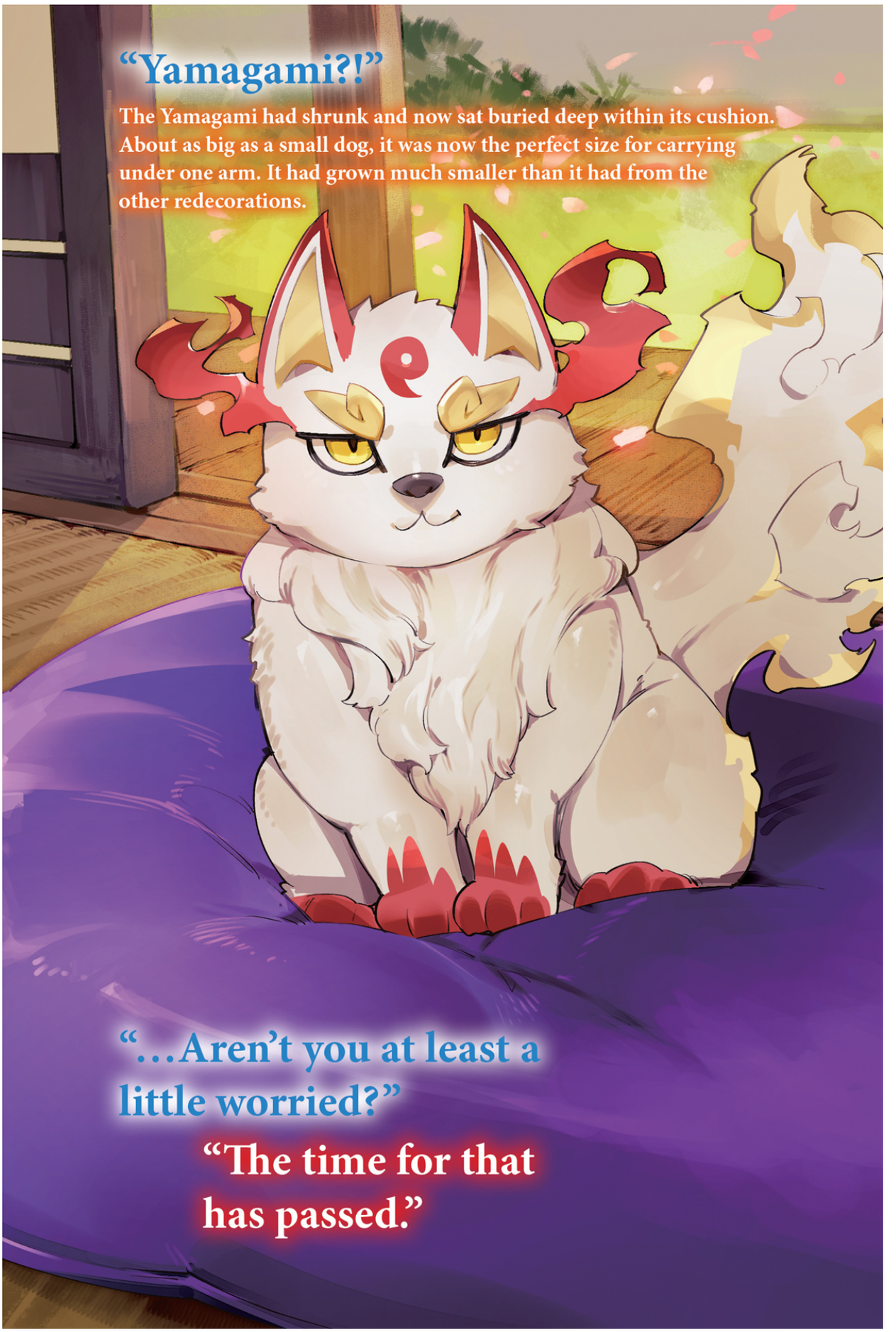
Kusunoki's Garden of Gods

2

Enju

Illustration by OX




“Yamagami?!”
The Yamagami had shrunk and now sat buried deep within its cushion. About as big as a small dog, it was now the perfect size for carrying under one arm. It had grown much smaller than it had from the other redecorations.
“…Aren’t you at least a little worried?”
“The time for that has passed.”


Fujin and Raijin
Two kami who love drinking and causing mischief.
Minato Kusunoki
Age twenty-four. Hired as custodian for a certain problematic property by a distant relative. Has an innate ability to see beings other than humans, and his writing has the power to dispel spirits. A compulsive notetaker.
The Yamagami
A somewhat unfortunate kami whose true form is the mountain next to the Kusunoki residence. It's constantly hanging out on the veranda and indulging in its favorite *wagashi*, Japanese-style sweets.
Seri, Torika, and Utsugi
The Yamagami's kin. Seri is the serious big brother, Torika the responsible big sister, and Utsugi the freewheeling youngest sibling. They prefer Western-style sweets.


"Oryu, cut that out or I'll send you flying into the pond!"
"Don't make me laugh! You are no match for me!"
Oryu turned its horns toward the kirin and charged. The kirin struck out with its antlers in response. The sharp crack of the impact rang around the garden.
Though the two of them always competed with each other, they weren't enemies. They simply enjoyed roughhousing.

Kusunoki's Garden of Gods

2

Enju

Illustration by **OX**

YEN ON

New York



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Translation by Michael Blaskowsky Cover art by ox

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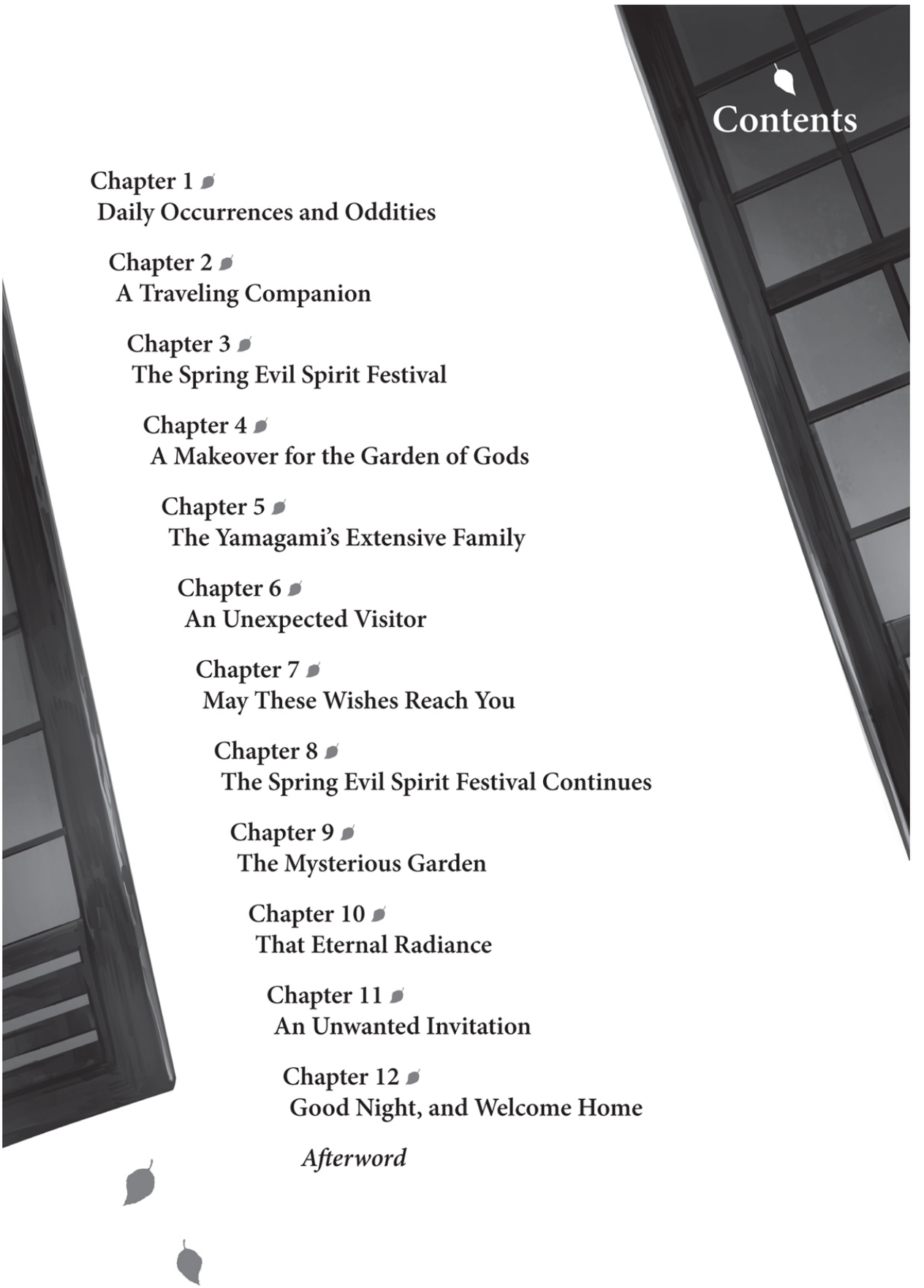
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Afterword

Chapter 1
Daily Occurrences and Oddities

His right hand started to burn when he grabbed the can of beer.

Minato paused in front of the convenience store refrigerator, his arm outstretched. Contrasting sharply against his cold palm, the back of his hand simmered under an intense gaze. He knew where that expectant gaze came from. He knew all too well.

The corners of his mouth perking up in a mischievous grin, Minato casually let go of the beer with the kirin on the label. He made a show of grabbing the can next to it—a well-known brand depicting the rotund face of the kami Ebisu.

The instant he did, his hand was struck by a glare sharp enough to pierce skin.

"No, no, not that one! Get the first one."

He could practically hear the kirin's fervent protestations in his mind. The Yamagami always translated for the kirin, so it was easy for Minato to imagine.

It took all his willpower to suppress a laugh. He couldn't suddenly burst out laughing while shopping by himself, even if the only other person in the store right now was an employee stocking shelves.

A grin on his face, Minato placed the *regular* beer he'd originally planned to buy in his basket and walked to the register. As he did, he looked outside to see the kirin clinging to the store window, nodding in satisfaction.

The Kusunoki residence was located in a rather remote area. There were no other houses nearby and, of course, no stores of

any kind. However, a convenience store had recently been built in the area.

For Minato, who'd been taking the bus all the way to the shopping area, having a store right near his bus stop was invaluable. He often stopped there on the way back home to buy heavier items, mainly just alcohol.

He'd swung by today as well to buy beer because he thought the kirin would probably be back.

"We're running a promotional campaign right now. Everyone who buys beer gets a chance to win a prize!"

"…Of course you are."

This was nothing new.

The smiling employee behind the register held out the box of raffle tickets, and Minato coolly reached inside. He grabbed the piece of paper on the very top, making no effort to root around. After gazing at the ticket for a moment, he scratched it with a coin.

As expected, he hit the jackpot.

Lotteries aren't very exciting when you know you're always going to win first prize.

As he accepted his winnings, Minato realized he'd been thinking that a lot lately.

Minato finished up his shopping and exited the store. As he left, he saw two skinny cats waiting outside. Their piercing gazes encapsulated the certain air that was unique to strays.

The bicolor cat with the horizontal scar across its face pushed a fish cake forward with its nose. The brown tabby similarly rolled a piece of fish toward Minato with its front paw. Sitting there with their paws perfectly aligned, the two cats seemed eager to tell him something. Minato couldn't understand them, but he could make a guess based on their behavior:

"Go on, eat them."

Such culinary offerings signified a present of gratitude from the animals under the Four Spirits, as if to say, *Thank you for taking such good care of our leader. Please accept these*.

"…Thanks. Your gratitude is enough for me, though. You should eat it."

Having animals present him with food whenever he went out was just one of Minato's recent troubles. He never knew what to do. Those animals lived in such harsh environments, and he couldn't deprive them of the meager amount of food they had.

And, honestly, he didn't actually *want* anything scavenged from the garbage.

"It's for taking care of our leaders. We insist you eat it! Don't be polite! They're great finds! And they look scrumptious…"

"No, you really don't have to. You guys want to eat it yourself, don't you?"

"Delicacies like these are almost impossible to find. They're really good, just try them! Please! Quickly! If you don't, we…we might…"

"No, seriously! The thought is more than enough! I'm not hungry, so you should have them!"

