa guards or back up. ‘The boat...let’s just go out there...and leave. No knocking anyone out.’

‘Gods, you’re worse than fucking Miho.’

‘I’ve told you, she’s my friend. I vouch for her. She is not dangerous. I promise you.’

Akira avoided looking directly at the mage’s face as he knew the dopey cow expression would annoy him, so he tried Reiko’s instead. Ah, she was good...not pleading, not desperate, sincere eyes, yet slight confusion at the same time, as in, what the hell were these two guys doing in my temple?

But then, every other muscle in his body was calling this woman a liar. And sparing her would be the ruin of them.

‘Look, if we get on the boat, they won’t be able to get us anyway,’ continued Daiki, tugging Akira lightly on the yukata sleeve. ‘It’s about four kilometres across to the northern shore, twenty if you run the perimeter, on uneven ground. We’ll have a clear head start, whatever happens.’

The words were true enough and, after the mage had repeated them a few more times, Akira said as much, telling Daiki to go out and untie the boat.

‘We go together,’ he answered, glancing at Reiko and mouthing *I’m sorry about all this.*

She mouthed back *detach when you get the chance*, but it got lost in the air between as Daiki was already walking the cynical ashigaru over to the back entrance. He tried a few more times to send the mage out ahead, most likely so he could come back and gut her, but Daiki remained adamant, eventually getting him out as the head of the snake.

‘Detach, you drunken idiot,’ she whispered, to an empty temple boathouse.

Outside, there were sounds of water splashing, moans of *stop rocking the boat so much, keep it steady*, then a return to pure dawn quietude.

Reiko stayed on the listening bench for another minute or two, regulating her breaths back to a more mundane level. Then got up and walked around the temple space, pretending to examine the totem sketches pinned to the walls. *Not dead, still here. Not dead, still here. Not dead, still here, still breathing, still with a decent chance of finishing the night in bed with a gregarious, beautiful kunoichi. Maybe an onsen first, wash off all that dungeon grime. All*

this...nonsense...childish warfare shit. Gods, it was tiring. The whole lot of it, every side...every loss.

After what felt like an hour but was probably closer to fifteen minutes, she stopped and looked at the dagger that Daiki had surreptitiously left behind on the counter. Re-activating her brain, she started running through the possible stories she could tell Misora to explain this...whatever it was.

One: lie outright, say she didn't see anything.

Two: she came in, the boat was already gone.

Three: they were here when she entered, outnumbered her, but she managed to convince them she wasn't a threat.

Four: she blacked out and woke up on this bench.

Standing up, she walked over to the counter and picked up the dagger. Rolled the grip in her hand a few times. Then placed it on a hidden shelf underneath.

Number two seemed to be the best shot. She got here, boat was already gone. Three was more truthful, less risky in terms of telling the thing, but ultimately *more* risky as the inevitable follow-up question would be, why didn't they kill you? Or why didn't they knock you out?

Gods, maybe I should've just let the ashigaru whack me on the head?

Wouldn't that have been easier?

The cup on the counter, half full of temple wine, gave her nothing, no answers, no guarantees, so she picked it up and drank it dry. Stared at the empty cup for a good ten minutes, maybe longer, then poured out another shot. A generous one.

Okay, number two it is.

Hopefully, it's Misora who does the interview and not-

'You're here?' a familiar, slightly robotic voice asked, the sound floating across from the back room entrance.

Reiko steadied herself, controlling the urge to grab the dagger and throw it pre-emptively at Ichiko's face.

Instead, she downed the shot and poured out two fresh cups. 'You been out back?'

'Where's Kanae? The boy?'

'Interesting response.'

'Nearby?'

'Hopefully not.'

'What?'

Reiko paused, taking a sip of shōchū, tasting it. 'I'm sorry, Ichiko, I know she's your protégé, but that girl is far too annoying to function around.'

'You left her alone?' asked Ichiko, moving with one hand on her belt dagger towards the front side of the counter.

‘She’ll be fine. And so will I now that I don’t have to listen to her drone on about that fucking ant. She’s not going to forgive you for that, by the way. Said something about finding the ant’s family and training them to attack you when you’re asleep.’

Ichiko pulled out one of the two stools, hovering for a second with her hand still on her belt, then finally relented and took a seat. To complete the picture, she placed both hands flat on the table and studied the bottle of temple wine.

Keeping her left hand under the counter, Reiko pushed a cup across. ‘Drink?’

The kunoichi glanced at the intruder, peered down at its still swirling surface...

‘Don’t worry, it’s temple-approved.’

...then went back to the bottle.

‘You’re right. That girl is unsalvageable. Ignorant. Insolent. Brain like a sponge. Bizarre fascination with protecting animals yet eats meat for every meal.’

‘I’m glad you see my side of it.’

Ichiko gave up on the bottle and switched to the liquid in the cup, a single bubble popping on the surface.

‘What are you doing here anyway? Where’s Misora?’

‘Checking the treeline.’

Reiko nodded, taking a sip of her drink. 'I assume you saw the little jetty out back, before you came in.'

'What of it?'

'Well...there is a slight chance...that they took a boat from here.'

Ichiko stared forward, one hand perched on the edge of the counter.

'The monks usually keep a boat outside, tied up. But it's not there.' Another sip of the wine, a cough. 'Could have been taken out hours ago. Or days ago.'

'I see.'

'No definite way to tell.'

Ichiko flicked at a splinter then left the counter and wrapped her right hand round the whole circumference of the cup. Stared down at the bubble-less surface.

She doesn't drink, thought Reiko, edging her left hand onto the grip of the dagger underneath. And she's being nice. Amiable. Something is not right here.

'I did notice the space where the boat had been tied up.' Ichiko raised the cup, spinning it in a little half circle. 'There were wet patches near the base of pole.'

'Wet patches?'

'Tiny little tears crawling down the side.'

‘Must’ve been recent then.’

The cup stopped, swaying one way then the other, Ichiko’s head tilting in unison. ‘Could have been them, could have been you...’

‘Me?’

‘...putting cypress leaves out for old friends.’

The last words came out poetic, painted in deathly red, and Reiko processed them instantly, her hand clamping down tight on the dagger and pulling it out fast, preparing to swipe across at neck-height...

...then deviating to nowhere as a flying wave of wine crashed into her face.

The room turned off, then on again, blurred with water lines, a flash of yukata sleeve, something cold entering her neck, something strong pulling her down head-first onto the counter.

She tried to speak, but blurted out globs of blood instead.

Tried to slice the dagger out in a low-defensive block, but...

Tried to...

Couldn’t...

‘There, there, don’t flail,’ said the soothing voice of her attacker, pulling the blade from Reiko’s neck and letting the blood flow out. ‘In the red circle, we relent. In the green void, we accept. In the white space, we end.’

‘Miso...’ Reiko slurred, coughing up more blood, the remains of the temple wine running a solitary stream into her eye. ‘She’ll...’

‘In the red circle, we relent. In the green void, we accept. In the white space, we end. Say the words, traitor, and you may be saved.’

‘Mis...’

‘In the red circle, we relent. In the green void, we accept. In the white space, we end. Say them.’

‘She...’

‘The words, traitor.’

More blood, out from her body, onto the counter, the wine washing unapologetically over her eye, forcing it shut and

Reiko tried to raise the dagger with only her thoughts...to stab Ichiko in the mouth...to stop her parroting that ritualistic nonsense but

it was done

the temple into liquid, melting, evaporating, dissipating

void blackness creeping in from all sides

flesh tentacles

from Misora’s naked body

reaching out

perhaps not real yet

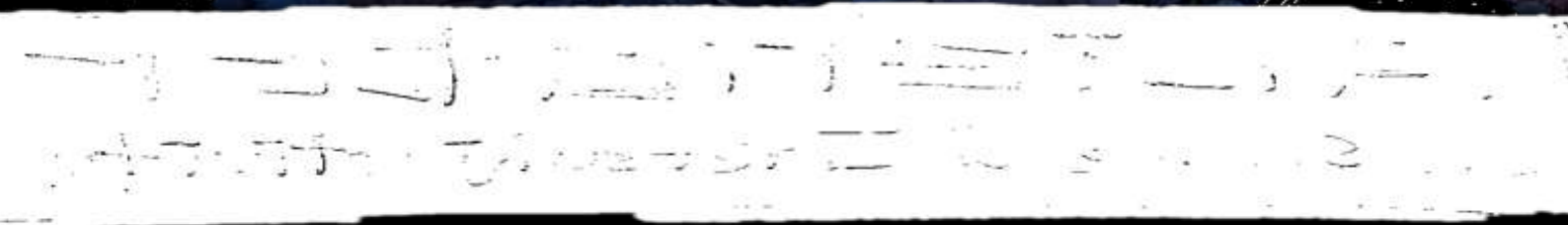
void

black as night

calling a name, guiding her in

away from this chaos

all these fucking-



CHAPTER 50

BLUE RUIN

Loop and a loop and a loop and a loop and a loop and a loop
thought the koi to itself as it curved around another wooden leg
of the pier, unaware that it was a pier that the wood was attached to,
or even the concept of what a pier was.

Another few loops and it would have to swim back home
deal with the family again
the horror stories about giant catfish and death claws from the
upper world

constant fear and paranoia.

or, it countered, swimming around another wooden leg, I could
just stay here for a while longer, enjoy my own thoughts, the quietude
of-

An eruption, half the lake folding in on itself, danger.

The koi instinctively darted downwards, feeling something brush
against its tail as the current caught up and pushed it left.

Turning back, it caught sight of the enormous God mask sinking
past, eyes four times the size of its own, reeds fixed to the beast's pale
head, blood seeping almost apologetically from the neck.

Not a catfish, it told itself as it sped back towards the centre of
the lake, towards safety. Not coming for me.