The insistent strays watched Minato as he waved away the offerings in a fluster with both hands. They tried their best not to stare at the food, obviously looking like they wanted nothing more in the world than to devour it.

As their argument continued back and forth, the leader of furred beasts skipped around the cramped parking lot, letting out a strangely shrill laugh.

"We're drinking again tonight! Raise a glass of beer to me!"

Expecting absolutely no help from the kirin, Minato heaved a deep sigh.

After somehow successfully persuading the stray cats to take the food with them, Minato headed home. The amused gaze of the store employee, who'd seen the entire interaction, had been too much for him to bear.

The road stretched off into the distance, flanked by rice paddies and surrounded by tall mountains. Minato walked on, both arms weighed down with bags, while the kirin frolicked behind him, keeping its distance. With its propensity for wandering, the free-spirited kirin would sometimes casually appear alongside Minato while he was out and accompany him home.

Today heralded an early start to spring. The sun's rays hung hesitantly in the air, while a chilly wind played with his hair. Cherry blossoms added splashes of color to the mountain in front of him—the true form of the Yamagami—and Minato felt certain that spring would arrive soon. It wasn't very convenient to walk, yet he found an irreplaceable joy in using all five of his senses to feel the changing of the seasons.

After gazing at the mountain for a while, Minato looked down at the ground. Crabs and baby turtles stared up at him, apparently having just climbed out of the runoff ditch. They and other shelled creatures were led by Reiki.

"Your leader's doing well."

At his words, the crabs all waved their large claws.

Meeting and exchanging pleasantries with a variety of animals was something else that brought Minato joy.

At the entrance to the footpath leading up to the Kusunoki residence was a small *hokora* shrine. It housed a Jizo statue wearing a wicker hat and red bib, in front of which flowers had been placed as an offering.

The flowers always reflected the season. Today, they were red anemones. They had vibrant, unfurled petals and sat in a glass of clear water. Condensation had formed on the outside. Factoring everything in together, it was obvious that not much time had passed since the flowers had been placed there.

Who keeps leaving them here?

Right as Minato was mulling that over—

"Kyyiiiiiiiiiii!!"

—a terrible scream erupted behind him.

"What was that?!"

Minato stood frozen to the spot.

He had unknowingly come within one step of the Jizo statue.

"Huh? What was that…?"

Backing up a few steps, Minato looked behind him to see the kirin, its hair standing on end and tail flicking furiously. It didn't look angry so much as on maximum alert.

"That scream just now…"

It had to have been the kirin. Minato had never heard it scream before, and the incredibly hoarse noise clashed with the kirin's elegant appearance. That had surprised him far more than finding himself so close to the Jizo statue.

Its impressive horns pushed incessantly against his calves.

"What is it? Okay, I understand. I'm going, I'm going."

With that, the kirin forced Minato away from the shrine.

The footpath soon turned into a gravel road, beyond which a house in the gabled *sukiya* style dominated the view. A white wall surrounded the black building, the entirety of which was encircled by large camphor trees, which made it seem like the property was part of the mountain. It looked for all the world to exist symbiotically with nature.

This house, currently the Kusunoki residence, was not yet fully complete, hence why the path leading up to it was still gravel. Surely at some point, a future owner would pave the road.

"…Actually, stone would suit it better."

Minato imagined the stone path as he approached the front gate. Only one set of footsteps crunched pleasantly against the gravel; the kirin produced no sound as it moved. Yet he felt its presence accompanying him, just like always. Although the kirin could completely erase its presence, it purposely revealed itself to Minato—something that impressed him about the miraculous creature.

A strange chorus began to intermingle with the solitary sound of the footsteps.

—*Hohke, hohge*.

—*Hoh, hoh, ke, kyo*.

It was the subsong of the warbler.

The Japanese bush warbler was renowned for heralding the start of spring with its beautiful song. They weren't born singing their songs with such grace, however, but practiced during the first days of spring and gradually improved.

The males were practicing again today, so their songs would impress the females.

—*Hohke*? *Hohgehh…?*

—*Hoh, keh, kekyo!*

“…I think they’re getting better…maybe…?”

Listening to the warblers diligently working to improve, Minato opened the door in the front gate.

The second Minato set foot inside the grounds of the Kusunoki residence, he was enveloped by pure, crisp air. The house radiated the same spring warmth as outside, though it felt completely isolated from the ordinary world. Whether that made a person feel comfortable or uncomfortable depended entirely on the individual.

Minato, of course, was the former. It was a sensation that now felt to him like coming home.

He continued down the side of the house without going inside, and an entire world opened up before him: a vast, verdant yard with deciduous trees dotting the perimeter and grass covering the ground. While the first cherry blossoms had just started to emerge in the world outside, the garden of the Kusunoki residence was the vibrant green of May.

It had a gourd-shaped pond spanned by an arched bridge and two stone lanterns. A towering camphor tree in the middle of the yard immediately drew the eye. At first glance, this appeared to be a typical Japanese garden.

However, atop the large rock protruding over the pond lay a pearly yellow turtle—Reiki—drying its shell. Nearby, a dragon with pearly blue bat-like wings—Oryu—gently wriggled its body as it swam through the water. Behind the camphor tree, white steam rose from a hot spring that glimmered with golden light.

This was the garden of the gods, filled with sights unable to be seen anywhere else in the world.

The leaf-covered branches of the camphor tree swished as Minato walked into the garden.

“I’m home.”

With one last look at the swaying camphor tree, Minato headed toward the veranda.

There sat the strangest thing of all.

Relaxing in the center of the veranda, as though staking its claim to the spot, lay a huge wolf on a purple cushion. Its dazzling white body emanated a golden light. The closer one got to the Yamagami, the stronger the scent of the forest grew, and breathing it in helped ease fatigue. Anyone would consider being able to bask in the forest within their very home to be the height of luxury.

The Yamagami rested with its eyes closed and its chin on folded paws. Both eyelids cracked open slightly, the yellow-gold pupils appearing like amber.

"Ah, I see you have returned."

"Yeah. It's nice to be home, Yamagami."

Ordinarily, it would be strange to exchange such a greeting with a mountain kami—the "kami next door," as it were—however, this was a completely natural occurrence in the Kusunoki residence. That alone spoke to the continued presence of his neighboring kami here.

On the plus side, the Yamagami helped Minato avoid having to spend his days in solitude as he cared for the house. It simply made Minato happy to know that he'd be greeted with a warm welcome when he came home.

Minato removed his shoes and stepped onto the veranda. The kirin rolled some tropical fruits over from wherever it had been hiding them. It always brought back souvenirs whenever it visited another country. It was surprisingly thoughtful like that.

"Thank you, Kirin."

The kirin was a chimera, so Minato had decided just to call it by its name. He'd once called it "Deer" because he thought it kind of looked like one, but that had earned him a steely glare from the kirin.

"Yamagami, I bought some strawberry *daifuku* from a new *wagashi* store. Though I'm sure you already know that."

The Yamagami continued wagging its tail, as it had been doing for a while.

"I see your nose is as good as ever," Minato said.

"I *am* the Yamagami…and therefore a wolf."

Having slowly risen, the Yamagami was overpoweringly divine. It seemed fitting that such a creature should reign over this beautiful, unique garden of the gods.

Minato squinted reflexively.

This wasn't just a place for gods to relax but a kami realm. Sometimes Minato wasn't sure that a human like himself should even be here. Still, he couldn't deny he felt an indescribable sense of contentment at being able to leisurely enjoy such a peaceful scene.

"I'll go make some tea."

Minato seemed happy as he opened the sliding door of the veranda and walked inside the house.

Behind him, the kirin stared fixedly at the Yamagami.

○

"Observe the delightfully plump appearance of this strawberry *daifuku*. That already bodes well. And peeking through this this thin layer of *gyuhi mochi*—yes, this is undoubtedly… Mmm… Smooth bean paste!"

"Of course it is. Do you really think I'd forget you don't like chunky bean paste?"

The Yamagami was a rather picky eater. If given something with chunky bean paste, it would look dejected and dismiss the sweet, refusing to eat even a single bite.

"And the texture! The succulent juice and fruit of the strawberry bursts forth upon biting into it… Mmmm, such a harmonious collaboration! And they complement the smooth bean paste perfectly! Such a sinful flavor. This pairing of smooth bean paste and strawberry has a certain *je ne sais quoi*!"

"Yamagami, you've switched to French in your excitement… You didn't let me down, Hizenan. I'll go back there sometime."

"I assume they were made by an old man?"

"I wouldn't quite call him old. He's still in his fifties."

"Hmm, any number of things can still happen at that age…"

The Yamagami wrinkled its nose as it savored the sweets. It seemed so pleased with the quality of the *daifuku* that it had

started talking in a language it hardly knew and fretting over the owner's health.

Minato used that pause in conversation to pop a strawberry *daifuku* with white bean paste into his mouth. The mochi, not-too-sweet paste, and fruit combined in a surprising way to bring out the best in each other.

"The white bean paste ones are really good, too."

"…That is undeniable. Yet nothing in this world can surpass smooth bean paste made from red adzuki beans."

"What's white bean paste made from again?"

"Navy beans. And very rarely with white adzuki beans."

"Ah, my thanks for the explanation."

Minato had recently been picking up on some of the Yamagami's figures of speech. *That's not great…*, he thought as the Yamagami leisurely savored the small strawberry *daifuku*.

Around them, a flurry of birdsong rang out.

—*Hoh, hoh.*

—*Ho, hohke! Kyo*.

In the shade of the camphor tree, a group of Japanese bush warblers were gathered around the ho'o, singing. The ho'o flapped a wing out toward a young bird struggling in front of it.

—*Chirp.* (You. The end of the first *hoh* should be more drawn out.)

—*Hoh, hohkyo*.

—*Chirp, chirp.* (Good, that's it. Do it just like that, and you'll be sure to attract a mate in no time.)

—*Hokehkyo*.

—*Chirp.* (Did you forget the first *hoh* just now? From the top.)

—*Hoh, hoh?*

—*Chirp, chirp.* (Yes, that's the sound. The pitch and intonation were pretty good, too. Well done.)

—*Hokeh? Hogeeeh!*

—…*Chirp.* (…That was completely wrong.)

Sky School was in session, with the ho'o as headmaster.

The bush warblers had come to demonstrate their calls to the ho'o, their leader. The singing that Minato had just heard from the front gate must have been them practicing.

Ever since the ho'o had moved into the Kusunoki residence, it had been visited by large flocks of birds. Earthly creatures were

generally not allowed inside the garden of the gods, but it was open to the birds.

In addition to the warblers, a group of sparrows were resting their wings higher up in the camphor tree, watching the Sky School from above.

—*Kekyo!*

—…*Chirp.* (…What a mess.)

The ho'o turned to fully face the bird behind it. That poor young warbler hadn't improved even the tiniest bit.

—*Chirp, chirp!* (Ready? Listen carefully to my voice.) *Hohkekyo!*

The song reverberated clearly to every corner of the garden. It was a beautiful sound that touched ears and souls alike, and the group of warblers fluttered in excitement at their teacher's performance.

In the wild, warblers practice singing by recalling the songs they heard from their parents. For that reason, warblers who'd never heard this beautiful cry before wouldn't be able to sing it very well. And just like humans, such young birds were bound to improve faster under the direct instruction of an experienced teacher like the ho'o.

—*Hogeh!*

Yet one bird still failed to meet expectations.

Exasperated by such a helpless student, the ho'o looked toward the sky. It seemed a little tired, its appearance still that of a chick. The ho'o had long been trapped by a tainted kami and had only very recently been rescued by Minato, so it still wasn't fully recovered. It spent more time asleep than awake.

Recognizing the signs of exhaustion, the warblers and sparrows let out a high-pitched call and flew off as one. The birds were well organized and had good manners, so they never overstayed their welcome.

Quiet returned to the garden, and the ho'o let out a gentle sigh. It hopped off toward its bed, the stone lantern.

Just before going inside the lantern, where the flame was lit, the ho'o turned to look back at Minato.

"*Chirp, chirp!* (I'm going to rest for a while.)"

"Sleep well, Bird."

Minato couldn't understand what the ho'o said, but just like with the kirin, the Yamagami had translated enough for him to get the gist from its gestures.