On the pier above, the shadowy figure of Ichiko watched from a kneeling position as Reiko's body shifted from bold to faint to invisible to did it ever truly happen?

If Misora asked, no. *I have no idea where she is. Why don't we find Kanae and ask her? Oh, she wandered off on her own. Then she could be anywhere.*

Or she could just tell the truth?

Rubbing non-existent blood off her hands, Ichiko pulled herself back to her feet and looked out across Lake Suwa. In the distance, about two kilometres north, she could see the tiny shape of something that could be a boat...with both targets potentially on board...but she couldn't be certain. The sun light was brightening, but not quickly enough. And even if it were midday, it was probably too far to make a definite confirmation.

But it was them...it had to be.

The boat had been taken within the last hour, the wooden boards were still damp, and Reiko's lunge for the dagger at least half proved it.

A few bubbles popped up on the surface near her zori, drawing attention back down.

Trapped air, she thought, going back over the kill...her memory of it...confirming that there was no fakery.

Trapped air or fish panic.

She cleared her throat, brushed down her dōbuku, the stolen yukata poking out underneath. Checked for bloodstains. Made excuses for any future ones Misora spotted that she hadn't accounted for.

It's from before, the dungeon.

A guard's blood.

Reiko's blood.

She tried to kill me.

Traitor...helped them escape...she admitted it.

All were acceptable and the act was done and there were still two targets halfway across the lake that, with a bit of luck and discipline, could be intercepted on the northern shore.

That was what she had to focus on.

~~~

Back inside the drop-in temple, Ichiko sat down on the same high stool she'd used as a murder platform, and slowly rotated the cup of shōchū.

It was mostly empty.

Just a small puddle of alcohol mixed with some loose drops of Reiko blood.

And each time she turned it a little, the blood mixed into the shōchū a tiny bit more.

Mixed and diluted.

Outside, the wind blew against the door, making it rattle. Clearly made by a novice as the track that the panel had been attached to was far too loose. Maybe they didn't get much wind out on this side of the lake. It was odd. There hadn't been any wind when she'd come in. Was a storm coming? Hopefully not. She had no patience for that kind of weather. And Misora would probably call it a metaphor.

Gods, Misora...where was she?

How long did it take to check the tree line?

Wouldn't she stumble in any second now, see everything?

See what she'd done...

Ichiko abandoned the cup and wrapped fingers around Reiko's dagger, rotating the handle of that instead.

Then shifting to the blade and turning it that way.

This temple, she thought, glancing around at the iconography on the far wall, is not a true temple. Nothing can be judged from within here. These icons are not my icons. These gods are not my gods. This carpentry is not competent carpentry.

*In the red circle, we relent.*

*In the green void, we...*

Behind her, the door rattled again, causing her grip to sharpen and her hand to cut itself on the edge of the blade.

‘Kuso...’

She wiped the streak of blood off her fingers and dabbed some loose shōchū from the counter onto the wound. Then told herself to stop moping and get out there, find Misora and command them north.

Putting the order into an internal Shingen voice, she pushed up off the high stool and headed towards the door, almost tripping on an uneven chunk of tatami.

‘Not a fucking temple,’ she said out loud, kicking out at the mat.

~~~

Outside, the sun was halfway up, and the shore of Lake Suwa reacted by producing a kind of surreal azure glow across its terrain.

There was no one within sight as Ichiko descended the four steps from the temple entrance to the dirt that did a pretty poor impression of sand, but she was too professional to slouch or breathe out dramatically.

Absolute quiet can be solitude or prelude.

A prelude to ambush or assassination, usually. Or a lone figure sneaking up from behind, with expertly concealed footsteps...

Ichiko spun round fast and swiped at the rogue fingers reaching out to prod her on the shoulder.

‘Gods of-...what the hell are you doing?’

‘Kuso. Idiot.’

‘You almost slashed my fucking hand off,’ continued Misora, clutching an imaginary wound on her left palm.

‘Blind footsteps...in this light...’

‘I whispered to you when you came out the door, what are you talking about? You nodded back at me.’

Ichiko pulled the dagger back in close to her side, squinting at the door of the temple that she’d just come out of.

‘Not the biggest of nods, but-’

‘I did not hear you.’

‘Okay, well, fine, we both messed up then.’ Misora stretched out her fingers and pointed at the rear side of the temple. ‘I heard a splash round back and went to investigate. Some blood on the boards, and damp too. Which means...’

‘They took the boat.’

‘...there was probably-...yeah, that’s what I thought. The wood was still damp.’

‘I saw the blood too. One of them must be injured.’

‘Did you see them leave?’

‘What?’

‘The ashigaru, the boy...were they on the boat? Did you see them?’

Ichiko blinked like a raccoon on the branch of a falling tree, then quickly compensated by opening her eyes to the size of honey melons. ‘A shape in the distance...heading to the north shore...I think it was them.’

Misora nodded, tracing the route of the shore back to the northern side. ‘Gonna be impossible to get round there before they land. We should find Kanae and Reiko first, go from there.’

‘That...is not necessary.’

‘Huh? You mean we should go off without them?’

Ichiko tightened her grip on the dagger, shifting its aim up from the ground to Misora’s knees.

On the shore around them, the wind picked up again, this time forcing the hair of both kunoichi to flutter about chaotically for three seconds before settling down and leaving them looking like they’d just wrestled a forest.

Misora pushed the tangled hair strands off her face and ran through a few curses, then added a hushed *kuuuuuso* as three figures emerged from the tree line to the west.

‘Behind. Three,’ she said quickly, not bothering to point.

Ichiko took the hand away from her own hair-coated face and spun, quickly sliding the dagger up into the sleeve of her yukata.

‘We’re from the temple, early shift,’ coached Misora, as the three figures, who they could now see were Suwa guards, marched towards them, all with their katanas drawn.

‘Kill and run,’ replied Ichiko, loosening her left sleeve.

‘No, no...diplomacy.’

‘You take the one on the right, I’ll handle the other two.’

‘We’re from the temple, it’s the early shift,’ repeated Misora, stepping up to the side of Ichiko and gripping her left wrist, as her other arm moved to wave at the three guards, who were now little more than ten metres away.

‘Stop taking charge,’ said Ichiko, shaking off Misora’s hand, then spinning round the other way as two more figures appeared to their rear. ‘Kuso...’

‘This does not look like a Suwa dungeon,’ announced Lord Jun’ya, light blue eyes on Ichiko’s sleeve as the wind shook it and something metallic flashed from within.

‘Of all the fucking luck,’ mumbled Misora, dropping the greeting arm and moving for the dagger in her own sleeve. A sleeve that was now ensconced in blue mist, dragging her upwards into the air, then back with whiplash effect into the shallows of Lake Suwa.

She landed awkwardly on her shoulder and groaned as her body rolled up reflexively into a defensive posture, the pain running all the way down the length of her left arm.

‘Demon fraud,’ spat Ichiko, pulling up the rim of her sleeve and flicking a *bo-shuriken* at the Suwa General’s head...then freezing in bafflement as it curved in mid-air and lodged into the neck of the guard next to him.

‘Poor aim for a *kunoichi*,’ said Lord Jun’ya, watching with the compassion of a sociopathic cedar tree as his comrade dropped onto the dirt, not quite dead, but definitely on the way to it.

‘Ichiko...back,’ shouted Misora, rising to her feet, prepping a fresh dart.

It was a logical command, but Ichiko was beyond that level of rationalism, her left hand firing off three quick darts in succession as the rest of her body put distance between her and the apparently supernatural Suwa.

Contrary to Lord Jun’ya’s remark, her aim was excellent - she’d been in the top three dart throwers all through the academy - but all three missed their targets, the Suwa General dodging with an effortless shoulder feint, and the other two guards on the flank rolling with surprising adeptness onto the dirt.

Kuso, guards with actual training, she thought, pulling out her dagger. But if the snake is headless...

‘Back...Ichiko,’ Misora shouted again, holding position in the shallow water as she flung two of her own *bo-shuriken*, one missing

due to morning fatigue and the other hitting the side of the guard who was already dead.

The latter effort caught the attention of Lord Jun'ya, who managed a chuckle, before refocusing on the advancing figure of Ichiko, crouched low, dagger held back, ready to slash upwards.

Ah, predictable, he thought, opening himself up for the attack, and then saying 'ugh' as the Shingen kunoichi shifted aim at the last millisecond and sliced at his right leg.

Not a clean hit, but there was blood...or blue goo...which disoriented Ichiko enough for the Suwa General to parry her follow-up strike, this one an upwards throat slash, and then knock the dagger out of her hand completely.

'Cunning little ant,' he said, spotting flecks of blood on her neck and moving forward to lick them.

'Ichiko...'

Feeling the cold of his tongue coupled with Misora's primal yell, Ichiko rebooted, running through her options. No dagger, no dart access, no leverage for kick attacks. What else?

Teeth, she decided and, ignoring the feral shrieks of *back Ichiko* from Misora, pushed her face forward, aiming for the side of the Suwa General's throat.

Too far, too bearded.

Arggh, a different target then, something non-fatal, but enough to break the iron-clad grip he seemed to have on her neck.

Tilting her head left, she went in for the first lump within range, his ear lobe...and let out a whistle of air as something blunt pushed itself into her back.

‘Ichiko,’ Misora screamed again, finally ditching the shallow water and charging like a Mexican anarchist towards the blue-eyed demon.

For some reason, the other three guards stood there and did nothing, their faces rigid and dumbstruck, staring at the visceral body horror unfolding opposite.

Lord Jun’ya...their superior officer...pushing his left hand deep into the female ninja’s body...blood and blue slime oozing out...and his face...doing something to her neck...biting it?

‘Teeth off her, demon,’ yelled Misora, diving low and, despite some pretty sloppy technique, planting her dagger up and diagonal into the General’s gut.