Inside the lantern, a pile of camphor leaves supported a soft cushion. The ho'o laid down in the middle of the pillow and was soon fast asleep. The courteous, conscientious ho'o couldn't refuse a request from the birds it called its children. Perhaps it had been a bit overzealous. It should get some rest.

While Minato was gazing at the ho'o, the Yamagami beside him finished its strawberry *daifuku* and slowly stood up. It jumped down from the veranda and approached the stone lantern. It stood on its hind legs and began to paw at the lantern's opening.

"Yamagami, what are you doing…?" Minato asked quietly. He naturally kept his voice down whenever the ho'o was sleeping.

The Yamagami, however, spoke at the same volume as always.

"If I do this here…and place it like so…"

The Yamagami fiddled with the lantern for a little while, and the open side changed to glass to match the other three sides. The area inside of the lantern was now fully sealed.



“Hmm, that’s better. Now no sound shall enter. Light shall not bother it, either, so it should be able to rest well.”

Satisfied, the Yamagami returned to the veranda. Peering over the wolf’s giant body, Minato looked in awe at the stone lantern.

“…Where did that glass come from…? Yamagami, you really can do anything, can’t you?”

“Aye, of course. I am the Yamagami.”

“You say that like you don’t need to explain any further. Can all kami use their powers as easily as you just did?”

“Naturally, in their own kami realm. As for what each kami can do, that depends on their class.”

“So, since you can do whatever you like here, you must be a pretty high class of kami, then, right?”

Sitting on his cushion, the Yamagami puffed out its chest, looking proud. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that its divine body was an embodiment of the sun. Squinting at the sight, Minato saw a halo of laser beams begin to streak away from the figure, which shone with a completely unnecessary majesty.

The Yamagami had no need for words. It spoke with its entire body. Regardless of what went on inside, every millimeter of its exterior exuded the proud air of a dignified lord.

With a hint of a smile, Minato quickly ate the last of his strawberry *daifuku*. His sugar levels replenished, it was time to get to work.

Minato was the caretaker of the Kusunoki residence. That meant he maintained the property inside and out.

It had to be kept in a state where it could be handed over to a new owner at any time, in case a buyer showed up, so it went without saying that Minato had to diligently clean it every day. He made an effort to keep the inside of the house as tidy as humanly possible and always wiped down the sinks after using them. That was partly why he spent so much time relaxing comfortably on the veranda. He also tried to limit the number of things he owned so he could vacate the place quickly whenever he got the call.

However, no matter how well-mannered the birds may have been, they were still wild animals. After they left, feathers and droppings covered the area around the camphor tree.

The first thing Minato did was clear the area with wind. He pointed at the camphor tree and released a gust of air from his finger. A slow, gentle whirlwind enveloped the camphor tree like a cocoon.

The tree had recently taken a liking to being enveloped in this cocoon of wind. Minato controlled the gentle cyclone, taking the utmost care to ensure he didn't damage any of the tree's branches.

The wind that Minato created differed greatly from Fujin's whirlwind, from which it was derived. Minato had welcomed Fujin and Raijin into the Kusunoki residence when they'd stopped by, and as thanks, Fujin had lent him some of his power so Minato could control the wind himself. He'd used that power to cut down the fake trees in the kami realm the Yamagami's kin had created.

Ever since then, however, he hadn't tried to hone the more lethal side of his power but used it exclusively for tidying up the camphor tree and to carry things. He only used it to make certain parts of his job easier.

Having swept the area with his wind power, Minato next picked up all the fallen leaves and feathers in the canopy of the tree and scattered on the ground. As soon as he was finished, Oryu splashed some water up out of the pond, and Minato used his wind to swirl it into a mist and cover the camphor tree with it.

He was cleaning with the water from the sacred pond.

"Thanks, Dragon."

Splash. Oryu's tail slapped the surface of the water in reply. It helped out without being asked every time.

Minato considered it a very thoughtful kami. It was gentle and quiet, matching the blue glow of its body. Although it was a little too fond of wine, it usually just drifted around the garden, so that wasn't much of a problem.

The pond had been created with the Yamagami's power, and both Reiki and Oryu lived there, hence why it seemed to have mysterious powers.

Minato used the water from the pond when creating ink for his talismans. The powerful water boosted the ink's dispelling abilities, and he could clean his ink-stained brushes simply by soaking them in it.

"I wonder what's in it …," Minato muttered to himself.

Munching on an herbaceous *kusa mochi*, the Yamagami smiled indulgently, its eyes thinning to crescents.

Minato had grown the camphor tree from a seed. He watered it daily without fail and took great care looking after it, treasuring it as if it were his own child.

The camphor tree differed from a normal tree and had a personality of its own. Although Minato couldn't pick up some of the more subtle nuances, he could more or less figure out what it was trying to say.

It rustled its branches in the wind, looking happy. Minato found himself smiling. Deciding that he'd given it enough water, he calmed his wind, and a sparrow fell from one of the branches with a thud.

"You were still up there?!"

Stopping the wind completely, Minato rushed to the base of the camphor tree.

Lying between the roots, the fallen sparrow didn't even stir. Most likely, it had become dizzy and fainted.

Minato examined the bird more closely; its chest rose and fell, and it had a peaceful look on its face.

"…No way. Is it…sleeping?"

It appeared to be fast asleep.

"What a relaxed little guy. It's probably best if I don't touch it… What should I do?"

Leaves rustled overhead. The camphor tree seemed to be telling him something, but Minato couldn't make out the details.

“Leave it be and all shall be fine. It liked the wind you made and was lulled to sleep. It will wake before long.”

“It liked it…? It wasn’t a strong wind, but I’m sure it was stronger than a natural breeze.”

“The sacred tree enjoyed it, too.”

“I thought that was because it’s a special camphor.”

“It says it finds your wind relaxing.”

The branches moved as though in agreement. Minato looked up at the camphor tree and touched its trunk. It felt firm and slightly warm. The entire tree was like that, including the roots spreading into the ground.

Cradled in the roots, the sparrow also somehow managed to look comfortable. Minato figured the bird would be fine, so he left it where it was and gathered up the piles of fallen debris.

After tidying up the entire garden, he heard someone call out his name from the rear gate.

“Minato! I’m leaving you some wild vegetables out here, so please eat them!”

“Thank you!”

It was Seri, one of the Yamagami’s kin.

Minato hadn’t seen him for quite some time. Recently, the three martens had all gone off on their own separate ways and only came by to visit individually.

Seri had set a bamboo basket by the door and left. Even from a distance, Minato could see it overflowing with angelica tree sprouts, wild onions, and butterbur shoots. Seri was sharing some of his seasonal vegetables.

This was the distance people *normally* kept from their neighbors.

“This unique, grassy smell passing through my nose… It pleases me.”

Minato’s kami next door, who didn’t understand that interpretation of the word “neighbor,” continued savoring its *kusa mochi* as it sniffed the air.

“—The exquisite taste of this smooth bean paste, such a wonderful harmony of salty and sweet, overwhelms me… Oh, it’s simply too much—”

“Minato! I got you some mugwort!”

Utsugi interrupted the Yamagami’s adoring words for the sweets.

“Truly, only smooth bean paste can create such a sensation. Chunky bean paste could never…”

Leaving the Yamagami to his musings, Minato headed toward the rear gate. Standing there on his hind legs, Utsugi held aloft a wicker basket large enough to easily hold the marten himself.

“Thanks for sharing this, Utsugi. Do you want to come in?”

“Sorry, not this time. I’m busy right now.”

“Seri left straight away, too. How’s Torika doing?”

“Oh, she’s fine. Right now she’s totally swamped. You know how it is, a lot of strange things pop their heads up come spring. It’s like that with humans, too, right?”

“…I guess so.”

Minato couldn’t deny it. It was a well-known fact that when spring arrived, schools warned students to be careful of strangers.

On the other side of the door, Utsugi looked wistfully off into the distance.

The Yamagami had only created the martens less than a year ago, but they had received the Yamagami’s memories and possessed an abundance of knowledge beyond what they’d experienced firsthand. Because of that, they knew more than enough about humanity’s darker side.

Utsugi looked past Minato toward the Yamagami on the veranda.

“Thank you for looking after the Yamagami. We really appreciate everything you do.”

Minato opened the door, and Utsugi respectfully handed him the basket, the gesture conveying his sincere gratitude. Minato was a little bewildered at seeing how quickly Utsugi had matured since the last time they’d seen each other.

“…No, it’s no trouble at all. I enjoy the company.”

Minato couldn’t help but feel a little sad. He felt exactly the way an old uncle living next door would.

“See ya!”

“…Sure, see you later.”

Utsugi ran swiftly away on all four legs, and Minato watched his white back recede until it disappeared among the green vegetation.

Minato carried the two baskets back to the veranda. The thick scent of mugwort tickled his nose.

“Everything looks delicious again this year,” he said to the Yamagami.

“It has all been harvested from my own self, so the quality is assured.”

“Of course. I don’t doubt it, but hearing you say that makes me feel a little strange.”

“Whatever for?” the Yamagami asked with a nonchalant look, sipping from the cup of tea in its front paws.

Deciding to ignore the question, Minato set the baskets in the kitchen and returned to the veranda. The Yamagami glanced at his jacket pocket.

“The power has almost dissipated.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean my notepad?”

Minato took his notepad out of his pocket and flipped through it. The words he’d written there had mostly vanished. Saiga provided him with washi paper, but he’d already written on it all and returned it, so Minato used the notepad for his own personal use.

Minato didn’t have any qualms throwing away sheets of paper once he’d used them, so he loved the cheap notepads made from straw pulp. They were particularly good, considering a piece of paper couldn’t be imbued with power more than once.

“I hadn’t realized. I guess it was a little faded to begin with…”

“I did tell you to write more.”

“You said that right before I left. Well, it kept up its power long enough, so it all worked out okay.”

Spirits didn’t affect Minato, so he wasn’t the most diligent about risk management. He never forgot his notepad when he left the house, but it only ever contained a few pages of writing. Though now that his dispelling powers were stronger, that was enough.

Minato had developed an awareness of the dispelling power he’d only ever used unconsciously before—something that had

been strengthened from learning to control the wind. Now that he'd trained it, his powers of elimination surpassed human limitations.

"I was thinking about it again, but it's kind of like the power seeps out of the paper."

"A more accurate description would be that the power is discharged from the paper."

"…When you say it like that, it feels like it could cause trouble."

"The effect is negative only for malicious beings. To them, your existence is akin to a serial killer on the loose."

"It sounds awful when you say it like that."

Minato set the notepad down on the table with a wry smile.

"When I'm writing talismans later, I'll write some for me, too—"

He was interrupted by a loud splash. Minato looked in the direction of the pond to see if either Reiki or Oryu was trying to get his attention.

Instead, he saw something there he'd never seen before.

"…Is that…an island? What the…?"

An island with a pointed hill floated in the middle of the gourd-shaped pond's smaller half, where Reiki lived. Actually, Minato didn't know whether he could even call it the middle of the pond, since it was so large, it went all the way to the edge.

Minato walked toward the island, and the Yamagami lazily stood and followed.

"…It's Turtle."

It was a familiar glowing, pearly yellow. Reiki's shell had gradually been increasing in luster, and it had now grown to gigantic proportions and was emitting an even brighter light. When they went around the island, they found the turtle's head, his normally half-closed eyelids open wide in a troubled expression. It was having trouble moving its legs and seemed to be struggling.

"You're…not okay, are you?"

Reiki didn't seem to be in pain. It was just having serious problems.

"I thought Turtle was getting bigger, but I didn't think it'd suddenly grow so humongous… It's way bigger than I am."

The top of the shell reached higher than Minato's head. At its current size, there was no way he could hold it in his arms.

“And it shall continue to grow,” said the Yamagami.

“What?! Then it won’t be able to live in the pond anymore…”

The shell trembled. The kirin on the arched bridge and Oryu floating in the air looked on sympathetically.

Minato stood there at a total loss, so the Yamagami took the initiative.

“Come, now. I shall resolve this.”

The moment its front paw settled gently on the shell, Reiki shrank back down. Now back to being under twenty centimeters in diameter, the turtle dived to the bottom of the pond, a trail of bubbles in its wake. With a single stroke of its flippers, it swam under the bridge and back to its home.

“…It looks happy. It shrank back down so easily.”