His grip loosened instantly and Ichiko dropped, almost landing on Misora.

‘My uniform,’ he said with mild irritation, looking down at the wound, blue slime leaking out in fifteen different streams.

Keeping her dagger gripped tight, Misora half thought about striking again, ending a major Suwa target once and for all, but

something about the way he was reacting to a supposedly fatal knife wound told her to back off, pick up Ichiko and get the hell out of there.

‘Kill him,’ blurted out Ichiko, along with a drizzle of blood.
‘He’s Suwa...kill him. Now.’

Misora patted Ichiko on the shoulder and tried not to look at the blue shit dribbling out of her neck. Not human, she told herself. This man is not human. Stay and you’ll both die. Get to the lake and...maybe. Or stab him again and the others will run off. Then lop off his head and burn it. Bury the ashes at sea.

Both tracks of thoughts ran on for another ten, twenty seconds - the Suwa General still inspecting his stomach wound, Ichiko still coughing up blood [along with lunatic demands for her to kill the blue bastard] - and it was only when the guards switched back on and shouted at each other to gut the sneaky witches that Misora finally reached a decision.

Perhaps not an ideal one, but...faced with a demon who didn’t seem to feel pain or die like a human would...who leaked fluorescent blue blood...

‘What you...doing,’ spluttered Ichiko, trying and failing to hold up a defensive arm.

‘Saving us.’

‘No...’

‘Yes.’

Sliding her arm around Ichiko’s back, and flinching at the wetness, she pulled her towards the shore, getting waist deep before trying to think of a way to fight the guards about to intercept her while also preventing Ichiko from drowning.

Luckily, the dilemma was rendered superfluous as Lord Jun’ya finished with his wound examination and shouted at the three guards to stop.

Two of them obeyed immediately, while the third kept going, prepping his katana to strike at Misora’s back...and getting a dart in the neck for his trouble.

‘I said stop,’ boomed the Suwa General, standing at the edge of the shore, the hole in his stomach and eye sockets both emitting the strangest blue light.

The third guard sank beneath the surface, his arm locked around his own neck as if he were attempting to strangle himself, and the other two took a step back in retreat, shoulders hunched up a little in case of more darts.

‘Swim, little ants,’ Lord Jun’ya bellowed, eyes honing in on Misora. ‘See if you can make it to the other side.’

There was no smile or smirk attached, no way to know if he expected them to die on the way or actually make it to the northern shore, and the blue goo coating her hand made Misora realise that she

didn't care what he thought, demons were in their own little world, fuck them, and the important thing was to survive, her and Ichiko, together, so they could fix their wounds on dry land and start bickering with each other like teenagers again.

'Idiot...' muttered Ichiko, as Misora pulled her deeper into the lake, keeping her feet rooted to the lake bed until the water was up to her chin, then pushing upwards into an awkward doggy paddle.

'Four kilometres,' she said, relinquishing the alternative of *fuck off, he's not human, you've got blue demon blood all over you*, and focusing instead on the marathon swim ahead of her. 'Try to kick your legs.'

'We won't make it...'

'Try.'

'Too far.'

'Legs. Kick them.'

Ichiko drooled out another line of blue blood then groaned and did a solitary kick. Then groaned again. And did another kick. Another groan. Another kick. Until finally she established some limited form of rhythm.

'That's better.'

'Still won't make it,' Ichiko slurred, eyelids closing.

'Don't sleep...'

Her eyes came back open, stretching out to the fringes. ‘Too far...’

‘Yes, very far. Now for the right arm. Any movement will help.’

‘*Kasu...*’

Misora rode out the shock insult and waited for her comrade’s arm to start ploughing water. After a few seconds, and a few more insults, it finally sparked into action, not helping their progress across the lake that much, but definitely enough to keep her eyes open and her brain aware.

Which was the main aim.

And the secondary one: to avoid thinking about what all that blue slime was doing to her comrade’s insides.

Blue blood...blue eyes...unharmd by a dagger to the gut.

Misora told herself not to, but looked back anyway.

The Suwa General was still planted to the shore, flanked by the two surviving guards, watching them swim-flail with shining blue eyes, the pit in his stomach glowing like one of those magical doors from old Kyushu mythology.

If only Atta Noe were here, she thought, an image of a young girl’s butchered corpse appearing next to the purple demon in her head.

If only none of them were here, she corrected, hearing Ichiko's groans again and turning back to the lake ahead.

Fucking demons.

CHAPTER 51

I CAN'T GO WITH YOU



The blueish greeny vein ran long and intermittent through the
palm

faint in patches

at times vanishing completely

before reappearing and

‘I think he’s gone,’ whispered Aya at the rock face directly ahead of them both, the thing she’d been forced to stare at for the last twenty minutes. ‘Miho...you still there?’

Miho blinked like a farmer gawping in confusion at a hundred green chickens, then cleared his throat, saying, ‘kuso, sorry,’ instantly as he realised it could’ve given away their position.

Luckily, no guard head peered over the side of the rock above, and no one called out, ‘who’s there?’ or ‘what’s that chatter behind the rock?’ so they were safe.

For the moment.

‘Are you staring at my hand?’ Aya asked, noticing where his eyes were focused.

‘Sorry, I was just-’ He paused, wondering how normal it would be to tell her he’d been following the life line on her palm. Then deciding it wouldn’t be normal at all. In fact, back in his village, it was a sign of witchcraft. Not a good thing to say to a recently outed demon. Better just to change topic. ‘Is the guard gone?’

‘That’s what you’re gonna find out.’

‘Me?’

‘Okay, both of us, at the same time. Ready?’

‘What, now?’

Muttering ‘of course, idiot,’ under ghost-like breath, but keeping a mildly amused expression, Aya raised her head skywards, tilting to the left as she neared the top of the rock. As it turned out there was no need for such caution as the guard who’d come out from the tree line twenty minutes earlier had clearly gone back in as there was no sign of muscular legs or Suwa uniforms nearby.

‘All clear,’ she said, shifting her feet and then using both hands to clamber up the side of the rock. ‘Though they might come back again soon. Best if we hurry. Stay low.’

It wasn’t a question exactly, but she expected some kind of response and when all she heard was a gasped ‘wah’, she bit her

tongue, warned herself quickly not to lose it, and turned back to their hiding crevice between the larger rocks and the lake water below.

And said 'wah' too.

'Is that the fox again?' asked Miho, watching the blue field of light slowly start to merge with the sky in the distance.

'Don't know.'

'A beacon of some kind?'

Aya repeated *don't know* and continued her own open-mouthed gawping at the blue light show about two kilometres down the southern side of the shore. There was a chance it was the fox, incapacitating another batch of Suwa militia, but the colour seemed wrong, not white enough, and it would be suicide to announce its location like that a second time. No, far too reckless, even for a type like the fox. More likely it was...*kuso*...someone potentially worse.

The image of the twisted boy corpse from the castle flashed back into her head, provoking a flinch reflex. Not a shiver, or a shudder, or a tremble, she was too seasoned for all of that, but definitely a flinch.

'What do we do?' asked Miho, finally pulling himself up the rock face, using the bottom of Aya's yukata for the final part of the ascent.

'Go over to it?'

'What?'

'The light...if it is the fox, and the others...they could be in trouble. That could be a signal for help.'

Aya turned, about to launch into another vigorous shake of the head and tell him, sure, let's head to the same place half the Suwa Clan will also be heading, to fight them with our bare hands...

Then stopped.

What-

Somehow, with some hidden pocket of instinct, she half raised a hand in defence as what her brain warned was the trace of a ghost concubine used the handle of their not-ghost dagger to jab her in the side of the head.

'There...' came out of her mouth, or throat, or somewhere, an owl hooting the rest of the sentence in the trees behind.

Aya stumbled back, grabbing Miho's sleeve, shouting *NO* as the girl who definitely wasn't a ghost stepped forward and struck her again, this time hard enough to send her onto the rocks below.

'Wah,' managed Miho, doing nothing to detach Aya's hand from his sleeve and, as a result, falling down after her.

In normal cases, there would've been broken bones, possibly death from a crack of the head, but in this instance the rocks were liquid and wearing the gigantic costume of Lake Suwa, so the worst that happened was a sudden intake of freezing cold water followed by spluttered coughing noises as the two fugitives resurfaced.

‘It’s a guard,’ shouted Miho, attempting to move his arms in a swimming motion before quickly realising that the water was only waist deep.

‘Miho, run,’ Aya yelled back, tugging at the space near his yukata sleeve, looking up in annoyance and then down again as the woman assassin on top of the rocks, who couldn’t have been older than twenty, jumped into the lake after them, landing cat-like, dagger not moving an inch in her right hand.

‘Calm down,’ the woman said, her eyes looking oddly kind and optimistic as she pointed the blade. ‘I don’t want you both. Just him.’

‘We’re Suwa citizens,’ blurted out Miho, steadying himself a little in the water. ‘Over there, our houses...just past the trees.’

‘Liar tongue, liar words.’

‘No...liar? Who?’

Kanae strode forward, tucking the blade in close as she went, frowning when Miho made not a single move to back away or, as most targets would’ve done, just outright pivot and flee deeper into the lake.

‘Me?’

‘Not that I blame you. I would probably do the same. If I were cornered by a predator.’

‘Aya...what’s happening?’

‘Sorry, but she can’t help you now.’

‘Who is this girl?’

‘Girl?’

‘Suwa guard? Ninja?’

‘I’m nineteen, actually.’

‘Aya...’

Miho followed his questions with a glance over to the Sessskat, who was rubbing her head wound and looking down at the surface of the lake around her waist as if it were a bear trap.

‘Don’t worry, she’s not on the list,’ Kanae explained, stopping in front of him, clamping a hand on his shoulder. ‘And just so you understand, this is not my decision. I don’t particularly want to do this.’