“That is because here, my powers can do anything,” the Yamagami said with a proud snort. It truly was a gracious kami indeed.

At the edge of the pond near the Yamagami’s paws, the red and white Ryugu Gate peeked out between the reeds. Reiki and Oryu, who showed absolutely no interest in the human world, would sometimes pass through it to go somewhere.

Where do they go? You don’t think…?

But just as a potential answer crossed Minato’s mind, he decided the question was best left unasked. And so their destination remained a mystery.

Minato headed back to the veranda. The Yamagami, sitting up, and the hovering Oryu silently watched him.

Chapter 2
A Traveling Companion

“Oh, there it is. My usual detergent.”

A single pouch of the laundry detergent refill he was looking for remained on the shelf, and Minato added it to his shopping basket.

“That’s the last thing. Okay then, let’s go home.”

“*Chirp!*”

The pearly pink chick on his shoulder spread its wings slightly as Minato made his way to the counter.

He’d gotten the last pack of what he’d been looking for.

Most people would consider it their lucky day if something like that happened to them, and if everything went their way, they’d call it a crazy streak of luck. Even though Minato’s luck was a given, thanks to the blessings of the ho’o and the other three spirits, it still made him happy. After all, no one enjoys going from one store to the next trying to find something.

The cashier was absorbed in checking inventory. Even after Minato set his basket on the counter, he didn’t so much as glance his way.

“Excuse me, could you ring me up?”

The man practically jumped when he looked up and noticed Minato.

“Huh?! …Oh, of course, right away!”

He stared at Minato for a second before beginning to scan his shopping.

The ho’o sometimes accompanied Minato when he went out. Whenever it did, people inadvertently avoided him, just like when he was with the Yamagami.

Even though the cashier couldn’t see the ho’o, he hadn’t noticed Minato with it attached to him. Minato understood that, yet the ho’o on his shoulder narrowed its eyes.

The shopping street was always quiet on weekday mornings.

Minato was self-employed, so he only went out shopping during the week and avoided weekends because the kami naturally caused people to steer clear of him.

A few steps away from a crosswalk, the ho’o cried out, catching his attention.

“*Chirp!*”

Minato glanced at his shoulder to see the ho’o pointing a wing toward a store on the street corner. An assortment of small *yosegi*-style wooden boxes were lined up in the front window. The ho’o adored traditional handicrafts made by humans. Minato thought that something about them must appeal to it.

He went into the store to let the ho’o browse.

A few seconds later, a bicycle tore down the street…

“Do you like this one? Or that one?”

…but Minato was completely oblivious. He was holding up two small boxes for the ho’o to admire. Had they not entered the store, the bicycle probably would have barreled right into them. Minato avoided dangerous situations like that on a daily basis—just another effect of his good luck.

The ho’o seemed happy enough just browsing, so they left without buying anything.

Accompanied by the pleased-looking chick with its feathers puffed up, Minato walked toward the crosswalk at the end of the shopping arcade. The moment he got there, the light turned green with impeccable timing. This, too, was an everyday occurrence. It happened not just with lights but with anything that required waiting.

When he’d been living with his parents, Minato had often suffered from the colds and other throat problems that came with the changing of the seasons. However, since he’d moved

here—or, more accurately, since Reiki had started living in the garden—he hadn't been sick even once. And, of course, he hadn't been injured, either.

Having left the shopping arcade, Minato was strolling leisurely when he spotted a liquor store on the corner. A poster covering the glass front door was advertising a raffle.

Minato quickened his pace and hurried past. The ho'o didn't seem to react. Lately, Minato had been trying to avoid anywhere that a raffle or lottery might be held—because he'd definitely win.

Anyone would start to think something funny was going on if the same person won pretty much every single time. People would suspect him of cheating or some other sort of underhanded trick.

Minato's luck came from the Four Spirits having arbitrarily decided to bestow their blessings upon him. It wasn't just one of them that had done it, either, but all four, making him far luckier than normal.

He really did appreciate it. He *did*, but honestly, he wished they'd tone it down a bit. Their blessings didn't stop at granting him luck but extended to other things as well—such as attracting huge flocks of wild birds. Birds of all shapes and sizes appeared from every direction, perching on fences, rooftops, telephone poles, electric wires, and anywhere else nearby. What's more, Minato couldn't help but think that every single one of them was focused intently on him.

People passing him on the street whispered to each other.

"Hey, it's the bird whisperer."

"Look, he has a bunch of birds today, too."

They were misunderstood.

While it did appear to passersby that the birds followed Minato obediently without causing commotion, they were actually gathered around him to pay their respects to the ho'o perched on his shoulder. While Minato understood the reason behind this misunderstanding, he didn't try to correct anyone. After all, he wouldn't be able to make anyone who couldn't see the ho'o understand.

It happened whenever he went out with the ho'o, yet birds also came near Minato when he went out by himself, if not quite so many. Every so often, a rare wild bird would appear, so bird enthusiasts often followed behind him, cameras at the ready.

Pretending not to notice, Minato walked along with the proud chick. The birds followed solemnly along in their wake, the sound of their wings distant. A group of locals watched from afar.

"Incredible. It feels almost like a royal procession."

"It's so interesting. I always look forward to the bird whisperer coming around."

"Me too."

Minato didn't hear their excited chatter, but the locals treated it like a special event.

Thunk, thunk. The shopping street now behind them, Minato heard the pleasant noise of a hammer on wood.

Walking toward the sound, he spied people building a house. Only the frame was standing so far, and the surface of the freshly cut wood shimmered in the sunlight. Minato admired the impressive beams of the second-story roof. The structure used interlocking joints without any nails. Houses that used wood joinery like this were a rarity these days.

Minato stood, taking it all in. The house was wider and taller than the Kusunoki residence.

"…I wonder if it's going to be a multigenerational house. It looks like it'll be a nice, big building."

"*Chirp!*"

The ho'o was leaning forward, gazing intently at the structure. Minato chuckled at seeing it so absorbed in it.

"It certainly looks like something you'd enjoy, Bird—"

In the middle of his sentence, Minato had seen an elderly man in workman's clothes, staggering a short distance away. He had a long piece of lumber over his shoulder, but it seemed to be more than he could manage.

Minato waved an arm, sending a gust of wind toward him.

"Whoa!"

Supported by the cushion of wind, the elderly man stood up straight, narrowly avoiding an accident.

“Careful there, boss! That was a close one!”

“Your arms getting tired, are they? You shouldn’t push yourself so hard at your age!”

“Shut it! This is nothing I can’t handle!” the old man blustered at the young workers watching him from the roof.

Still, he set the lumber down. The way he did it was rather reckless, though; he didn’t toss it so much as release the load because he couldn’t hold it any longer.

The man rubbed his upper arms, his broad shoulders giving him a brutish air. He looked ready to snap at anyone who talked to him.

Just as Minato decided to quietly continue on his way, the elderly man looked his way. Minato accidentally met his gaze. The elderly man frowned, his scowl as frightening as that of a gargoyle.

“…Huh? Hey, you’re that bird whisperer guy. I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“…Oh. Hi.”

Minato had thought the old man might chastise him over something, but apparently, he just hadn’t been able to make Minato out that well. As an elderly fellow, he must have been having trouble with his vision.

No one had ever called Minato the “bird whisperer” to his face before. He didn’t know how to respond.

“You didn’t see that just now, did you? Ah, I wish you hadn’t.”

Looking slightly embarrassed, the elderly man scratched his head, which had a towel wrapped around it. He was actually pretty friendly.

“That sudden gust of wind sure helped.”

“That was a real stroke of luck,” Minato said, acting surprised.

“These days, my body can’t do the things that I want it to… Gah, getting old sucks.”

The old man laughed as he said it, but he couldn’t completely hide his frustration.

“I pushed myself because I still can’t leave things to those youngsters, but it might be time for me to throw in the towel.”

As he rubbed his callused hands over his arms, he looked up at the frame of the house.

“But this house, at least…I want to keep working on until it’s done.”

The honesty in his words conveyed a terrible sense of despair. No one could win against time. Minato’s now deceased grandfather also used to mumble sadly about his age, but there was nothing anybody could do. It was simply a fact of life.

And yet one being here could rewind the clock.

“Chirp!”

Minato found himself at a loss for words, but atop his shoulder, the ho’o opened its beak, and a soft ball of pink light emerged from its mouth. The glowing orb shot toward the elderly man like a bullet and struck him in the shoulder, glittering for a moment before seeping into his skin. The next moment, the light rippled across his entire body.

Only Minato saw this mystical sight.

“You shall not only finish this house but build many more before you eventually move on.”

The ho’o fixed the elderly man with a sharp gaze. Minato couldn’t hear it speak, but he thought the ho’o must have done something to the man’s body, just like what had happened to the master of Echigoya.

“Huh? What in the…? My arm… I can move it. It doesn’t hurt… What’s happening…?”

The elderly man raised and lowered his arm, then clenched his hand into a fist and opened it again. Confusion quickly crept across his restless face.

His initial hesitation to move his body quickly vanished. Though shocked at the sudden and unbelievable occurrence, the man looked overjoyed to finally be able to move the way he wanted.

“Well, I guess I should be on my way,” Minato said. “I look forward to seeing the progress you’ve made next time I pass by.”

“Oh, of course… Stop by again. Next time you do, it might even be finished!”

Minato heard the man’s powerful voice call out behind him as he walked away, at the head of a flock of birds.

The ho’o granted its blessing rather easily.

It liked the things humans created, so maybe it felt a fondness for the people who made them as well. Sad though it was, the world was losing its traditional skills and techniques because there was no one to inherit them. So perhaps this act of the ho'o would help pass them down to the next generation.

However, the ho'o was still recovering. Minato didn't want it to overexert itself. The other day, Reiki had suddenly grown extremely large, but it had shown signs of growing before then. Oryu and the kirin had also grown a size since Minato first met them. If they continued relaxing at the Kusunoki residence, those two auspicious beasts might undergo some sort of change as well.

Yet the ho'o showed no such signs.

Sometimes it would fall asleep, and Minato would have to carry it home in the hood or pocket of his jacket, but that seemed unlikely today. He looked at his shoulder and saw the ho'o spread its wings, playing with the breeze. It appeared perfectly fine for now, which filled Minato with relief.

In the middle of a residential neighborhood, Minato saw someone in a familiar jumpsuit pruning a hedge. It was the young landscaper who'd come to take care of the overgrown garden when he'd first moved into the Kusunoki residence.

At the time, the garden hadn't had so much as a hedge that the man could prune to really demonstrate his craft. Now, for the first time, Minato could see his skills.

The young landscaper had trimmed the hedge to look like haniwa sculptures used in traditional burial mounds. The figures had one hand pointing up to the sky and the other lowered toward the ground, with two cavernous eyes that gaped like the abyss. A row of haniwa with intriguing smiles ran the length of the hedge, each one about the size of an adult man. It was a bit unsettling, as a novel style of hedge art.

The square house behind it was unusual in its own way. The hedge created a strange kind of harmony with the house that made it draw the eye. It was almost certainly going to become a kind of neighborhood landmark.

Impressed, Minato examined each figure in turn. Unaware of Minato standing a little way behind him, the landscaper closed

his shears, humming to himself.

"Whew, all done. That's twenty-five of these cute little puppies."

"Aren't haniwa people, not puppies?"

"Ah!"

The landscaper jumped with a surprised yelp.

He must have been very focused on his work. Minato had walked up behind him normally, not trying to be silent. He'd even stood where the landscaper could have spotted him from the corner of his eye.

Minato was surprising all sorts of people today. He wondered whether it was really because he didn't have that strong a sense of presence.

The landscaper whipped his head around so quickly, it seemed to make a noise, and his eyes grew wide.

"…Mr. Kusunoki, right?"

"Yes. It's nice to see you again. I'm surprised you remembered me."

"I'm good with names and faces. How long have you been standing there?"

"Just a couple of minutes."

"…I didn't notice you at all… I'm usually pretty observant…"

The landscaper shook his head in bewilderment.

"That's quite an avant-garde hedge."

"The owner said I could cut it into whatever shape I wanted. I haven't had a job like this in a while, so I decided to really go for it. It's pretty good, don't you think? Maybe you'd like something like this in your garden?"

"…I might, sometime."

Minato knew that day would never come, though.