‘Do what?’

‘Even though you did just lie to me.’

‘Who are you?’

‘And called me a girl.’

‘What’s going on?’

Kanae frowned again, glancing over at Aya a few metres deeper into the lake, who had dropped the head massaging and was now edging her way back. Slow and weapon-less, thought the young

kunoichi, turning and refocusing on the blank-looking man-child. Wah, this was not going to be easy, his eyes were almost chicken-like, pleading with her to explain why the knife was pointing in his direction, puzzled by the existence of a knife in the first place.

Had she got the wrong person?

Was there a chance that he really was an innocent Suwa citizen, out watching the sunrise with his girlfriend...who she'd just cracked the skull of?

No, couldn't be...impossible. The description matched, the girl was with him, who else would be out in the middle of nowhere at this hour? No one sane. No one insane either. It was him. The one she had to eliminate. The poor chicken who didn't understand that some people in this world wanted to eat poor chicken meat, and would train people like her to do it professionally, without sentiment.

Which she did not have.

Ever.

No sentiment, no attachments. None.

Definitely not to humans.

Most humans.

Kuso...what was this? Doubt?

Her eyes drifted down to the dagger, tracing the line from grip to blade tip, the cold voice in her head telling her to focus on technique,

not the strawman, not the non-existent conscience shaped like a lemon hovering dream-like inside her thoughts.

The target. The mission. Focus.

‘Look, whoever you’re looking for, it’s not us,’ continued Miho, putting a wet hand on her fingers, which were still fixed to his shoulder, and pretending the other ones with the stabbing weapon didn’t exist. ‘I’m Kenji...this is Aya...my girlfriend. We just came out to see the sunrise and-’

The words ceased, replaced by an off-kilter cough. Then another. Then a rasping breath as Miho’s hand let go off Kanae’s arm and switched to the dagger handle lodged two thirds of the way into his chest.

He tried to get a grip on the thing, but the wood seemed slippery somehow, and there was something in his throat, stuck there in-

‘Miho,’ screamed Aya, losing all caution and rampaging forward, splashing lake water at the murdering lake witch ahead.

Most of it landed on a human statue, Kanae mesmerised by Miho’s hand trying to latch onto her dagger, then some drops got in her eye and she rebooted, pulling out the blade and reorienting it to strike the approaching lunatic.

‘I’m not here for you,’ she yelled, crouching a little, half reaching out a hand to grab Miho’s yukata as he started to collapse backwards,

hoping to reel him in and use his torso as a shield. But he was already on the way down.

‘Murdering-’ started Aya, getting close, both hands poised like claws.

‘Don’t.’

‘...witch-faced little...’

‘No closer.’

‘...cunt.’

The last word hit hard, startling Kanae to such a degree that she stood up straight and was on the cusp of saying *I’m the cunt, me?* when a blur of yukata sleeve caught her eye.

To the left, bobbing awkwardly in the water, blood leaking out of both his chest and mouth, pulling a rock out of somewhere, trying to hold it up...to brain her?

Whatever Miho was attempting to do, there was no energy for it, not when he had to concentrate on coughing up his lungs, and the rock fell apologetic from his hand, sinking quickly into the shallow depths of the lake.

Behind him, Aya adjusted course, grabbing onto Miho’s yukata collar and yanking his head back up out of the water, telling him to stay awake and stop bleeding.

‘Rock,’ slurred Miho, disobeying and choking up blood directly onto Aya’s neck.

‘Don’t...’

‘It didn’t work.’

‘Miho, stop speaking. Stop. You have to conserve...’

‘Didn’t even-’

‘...energy.’

His mouth shut, then opened again, going for one more shot at a sentence, but it was too much, too hard to even churn up blood, and the water was starting to feel slightly less cold, Aya’s arms were comfortable, soothing, and the night was creeping in from the sides.

‘Miho, don’t close your...’ Aya started to say, switching eyes to the blood slick surrounding them both, feeling the lack of movement from his arms, his chest, refusing to look back up at what she knew would be a death mask.

If you don’t look up, he’s not gone.

If you don’t look up, he’s not...

She looked up.

His eyes were open, as was his mouth. Pretending to be functional in his usual gormless village style just for her. But there was no breath crawling out, no fluttering of the eyelids, no-

‘The water,’ someone mumbled from the side, probably the murderer, though Aya could care less about her. The witch had come for Miho and she’d taken Miho. Her only ally. The one person in this vicious fucking shithole who-

‘It’s roiling...’

Aya blinked, looking down at her wrist. The murderer was right, there was something happening, bubbles popping up on the surface, visible currents swirling in frenzied loops, fish shadows darting away from the event horizon, a faint pink light slowly rising up from the lake bed.