The garden of the Kusunoki residence didn't need landscaping. The plants in the garden of the gods retained their most luscious green state all year-round and never grew. They stayed perpetually beautiful.

Minato pasted a smile on his face and bade the landscaper farewell.

"Maybe the Yamagami does regular upkeep on the garden…"

"…*Chirp*."

Minato wore a faint smile on his face. At some point, the ho'o had begun to blink more frequently on his shoulder.

"Bird, maybe you should get in my bag."

He opened up his tote bag and held it up for the ho'o.

Just then, a man and a woman in black suits raced past. As they ran by Minato, he saw the dull golden badge on their chest. He'd seen it before. It was the same one Saiga wore.

They were *onmyoji*.

As he had that realization, the two seemed to take on a more distinctive air in Minato's mind. He found himself staring after them as they ran but lost sight of them once they turned down a side street.

Minato didn't have spirit sight, so he couldn't see evil spirits or sense their presence. He had no way of perceiving whether any evil spirits were in the area or even right next to him.

He removed his notepad from his pocket and opened it to see brilliant black letters filling the page. His writing hadn't disappeared, so he hadn't come across any evil spirits. That was the only way he could tell.

The ho'o hadn't reacted to anything, either. In the past, he'd been led to places with evil spirits, but nothing of the sort had happened today.

Seeing *onmyoji* wandering around worried him, though.

Ultimately, however, Minato was the caretaker of the Kusunoki residence, not an *onmyoji*. He simply used his slightly unique talent to create talismans and to earn a little money. He didn't know for certain that something big was going down. Those two may not even be *onmyoji*.

He glanced at the ho'o, which clung to his shoulder, as if to say it wasn't going anywhere.

"…Let's go home."

"*Chirp, chirp.*"

They passed in front of a small shrine overrun with bamboo.

It looked like no one had cared for the grounds in ages. Minato usually only glanced at the shrine as he passed, so he didn't know it well. Today, however, he saw it clearly.

The rain-exposed wooden shrine lay mostly in ruin. It leaned under the force of a patch of bamboo pushing at it from one side, but the bamboo on the other side supported it and saved it from complete collapse. A set of double doors hung right in the center. One side was cracked open, and inside—

Minato jumped with a start. He had unwittingly walked to within a few steps of bumping into the shrine.

Why had he come so close?

Panicked, he tried to step away.

But he couldn't.

Something pulled him closer. Minato tried to stop himself, but he couldn't overcome the powerful force tugging at his body. Resistance proved futile, and the second the tip of his shoes touched the ground in front of the shrine, space rippled out from that point like waves on the surface of a pond.

A moment later, the ho'o flew off his shoulder. It transformed instantly, floating in space, looking like a peacock with its wings open wide. Flight and tail feathers glimmered black, white, red, blue, and yellow over a base of vibrant crimson. A pearly luminescence radiated from its entire body.

Minato gazed in awe. He soon realized that this was the ho'o in its true form. The harbinger of fortune, its appearance truly deserving of the title "auspicious beast."

That ho'o faced in the direction of the Kusunoki residence and released a high-pitched cry.

"*Kwaaaaaaaaa!!*"

The sound made Minato's ears ring. The ho'o's harsh voice jarred with its beautiful appearance, the incredible contrast testing the limits of imagination.

A shiver ran through Minato's body.

"…Unbelievable."

The kirin's cry had been terrible, but the ho'o's was even worse. Where was the chick's quiet, clear voice? Minato could scarcely believe that the same set of vocal cords were capable of producing such a sound.

The strength left his body, and Minato was dragged inside the warped space. Quickly morphing back to a chick, the ho'o followed close behind.

The double doors closed silently. There wasn't anyone there anymore; both Minato and the ho'o had disappeared. The only sound was the rustle of the wind through the leaves of the bamboo grove.

○

A gentle breeze blew endlessly across the veranda of the Kusunoki residence.

The great wolf sat in the center on a plump, cotton-filled cushion. Its long fur rustled in the breeze, and its shoulders rose and fell regularly as it leisurely relaxed.

Something caused its triangular ears to twitch, and the Yamagami slowly opened its eyelids. The golden eyes that emerged looked toward the other side of the mountain—the direction from which the ho'o's cry had come. It blinked once, before turning to look at the mountain.

A few seconds later, a light gust of wind sounded, and the figures of its kin, Seri, Torika, and Utsugi, appeared atop the wall.

"Go," it ordered in a low voice, pointing with its chin.

Nodding, the three martens jumped down from the wall and ran off, their steps rustling the fallen leaves.

The Yamagami let out a faint sigh.

"…Creating such noise as they move is inexcusable. They still have much to learn."

As it finished speaking, Fujin and Raijin descended from the sky to land on the veranda.

"Long time no see! I see you're as strict as ever!"

"It hasn't even been a year since you created them. I reckon they're growing pretty well."

"A year is more than ample time for them to learn such a thing."

"Says you, who does nothing but sleep. Anyway, it seems like something happened."

"It was near town, not too far from here."

Fujin and Raijin gazed at the side of the wall bordering the rice paddies.



Minato felt his eardrums expand, then the force pulling at him vanished. He stumbled and caught himself. The world in front of him wasn't the bamboo grove he'd just been in. He'd clearly crossed a boundary into some other realm.

Even in an emergency like this, Minato stayed surprisingly calm. He'd experienced this sensation before.

"…This feels weirdly nostalgic, even though it hasn't been that long."

It felt just like when he'd entered the kami realm made by the Yamagami's kin.

Minato looked around. Uneven, moss-covered terrain stretched out endlessly beneath a pale blue sky, while wooden boxes lay scattered about the ground. They were small enough that you could easily hold one in both hands, some of them abandoned, some partially buried.

It was all rather creepy, but he didn't sense anything sinister. Minato didn't feel any of the acute physiological revulsion he did when he entered an impure kami realm.

The same scene presented itself when he looked behind him. The barrier he'd just crossed had already disappeared.

He extended an arm in front of him, but it passed easily through the air.

"This must be a kami realm, right?"

"*Chirp.*"

A pearlescent pink chick rested on his shoulder. Minato hadn't noticed that the ho'o had crossed over with him.

"Are you okay, Bird?"

The ho'o nodded, but it looked sleepy. Minato thought it might have exerted too much energy when it reverted to its original form. He didn't know why it had done that and cried out in that terrible voice.

It would be awful if they lost each other in this strange place.

Minato opened the breast pocket of his jacket, and the ho'o nestled inside. It turned around, then poked its head out.

“…Let’s start by finding the exit.”

To leave the realm made by the martens, a distortion would appear in the air, and Minato would pass through it to return to the real world. Something similar might exist here.

He looked around with a slight glimmer of hope and cautiously set out.

The moss-covered ground looked like the middle of a forest that never saw the light, yet not a single tree towered overhead. An astonishing number of wooden boxes protruded all over the ground. Although they were old and worn down, they looked solid. None of them were open. Each one was covered by a lid and tied with string in a cross-shaped pattern, making them look like boxes used to store antiques.

This kami realm appeared peaceful, but even so, Minato didn’t want to stay too long. There was something about the air that seemed to cloy in his throat, and he couldn’t say he felt entirely comfortable here.

According to the Yamagami, kami realms were mental landscapes of their creators. After all, they’re created by kami to be the place in which they can feel most at home.

“Maybe the kami that made this likes moss or boxes…”

Minato knew that whatever being created this realm would be aware of every action, conversation, or hushed murmur that occurred within it. That was why he didn’t want to do or say anything careless.

He walked on, taking extra care to steer clear of the wooden boxes, to show that he wasn’t harmful but that he just wanted to get out. He even hesitated to speak too loudly. The being that had made this realm was either a kami or its subordinate, and it might hurt him if he acted too brashly. He didn’t have the slightest clue what sort of being he was dealing with, so caution was his best course of action.

The Yamagami and its kin were overly kind to Minato, the reason being because Minato had saved the Yamagami, albeit unintentionally. Even though all of them, including Fujin and Raijin, were friendly with him, Minato always showed them respect.

After all, they weren't human. They existed in a different way from humans. An impassible boundary existed between them and humanity. Minato always remembered that.

Minato wandered around aimlessly for a while but couldn't find a place where the space seemed to distort, so he figured he had to try to find the being that had created this realm.

"Where could it be…?"

The ho'o looked straight ahead with its sleepy eyes. It chirped in warning every time Minato started to veer to the side of the bumpy path, and Minato thanked his luck that the resilient baby bird had accompanied him. If he were alone right now, he would be much more panicked.

The realm had no sunlight, nor any wind. The same scene continued without end, and the humidity caused Minato to sweat. Honestly, Minato only felt dismayed imagining what kind of kami would prefer this landscape and what it might like.

Just then, a thought struck Minato. The kami here might not even take on a human form but appear as an animal like the Yamagami. It could even choose to appear as an amphibian, in which case a place like this might suit it well. He reflected on this for a moment.

Whenever Minato imagined a god, it was the image of the Buddha that sprang to mind. He had just assumed that any being he might meet here would take on a human form—even though he'd recently been spending a lot of time with a wolf that kept telling him it was the Yamagami.

"The Yamagami doesn't really look like a god, though…"

"*Chirp*."

The ho'o agreed. One good thing about the Yamagami was that it was easy to relax around.

Minato had no idea how long he'd been walking, nor how much time had passed since he'd entered the realm.

He made his way over a slope and suddenly came face-to-face with a huge rock. Large enough to be called a hill, it obscured his entire field of view. The center had been excavated, giving the

impression of a dugout shelter. It sat open; however, piles of wooden boxes created towers that closed off half the entrance.

Minato looked down at his breast pocket. The ho'o simply stared quietly at the entrance in the rock. It didn't seem wary of it.

Nervously approaching the hole, Minato saw a pair of feet peeking out from the darkness. Based on the size and shape, he thought they must belong to a human woman. Drawing closer, Minato saw she was lying on a soft blanket. A plain cloak was draped over her body, while her long hair spread across the ground and covered her face.

She seemed to be asleep.

Though it wasn't what you could quite call a peaceful sleep…

"Hrrngh… Mm… Urgh…"

She was groaning softly, apparently not sleeping very well. Minato wasn't sure if he should wake her or leave her be.

Hang on, if that's her bed—is this her bedroom?

If so, it wasn't some place that Minato could just barge into uninvited. He was only a few steps away from the entrance, so he crept back slowly and quietly. Holding his breath and trying to keep his footsteps quiet, Minato distanced himself from the woman.

She sat up with a start, pushed her hair back, and yelled, "Argh! Who could sleep in such a depressing place?!"

She was gorgeous.

Her looks far surpassed regular human beauty—even considering the extremely bad mood she was in.

"The air here is wretched! It's so humid, I can't sleep. I need fresh air…but it's such a pain… Gah, this sucks! I don't want to move! It's all too much! I just want to sleep!"

On the inside, however, she seemed like an unfortunate kami.

"Aah, no matter how much I sleep, it's not enough… Hmm? Who's there?"

Finally noticing the trembling Minato, she narrowed her large eyes.

"…A human… Yet you carry many blessings with you. Why are you here? I didn't summon you."

"…I'm not really sure why I'm here… I'd like to know that myself."

“Are you lost? …That’s strange, the entrance should have been completely sealed off… No—could my powers be fading?”

The kami put a hand to her cheek, seemingly unaware herself as to how this could have happened.

“The shrine I was at before being brought here was rather run-down…,” Minato said.

The kami closed her eyes. A few seconds later, she opened them again.

“It is. It’s in a deplorable state. When did it become like that? Has it really been so long…? Well, I guess it’s fine.”

It is?! Minato wanted to interject but restrained himself.

The kami looked Minato over from head to toe and back again. She flashed him a beautiful smile, and Minato couldn’t help thinking it was hiding some ulterior motive. He stayed wary.

“Hey, you’re associated with Fujin, aren’t you?”

“Well…I don’t know if ‘associated’ is the right word.”

“But you have some of his power. I’m surprised that shrewd kami would gift any of his power to a human.”

“We have a little bit of history. He pretty much lent me this power on a whim…”

“I see. Well, I have a request for you. Could you use your powers to air this place out for me?”

“…Oh, sure, I guess… The air here is pretty stale.”

“Isn’t it? I do leave every now and then, but when was the last time it was aired out properly…? Let’s see, how can I put this in terms a human could understand…? Er, who was the man who used to talk about abolishing envoys to the Tang dynasty…?”

It sounded like it had been over a thousand years.

“Human lives pass so quickly, I can hardly remember anyone’s names.”

“…That must be difficult.”

Hearing Raijin tell it, the human population seemed to ebb and flow like the tides. Human lives must seem so fleeting and short to immortal kami. For that very reason, it was said to be incredibly rare for a kami to recognize a specific individual and address them by their name.

“Well then, would you like to get started?”

“…Sure. When I’m done, will you let me leave here?”

“Of course.”

The smiling kami lay still, her head propped up on one hand. She was incredibly lazy, yet she didn't seem the slightest bit ashamed about it. Put in a positive light, Minato guessed he could describe her as open-minded, but put negatively, "good-for-nothing" was the first thing that came to mind. All he could do was feign a smile.

The kami lazily extended an arm and pointed to an empty space far away from Minato, where a black dot immediately materialized. It gradually expanded in all directions, ending in a large, pitch-black hole. Minato had thought she'd been creating a portal back to the real world, but he was wrong. Who knew where that hole led?

"Since you're here, could you throw the boxes into that void? Just the ones you can see from here is fine."

"…Okay."

Minato's sixth sense told him he'd be better off not knowing what was in the boxes. That he should only do what she'd asked him to do.

The kami chuckled at Minato's rigid expression.

"Don't worry. Each one is very light."

That wasn't what was worrying him. But he didn't feel bold enough to say as much.

"…Well then, I'll get started."

Minato sent out a blast of wind, which swirled around him. It slowly expanded outward, lifting up all the boxes in the area and catching them in the windstorm. Even though Minato had created a loosely bound tornado, the air around him was completely still. Neither a feather on the ho'o's protruding head nor a lock of Minato's hair so much as stirred.

Inside the gale spun innumerable boxes. The wind was destined to end up inside the hole.

"What a sight to behold."

The kami enjoyed the wind rushing around her. Her long hair and robes fluttered wildly as she relished a breeze she hadn't felt in close to a thousand years.

Within minutes, all of the boxes were floating in the air and riding on the wind toward the hole.

"It's so nice to have those annoying boxes gone."

Minato had cleared the area, just as the kami requested, but simply moving the stagnant air around didn't make the place any cleaner. Minato's wind power was a gift from Fujin, and as such, it contained a little bit of the kami's spirit. However, even that hadn't been enough to clear away a thousand years of stagnation.

Minato took a few camphor leaves out of his jacket pocket. He'd made a point to always bring a few with him whenever he went out. There was a chance adding some leaves from the sacred camphor tree might clean this murky air.

He released the fresh leaves, letting them drift lightly on the breeze. They danced playfully toward the large rock and circled the kami once, then floated up into the air.

The kami and the ho'o saw it clearly. The wind—jade-green flecked with silver particles—swept away the gray sediment, and everything around them suddenly looked clearer.

With the air now much cleaner, the kami and the ho'o both took long, deep breaths.

Minato collected all the leaves he could see around him. Each one had withered completely.

"…Thank you," he said, and they crumbled to dust. Outside the Kusunoki residence, the camphor leaves mysteriously vanished once they withered.

As Minato was staring at his now empty hand, the kami spoke to him.

"If you have any more fresh leaves, would you mind giving them to me?"

"…Oh, sure. Here you are."

He held out his last leaf toward her fluttering hand. The kami's outstretched fingers went not to the leaf, however, but to Minato's index finger, releasing a soft, pale light.

His finger burned for the slightest moment.

"Huh?"

She grabbed the leaf and whipped it away in a flash. Chuckling, she fanned her face with it.

"I gave you a tiny portion of my power as thanks."

"…What kind of power is it?"

"The power to seal things. Ah, this leaf smells wonderful."

“Oh, yes, it has a fairly strong scent. I’m quite proud of… Huh? Sorry, the power to seal what?”

“Things invisible to the eye. Human emotions, troublesome thoughts, extraordinary abilities. You can seal those sorts of things in the vessel of your choosing.”

“…You mean that was what was in those boxes?”

“Oh, yes. I sealed them away because people asked me to. Dreams they couldn’t forget, jealousy toward another person, envy, strange abilities they couldn’t control, things like that.”

She wove the words together as though singing a song.

“You don’t have to use wooden boxes; I just happen to like them. Find the thing that works best for you.”

As she waved the leaf like a fan, the kami’s speech gradually started to slow.

“Whether you use my power or not…is up to you… You can choose to keep something sealed away forever…or release it on certain conditions… It will all come…with training…”

Her eyes began to close.

Oh no! She was starting to fall asleep. Minato would be trapped here. Who knew when she might wake up next? If she stayed asleep for another thousand years or more, that would be a serious problem.

He wanted to ask the kami more about the power she’d given him, but he didn’t have time.

“Madam Kami, where is the exit?”

“Ohh… The…exit…? What…is an ‘exit’…?”

She fell asleep, still holding the leaf up to her nose in both hands with a blissful expression.

Minato’s head drooped in disappointment.

“She fell asleep…”

“*Chirp*…”

Even the ho’o felt despondent.

“…I don’t really want to forcibly wake her up…”

It was a terrifying prospect. In her half-asleep state, it was entirely possible that she could seal him inside a wooden box. She’d told him that her power worked on things invisible to the eye, but she hadn’t said they were the *only* things it worked on. It might also affect living beings.

Kami don’t lie. However, they can purposefully obscure the truth.

The Yamagami was like that. It didn’t provide clear answers about everything. And there was still a lot about the Yamagami that Minato didn’t know.

Only kami can resist other kami. Humans can’t do so much as raise a sword against them, and considering how vast this kami realm was, the sleeping kami must be quite powerful. Minato’s wind contained some of Fujin’s power, but only a tiny amount. It would be incredibly difficult for him to tear a rift in this kami realm with his wind and escape.

Minato looked down and met the ho’o’s eyes, as powerful as ever. It cast its gaze toward the hill, now free of boxes.

The space directly in front of the hill warped, and a small hole opened in the air. It silently expanded outward in a circle, forming an opening wide enough for Minato to pass through if he crouched. He caught a glimpse of the bamboo grove on the other side.

Three heads poked through the opening: Seri, Torika, and Utsugi. They beckoned Minato toward them.

They’d opened a rift from the real world. The tension left his shoulders, and Minato was overcome with incredible relief.

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He passed through the rift without incident, back to where he’d started—right next to the dilapidated shrine. Minato looked back in time to see the hole close.

It looked like nothing had happened at all. The martens’ powers had improved significantly.

“Thank you so much for coming to get me.”

“Of course. It was an unfortunate accident,” Seri said sympathetically.

“…That is a very old kami… It’s a good thing she’s so lazy,” Torika muttered, gazing up at the shrine buried in bamboo.

“…You know…something smells kinda nice and sweet,” Utsugi said, standing up on his hind legs and sniffing the air. He seemed

more interested in the scent than in anything else.

“That’s probably because there’s a crepe shop just over there. Want one?”

“Really?!”

“It’s my treat. Have as many as you want.”

“Yay! You’re so generous!”

Utsugi jumped with joy. He may have matured, but his love of Western-style sweets remained unchanged. Even Seri and Torika looked happy. They hadn’t been stopping by the Kusunoki residence as often as they used to, so Minato figured none of them had eaten any sweets in a while.

They left the bamboo grove walking side by side. Minato was worried about the ruined shrine, but he didn’t know who took care of it, so he couldn’t meddle. The kami here hadn’t seemed to care about it in the least. He decided he’d ask the Yamagami about it once he got back home.

“Is this your first time coming to this area?”

“Yeah. We usually don’t leave the mountain.”

Torika was looking around at everything in amazement. Walking next to him, Seri glanced up at Minato’s breast pocket.

“We had a general idea of where you were, thanks to the ho’o, and the divine energy from the camphor leaves led us to you.”

Looking down, Minato saw the ho’o curled up in his pocket, asleep. It must have reverted to its true form and cried out to send some sort of emergency signal. He would have to thank it once it woke up.

Meanwhile, Utsugi had run ahead and was now staring back at them.

“Hey, hurry up! They make the crepes to order, right?”

He couldn’t conceal his excitement.

They hurried to the shopping street Minato had visited earlier. Far at the end of the road, he saw the two people in black suits. One of them looked like Saiga.

Chapter 3
The Spring Evil Spirit Festival

Spring, the season when all variety of things begin to sprout.

The first of the cherry blossoms had started to bloom—and with them, evil spirits were popping up all over the place. They typically resided in places filled with people's residual hopes and desires; however, during this time of year, they could surge forth from anywhere, like water from a mountain spring.

For that reason, *onmyoji* work constantly in spring, traveling to every nook and cranny of Japan, exterminating evil spirits day and night.

They call this yearly phenomenon "The Spring Evil Spirit Festival."

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In a graveyard halfway up a small mountain, *onmyoji* Saiga and Katsuragi were hard at work banishing evil spirits.

The area wasn't very big, and it had been consumed by nature. Overgrown weeds covered most of the headstones, several of which had toppled over completely. The graves sat mostly abandoned, no longer visited nor cared for.

A dark miasma covered every corner of the graveyard, seeping out from behind fallen tombstones. Saiga pointed toward the area where the miasma hung thickest in the air, index and middle fingers extended, with his thumb pressing his ring and pinky fingers into his palm—the sign of the blade.

"*Rin.*"

He slashed his fingers horizontally through the air.

“*Byo.*”

Next, he brought them straight down.

“*Tou. Sha. Kai. Chin. Retsu. Zai. Zen.*”

With each word, Saiga alternated between horizontal and vertical cuts, creating a grid pattern in the air.

The Simplified Nine Seals. The left hand acting as the scabbard and the right as the sword, the caster would draw the blade and use it to cut a lattice in front of them. It was a faster version of the Nine Seals that didn’t require the caster to form each sign with both hands. It didn’t provide the same degree of power, but it sufficed for weaker, low-level spirits.

The evil spirits that had materialized quickly dispersed.

Saiga walked forward, his fingers still in the sign of the blade. Stepping over a fallen tombstone, he extended his hand toward the edge of the graveyard. That alone was enough to immediately banish the partially formed spirits swarming there. He hadn’t even needed to recite the nine words.

“You’re not gonna do the whole ‘*Won. Kiri. Kyara. Hara. Futaran*,’ chant at the end?” Katsuragi teased from behind him.

Saiga looked around the area, then relaxed his fingers, releasing the sign.

“All that matters is that the seal activates.”

“You’re not wrong. Still, they just keep coming.”

“It’s like this every year. They never give up…”

“Right? We just cleared this place up six months ago.”

The two *onmyoji* sighed deeply. Once they banished all the spirits in an area, it should take a certain amount of time before they raised their heads again.

“Well, at least none of these guys take too much time to get rid of.”

“It feels a bit like working on a factory line.”

“True that. There’s so many of them, though.”

“It slowly depletes our power…”

Their hellish days had just begun—and they were already tired. Both men looked ragged and exhausted. Saiga’s typically pristine necktie had come loose, and Katsuragi’s trademark panama hat was askew.

This was the first place they’d visited today, but they were still exhausted from the day before. And they still had a number of

stops to make after they finished up here.

"We call it a 'festival,' but there's nothing about this that's fun."

"…Tell me about it."

Saiga cast his weary eyes around. He didn't see any troublesome mid-grade evil spirits poised to attack, but more than half the graveyard was already crawling with newly emerged spirits. If they didn't banish them today, those spirits would consume each other and grow stronger.

Honestly, he'd prefer it if they were mid-grade beings or above, with a clearly defined shape. The reason being—

"They really make my skin crawl," explained Saiga. "We keep getting rid of them, but they just keep coming back, like mold that won't go away."

"Must be hard for a germaphobe like you, huh?"

"…I don't know if I'd go so far as to call myself a *germaphobe*."

"You don't just clean *your* desk but the one next to yours, too."

"…I don't like it when things are dirty… That's all."

"You're the only person your old Uncle Katsuragi knows who polishes their shoes during car rides."

Saiga glanced down at his shoes. The black leather sparkled. The road up here had been rather steep, but it was paved, so his shoes had stayed clean.

Saiga appeared relieved, and Katsuragi shot him an exasperated look.