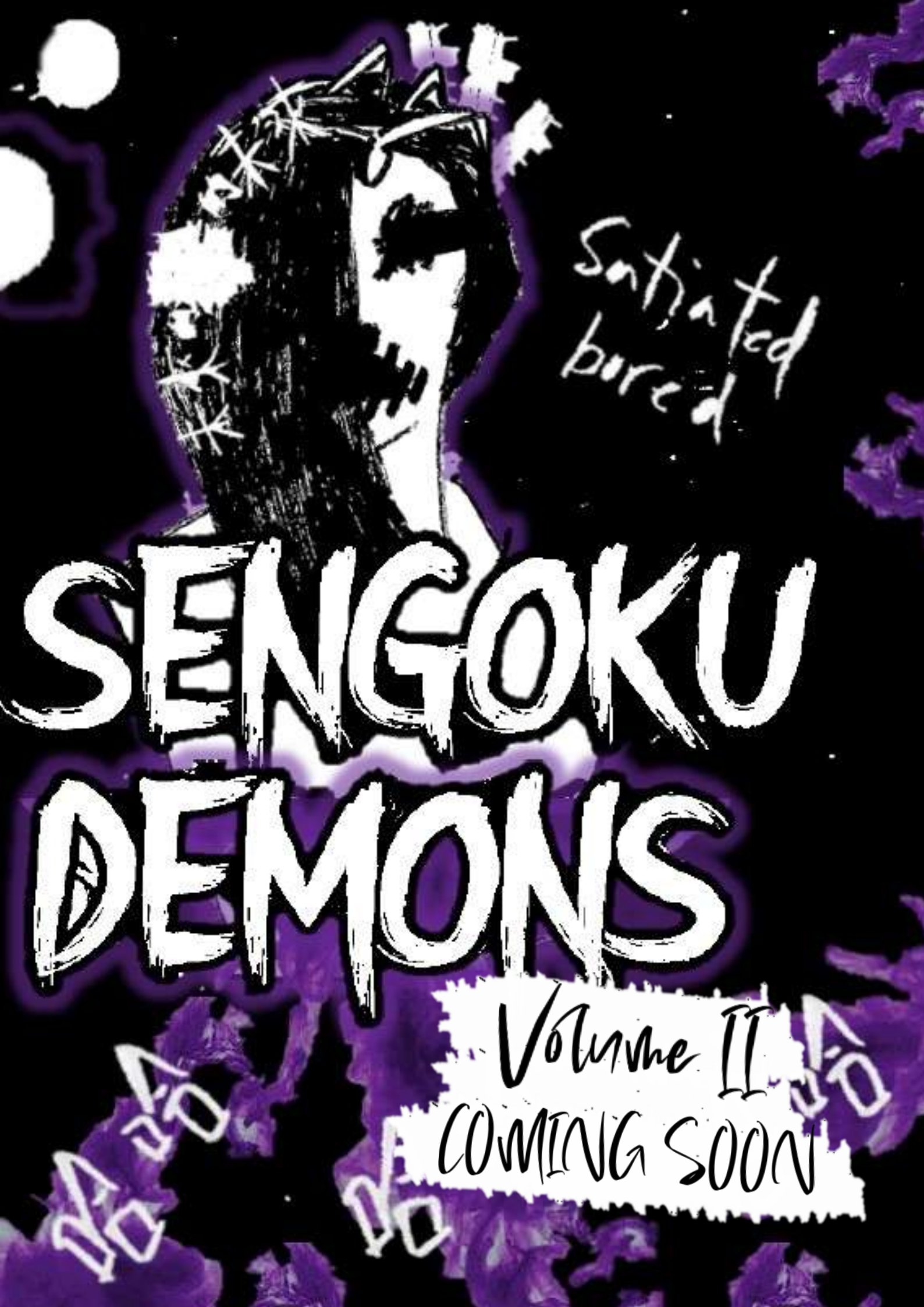
‘What is this?’ shouted Kanae, pointing the dagger first at the abyss forming in the water, then at Aya’s neck. ‘What have you done?’

Aya looked at the tip of the dagger and painted her own throat onto it. Gripped Miho tighter towards her own body. Pushed the reflex tears from her eye sockets onto his scalp. Thought back to the time in Reiko’s Izakaya, the two of them eating together, drinking together, serving weird customers mountain asparagus together. Tangled her fingers into and between his. Leaned into a cold ear and whispered, ‘I can’t go with you.’ Then closed her eyes and repeated it internally, like one of Himiko’s old parody mantras, doing absolutely nothing to stop herself and Miho being sucked down into the burgeoning alien-pink whirlpool of death.

‘What...this isn’t normal,’ shrieked Kanae, spinning round quickly, losing the dagger, lunging for the edge of the rock that had no real part for her to grip onto anyway...then shrieking again as the lake inhaled and sucked her in too.

Nearby, on the surface of the rock, a small ant watched the tragedy play out, tapping its front legs on a rough crack in the terrain, thinking to itself, that looks pretty dismal. Followed by a second thought, as the maelstrom gradually diluted itself, and Lake Suwa returned to its original serene state.

Glad I’m not a fish.



Satiated
bored

SENGOKU DEMONS

Volume II
COMING SOON