The area around them was completely overgrown. Soon, it would be hard to tell there was even a graveyard beneath it all. Saiga wanted to leave this weed-infested place as soon as possible.

It might be best to use the Nine Seals and banish all the spirits at once.

Saiga began to form the signs with both hands, but just then, Katsuragi reached into his breast pocket and removed a *katashiro*—a paper vessel for a *shikigami*.

"You took care of the big ones, so your old Uncle Katsuragi will use Number One to mop up the rest of the riffraff."

Katsuragi released the piece of paper, and it instantly transformed into a peculiar-looking creature.

It was a shark, more than twice the size of Katsuragi. It opened its huge mouth to reveal rows of sharp teeth, but its small, round

eyes made it look kind of cute.

The shark swam across the ground, mouth open, gobbling up everything in its path. The way it joyously devoured the evil spirits was quite a vulgar sight.

“Eat your fill, little guy!”

Katsuragi looked on, smiling. His *shikigami* was perfectly suited to helping them mop up all the low-grade evil spirits left over here. They could leave the cleanup to him.

Standing at the edge of the graveyard, Saiga gazed at the town spread out below him.

Beneath the spring sky with its wispy clouds, man-made structures covered the Earth. Humans gathered and settled in places where they could thrive. Looking down on it from above, Saiga got a keen sense of that pack-like nature.





At a glance, nothing seemed amiss. The town appeared completely at peace.

Yet other *onmyoji* fought in places throughout the city.

They were wildly outnumbered by the number of evil spirits currently out there. Recently, far fewer people were being born with the power of extermination, also known as “spirit power.”

Banishing evil spirits requires more than hard work. People need to be born with spirit power, which isn’t something that just anyone can acquire. To become an *onmyoji*, a person has to be able to see, sense, and exterminate evil spirits. Even though *onmyoji* typically work in teams, anyone who can’t see or sense spirits could never hope to join their ranks.

Which is why the Bureau of Onmyo is perpetually faced with a shortage of banishers.

Headquartered in Tokyo, the Bureau also had branches in several locations around Japan. Each branch housed *onmyoji*, who lived there permanently and handled local issues, as well as others who traveled around Japan to take care of more serious matters.

Naturally, more powerful *onmyoji* who were capable of working independently fell into the latter category, which included Saiga and Katsuragi.

The two of them had rushed to this town, a hot spot of spirit activity, as soon as spring had arrived, and they’d received an alert about a mass emergence of evil spirits.

At that moment, they found themselves near the home of Minato Kusunoki, the man who crafted talismans for Saiga.

The small mountain the two *onmyoji* were currently on bordered a taller mountain, which had the Kusunoki residence nestled at its base. Not too far from there, where the mountain slope began to ease, was a pond between rows of trees. In the past, swarms of evil spirits had congregated around it.

Saiga stared intently at the pond. He couldn’t make out anything unusual from this distance.

“All right, Number One, you must be full by now. Hmm? You’re still hungry? Don’t worry, there’ll be plenty more…!”

Saiga turned around to see Katsuragi grinning as he petted his *shikigami*.

The method *onmyoji* used to banish spirits depended on the individual. Katsuragi specialized in *shikigami*, something Saiga didn’t use, so he watched with curiosity.

“Hey, no eating my head,” Katsuragi said with a laugh as the shark tried to bite him from above. Nothing ever seemed to faze him.

The *shikigami* employed by average *onmyoji* were robotic, unfeeling beings that disappeared once their task was complete. Katsuragi’s *shikigami*, on the other hand, were a lineup of creatures he’d had for a long time now. He treated them more like well-trained, living pets than like disposable commodities, and for some reason, they were all quirky sea creatures.

“Come on, time to change back to paper… Oh? You don’t want to?”

The shark shook its head vigorously in refusal. It had a mind of its own—something that seemed impossible. By their very nature, *shikigami* were submissive beings.

“How can I say no to that face? All right, then stay behind me. Just don’t nibble on me too much.”

It was probably because he spoiled them so much.

Saiga and Katsuragi finished rooting out and eliminating all the evil spirits in the graveyard.

When they reached the foot of the hill, they both gazed down the road toward a house.

“…Looks like something’s there.”

“It seems like it might be slightly troublesome… Probably a mid-grade spirit.”

The two *onmyoji* had taken a different path down the mountain than they had going up. Although they hadn’t expected it to be as free of evil spirits as the area around the Kusunoki residence, they were surprised at the marked difference they saw here compared to in the sacred atmosphere.

“This air around here is horrible.”

“Oh, that’s right. The house of the guy who makes your talismans is around here. That place is practically sacred ground, so in comparison, the air anywhere must taste bad.”

“That’s true.”

They felt the presence of an evil spirit for a brief moment before it vanished.

“It feels like someone is banishing spirits here…”

“Sure does, doesn’t it? I doubt any spirit would just up and disappear.”

They walked toward the house to check it out. It looked abandoned from a distance. The color of the walls had faded completely, while the garden was completely devoid of trees and scattered with what they assumed were the belongings of a previous resident.

At the sight of a tricycle lying abandoned on the ground, Katsuragi pulled his panama hat low.

“Places like this always make me a little sad.”

“They do?”

“Don’t you feel anything when you see a house like this, that’s been left to go to ruin?”

“Not really. Though I do wish they’d cleaned up before they left.”

“Seriously…? Tell me, what color blood runs through your veins?”

“Red, of course.”

“Oh, uh, never mind.”

Saiga looked flatly at Katsuragi, as if wondering why he would ask a question like that. Katsuragi, meanwhile, had covered his face with both hands and raised it toward the sky. Behind him, Number One patted his shoulder with a flipper, in consolation.

“Sorry, it’s an old habit…! I’m usually surrounded by other old guys like me…!”

“…Sure.”

Saiga assumed it was an outdated joke or something. This sort of thing happened every now and then working with Katsuragi, so he tried to just let it go.

After all, Saiga wasn’t the type of overly considerate person who’d shower Katsuragi with empty flattery and reassure him he was still young.

They walked around the house and approached the front door.

Just then, the door opened, and a large man walked out. They knew him—the man was a freelance banisher around forty years old. His eyes were so narrow, it was hard to tell if they were open or closed, which gave a sly cast to his face.

Noticing Saiga and Katsuragi, the man furrowed his thin eyebrows, and his mouth distorted into a grin.

"Well, if it isn't you two, always connected at the hip. Nice to see you finally out in the field. You're too late, though; I already banished all the spirits. Took me no time at all," he said spitefully, peppering his speech with exaggerated gestures.

Banishers made their living exterminating evil spirits, so many of them—like this man—hated the very sight of *onmyoji*.

"Thank you for your service."

Generally, Katsuragi didn't engage with them and let it all slide. His father had been a banisher, not an *onmyoji*. Just because someone could expel evil spirits, that didn't mean they had to join the Bureau of Onmyo. To Katsuragi's mind, they were all in the same line of work, which made them coworkers. He harbored no ill will toward them.

As a rule, however, people not employed by the Bureau didn't carry the title of *onmyoji*. It was a distinction that had been established long ago, and some people saw the title as a kind of status symbol. This had resulted in some conflict in the past, but the only ones who still thought this way in the modern day were the freelancers.

The man snorted and turned his back to them. He was one of those dishonorable people who demanded exorbitant fees for exterminating spirits.

"Given how much he charges, I'd hope so…," Katsuragi muttered, after they watched the man turn down an alley.

If the two *onmyoji* had arrived here first and taken care of the evil spirits, it was entirely plausible that the other man would have taken credit for the job.

"Anyway," Saiga said, changing the subject, "let's head to the next spot."

"You got it."

He was staying out of their little altercation.

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Dusk was finally drawing near, yet with its clusters of dense trees, the area around the run-down seaside shrine made it look like it was already evening.

There were no civilians around. Four *onmyoji* stood assembled in the dim light—Saiga and Katsuragi had joined up with Ichijo and his childhood friend Horikawa to banish the evil spirits there. However, no matter how many they expelled, the number never seemed to decrease.

Saiga cast the Simplified Nine Seals, while Katsuragi had deployed three *shikigami* to help with the fight, having decided that one wouldn't be enough.

Ichijo and Horikawa took care of the other side of the shrine. The pair still frequently worked together, and recently Horikawa hadn't been subjected to as much one-sided criticism. The relationship seemed to have improved somewhat—but even now, it could hardly be described as friendly.

"You need to fall back."

Ichijo's orders left no room for protest. With a soft sigh, Horikawa obediently backed away, escaping to a safe distance. She furrowed her brow in mild frustration.

Ichijo seemed to have changed lately and was currently throwing everything he had into banishing the evil spirits. Every being there was low-grade, yet he used the same power he would to banish higher-grade spirits.

His brute force approach wasted a lot of spirit power. He liked showing off, though, so he always went all out. Even though he naturally possessed an extraordinary amount of spirit power, it was like using a sledgehammer to crack a walnut.

Horikawa somberly watched the evil spirits vanish instantly. Every so often, Ichijo would glance back with a smug expression on his face that was rather pitiful to see.

He showed absolutely no interest in working with her. Instead, Ichijo had charged ahead so he could be the first one to vanquish the evil spirits, as if to tell Horikawa to stand back and just let him protect her.

"She's a proud woman, though," said Katsuragi.

“Yes,” agreed Saiga. “If I treated the women in my clan like that, they would skewer me without a second thought.” Just imagining it was enough to send a chill through him.

“…Mm. With your clan, no matter how many lives you had, it wouldn’t be enough.”

Saiga’s family was all women. Throughout the generations, it had always been led by a matriarch. Every single lady in his family was incredibly brave and disavowed the false notion that they needed to rely on men. Every *onmyoji* knew about them.

The Harima family had a number of different weapons at their disposal to banish evil spirits. His older sister, the next matriarch, wielded a katana to vanquish spirits, while his younger sister used a *naginata*. Naturally, they took impeccable care of their weapons and kept them razor-sharp at all times.

The spirit-dispelling powers of these treasured family weapons could only be brought out by women born of the Harima bloodline.

Meaning that Saiga couldn’t use them.

Ichijo again used an excess of power to draw a pentagram and dispel some spirits, then looked back at Saiga and flashed a boastful grin.

It was a look meant to provoke Saiga, insinuating that he couldn’t do that.

Individuals vary greatly in their amount of spirit power, as the size of the vessel containing that power differs for each person. No matter how hard they train, a person can’t increase the amount that they’re born with. They can’t become stronger.

Saiga’s spirit power capacity wasn’t all that great, and it paled in comparison to Ichijo’s. Right now, he was relying solely on his own power, but in a few days, he’d have to start using Minato’s talismans.

He couldn’t deny he felt frustrated. Yet he was also proud that he’d trained his spirit power to reach its full potential. And no matter how much power Minato’s talismans contained, they still

needed to be used with caution. They weren't free, and they weren't endless; he only had a certain number of them.

Other people in the Harima clan also used Minato's talismans. Even with Harima blood flowing through their veins, some members of the family only had a trifling amount of spirit power. Most of them waited to use the talismans until they had no other choice, while some kept them as charms to ward off evil.

Saiga lowered his arm after a stream of Simplified Nine Seals.

A few spirits still cowered in the corners of the shrine, though he wasn't sure whether their timing was good or bad. It was the twilight hour—the time for meeting spirits.

Evil spirits were typically more active at this hour.

"…There's no end to them."

"It's always hardest fighting a huge swarm, so let's take them one at a time. I'm counting on you, Number Four."

Katsuragi removed a slip of paper from his breast pocket and tossed it into the air.

Saiga reflexively looked up. Through the treetops, some sort of kami-like beings flew across the pale indigo sky.

Saiga couldn't see the concealed forms of kami, but he could sense their divine power. And he had just sensed two incredibly strong divine powers pass over him.

He'd felt those same kami at the Kusunoki residence.

○

A myriad of kami existed in nature.

Mountains, oceans, lakes, trees, rocks—each one was home to a kami. Typically, those that had existed for longer periods of time were classed higher and possessed more power. These powerful beings could create their own personal kami realms to live in, which differed in size and shape in accordance with the kami's power.

Kami realms generally do not exist in the real world but in another dimension altogether. The entrances to these realms vary as greatly as the myriad kami themselves, and although they can be found everywhere, they are normally sealed tight.

A kami realm is their home. Even humans keep their front doors locked.

As a general rule, no one can enter a realm unless invited by the being that created it. But every so often, someone who shares a strong affinity with a particular kami wanders into their realm and disappears from the real world for a while. Although it does happen, the chances are very low.

And yet a certain human had developed an abnormally strong affinity with kami.

That's right—Minato Kusunoki.

But there was more to it than that.

Minato had unwittingly become drawn to kami realms.

This had happened because, even though he was human, Minato not only lived in a kami realm but bathed in the Yamagami Hot Spring every day.

○

"It only makes sense he'd divert from humanity a bit. There's nothing we can do about that."

"I don't know if he's just going to accept that, though."

Thin clouds stretched across the sky as Fujin and Raijin floated on the wind. Just as the sun finally seemed ready to dip below the horizon, a sea of yellow broke across half of the dim blue sky.

A familiar townscape spread out below the two kami. Peaks stretched out across the foot of the mountain, filling the space. Facing away from the foothills, houses and other human constructions fanned out toward the sea.

"Huh? There's a tall tower down near the ocean. Has that always been there?"

"…They just finished it last month," Fujin answered, sharing what the winds had told him.

"More and more people are moving into that area, aren't they?"

"It's the nature of animals to gather in places that are easy to live in."

“It might also be because the Yamagami hasn’t erupted recently.”

“That’s probably a part of it.”

Raijin flew off toward the summit of the mountain below them.

“It’s really calm. It used to erupt all the time.”

The truth was that the Yamagami was taking a break. Although it had quieted down now, there had been a time when it had been violently active.

Pushed forward by the wind at his back, Fujin flew along the mountain ridges.

“It seems the Yamagami has finally settled down.”

“It’s getting old. Right up until a couple hundred years ago, it was really wild.”

“The last time it erupted was over a thousand years ago.”

“It was? Well, that’s not so different from a couple hundred years. It’s within the margin of error.”

Trees rustled atop the mountain.

“*Accuracy is important. It was fifteen hundred years ago*,” came the Yamagami’s voice on the wind. But its sense of time wasn’t the most reliable.

Kami tend not to worry about dates. And nothing demonstrates this better than when they tell old stories. Minato’s expression had been indescribable when the Yamagami had called a few hundred years ago “recently.”

Regardless, Fujin and Raijin didn’t pay too much attention to what the Yamagami said and instead observed their surroundings.

Fujin suddenly noticed a patch of sky that was gently pulsing.

“Oh, that’s one over there.”

He waved a hand and shot out a small crescent-shaped blade of wind that tore through the distorted space and quickly disappeared.

It had been a portal to an abandoned kami realm.

Created at the whim of the multitudinous kami, the realms were often abandoned either because their creators had grown weary of them or because the kami had ceased to exist. An infinite number of abandoned kami realms existed, their

entrances dotting the land, sky, and sea. And they had the troublesome quality of moving around on their own accord.

Fujin and Raijin were flying around, destroying the entrances to the kami-less, abandoned realms near the Kusunoki residence.

"If he gets sucked into an evil kami's realm, he won't be able to get out on his own."

"He still can't control my power. It's the first time I've loaned it to a human, so who knows how long it'll take him to reach my level?"

"If I also share some of my power with him, he might get better really quickly."

"He refused, though, remember? You still haven't given up yet?"

"I mean, he's kind of like your disciple. I want one, too. It seems like fun."

"Simply granting someone your power and releasing them out into the world does not make them your disciple." The trees rustled with the frustrated voice of the Yamagami.

"Yeah. He's more like your kin than your disciple."

"That's true. Still, any kami would recognize my power, and I don't remember any of them holding a grudge against me, so I can't imagine they'd pick on him," Fujin said with an easygoing laugh.

"…Sure."

For once, Raijin was at a loss for words.

The Yamagami, for his part, remained silent.

Fujin and Raijin floated through the skies, using wind and lightning to destroy the distortions as they materialized.

Yet no matter how many they dealt with, they kept finding more.

"…I can't believe it. There's no end to them."

"We've always just ignored them, but there's so many…"

A strong wind blew, carrying with it a swarm of abandoned kami realms that had gathered in the air above the Kusunoki residence.

Fujin and Raijin looked at each other.

"There's no point keeping on going."

“Yeah.”

As free, uninhibited kami, they didn’t have much patience.

The two beings looked down at the ground in resignation.

“This is going to be tough for the Yamagami and its kin as well.”

“No kidding.”

Looking down, they saw the martens—three bean-sized objects who’d scattered across the mountain in three directions—swiftly converge on the large white spot that was the great wolf.

○

The Yamagami ambled along a path halfway up the mountain. It traced the contour of a sheer, orange-colored cliff, and one wrong step would result in a tumble all the way down to the bottom of the abyss.

Yet the Yamagami walked resolutely through the mountain that was its true form. Even if it fell, it wouldn’t suffer so much as a scratch. This wolf body was merely its temporal form, and as such, it felt no physical pain.

The trees above the Yamagami bowed low, and Seri suddenly flew out from that direction. He landed behind the great wolf and began walking along behind its massive body.

“I’ve taken care of all of them in the north.”

“Very good.”

“The west is complete,” said Torika, falling into line behind Seri.

“Good. You have done well.”

The two elder martens reverently matched the Yamagami’s pace.

Just then, the youngest sibling flew in from diagonally in front of them, tumbled across the ground, and landed at the wolf’s feet.

“The east’s also done!” said Utsugi.

“Aye. Good work.”

The Yamagami flung Utsugi behind it with its front paw. Seri and Torika jumped to either side, and Utsugi did a backward somersault in the air to land a few meters away. He sprinted back to the rest of the group, then clung to the Yamagami’s leg.

“That was so much fun! Hey, Yamagami, can you do that again?”

“Later.”

For some reason, he'd grown up to act exactly like the youngest child.

The Yamagami sighed. Seri had been created first, and he clearly acted the oldest, with a firm sense of responsibility. Torika wasn't too different, and if anything, could be described as overly serious. Created last, Utsugi was too carefree, which might be why the other two felt so compelled to be more restrained.

Still, they didn't fight, and they worked together extremely well. The Yamagami had no complaints.

"In any system, it is essential to have a certain *équilibre*."

"Is it just me, or have you been using more French words lately? Why's that?"

Utsugi seemed confused.

"I must actively use that which I have endeavored to learn."

"It's good to keep learning. You forget what you don't use."

"He's right. Even with your poor pronunciation."

"You two also seem to have become more emboldened lately."

Utsugi had never been one to hide his feelings, but Seri and Torika had recently lost some of their restraint.

"Well, you were created from me, after all. I guess such a thing is unavoidable."

The three martens had been formed from parts of the great wolf's spirit. They had minds of their own, but most of what they were came from the Yamagami, so it only made sense that they would resemble it to some degree.

"Regardless, you three are too boisterous. You must aim to be quieter."

"Sorry. We'll try harder."

"My apologies."

"Uh, we move quietly when we have to, so we don't really have to do it all the time, right?"

"Nonsense. As they say, everyday actions become habits."

Utsugi nodded along innocently enough, and he and his siblings changed their gait. They quieted their steps, carefully dropping their center of gravity to stop their bodies from swaying as much as possible. Not a single sound came from behind the Yamagami.

However, the great wolf still felt their presence keenly. They were a part of it, and other beings wouldn't be able to sense them at all. The Yamagami let out a low growl.

The martens were obedient, which is why they were growing so fast.

Yet why did the kin of a kami need to be trained?

The reason for this was because the Yamagami had purposefully created them as immature beings. They were going to spend the rest of eternity alongside the Yamagami, so they might find life boring if they emerged into the world knowing everything they needed to know.

If they continued to improve themselves and hone their powers, they would easily be able to deal with low-class kami.

It hadn't even been a year since they'd been created. The Yamagami was enjoying watching them grow.

The martens had just finishing clearing away the abandoned kami realms. They had largely ignored the abandoned realms so far because they posed no threat to the kin, but now that there was a possibility that Minato might get drawn into one, they needed to be dealt with.

"I've always just ignored them, but I never really noticed *how many* of them there are."

"I tried counting them like Utsugi did, and there were over three hundred. I never thought there would be so many."

"Right? I don't mean to sound disrespectful to other kami, but they're far too negligent. They should be the ones cleaning this up."

"Yet some are unable to."

The Yamagami's offhand remark hung heavy in the air. Many of the low-class kami had naturally disappeared.

As the Yamagami family walked in a line, a spatial distortion appeared in the middle of the road in front of them.

It was extremely small, not even the size of the Yamagami's head, yet the size of the entrance didn't matter; even an abandoned kami realm like this could pull in an elephant many times larger than itself.

The Yamagami stepped on it without breaking stride, crushing it into oblivion underfoot. It didn't hesitate in the slightest.

Gently swaying its tail, it descended a staircase made from logs.

“Humans built this path using trees that came down during the last eruption, right?” Utsugi asked, as he quietly walked down the step of the log stairs.

“Indeed. Although it happened quite some time after the eruption. It took a great deal of effort for the humans to build it with nothing but their own strength.”

The logs had worn down in some places, but they still functioned well as stairs.

The kin had also inherited the Yamagami’s memories. They might not have experienced any of it for themselves, but they had all the knowledge of the Yamagami’s distant past. Utsugi was extremely inquisitive. He liked to see things with his own eyes and compare them with the memories.

“Say, Yamagami, we haven’t been to Minato’s house for a while. Can we go today?”

“Yes, you may all come by. Minato has been missing you.”

“Then let’s bring him some eagle fern. By the way, are you really in a position to say *come by* like that?” asked Torika.

“She’s got a point,” added Seri. “You said that without a trace of recognition that *this* is our home.”

“It is not inappropriate in the least,” said the Yamagami. “The foothills where it stands are a part of this mountain. So, naturally, my home also extends to that house.”

“It’s a bit high-handed, but I get what you mean,” said Utsugi with a cackle.

Seri quickly followed the Yamagami down the stairs.

“Yamagami, you go down from the mountain rather flippantly. The other day, I was speaking with the kin of the kami that lives on the next mountain over, and they couldn’t believe that you leave here. I felt somewhat embarrassed.”

“The kami next to us never leaves its mountain. I haven’t seen it, but I want to at least once!”

“It is a fox, nothing more.”

“So it looks just like its kin.”

“Nay, wait. It is no regular fox… If I remember correctly, it has more than one tail… Five, perhaps seven…although I do believe it was even more than that… Yet it did not start as a mountain kami.”

“Really?! How bizarre! Now I *really* wanna see it!”

Ignoring the excited Utsugi, Seri and Torika looked tepidly past the Yamagami.

“The last time you met that kami was over five hundred years ago. It only makes sense for your memory of it to be a bit hazy.”

“Yeah, anyone would forget. That’s why we don’t remember either and can hardly even picture what it looks like.”

“Do not jest at my expense.”

The Yamagami glanced backward, fangs exposed.

Leading its three kin, the great wolf left the mountain and came out onto a relatively wide street. They saw the Kusunoki residence beyond a row of greenery. The roof and garden blended into the camphor trees covering the slope of the mountain.

There wasn’t a single distortion anywhere around them. They had disposed of the tiresome number of abandoned kami realms before arriving back home.

The martens looked on in silence, imitating the Yamagami as it gazed down serenely at the Kusunoki residence.

A strong breeze blew through the trees.

Innumerable distortions now swirled around the Kusunoki residence, dense enough to blur their field of vision. They had just spent all that time taking care of each of them. And now they were back to square one.

The Yamagami looked up to the sky, its eyes narrowed. Far above them, Fujin and Raijin sat cross-legged and shrugged.

“It’s not my fault,” Fujin insisted, his voice carrying on the wind.

“…I know,” the wolf said with a sigh. “There is no end to them.”

The Yamagami’s resigned murmur echoed around the mountain. The martens each looked to the area of the mountain where they resided, frowning at the scattered distortions all around.

Chapter 4
A Makeover for the Garden of Gods

A gentle breeze blew, and warm rays of sunlight shone down.

It was another leisurely day in the lush garden of the Kusunoki residence.

Even if the scene never changed, it was still a garden of the gods. One could never tire of the view, of simply feeling that air on their skin. Just gazing out at the garden would ease anyone's worries and bring them peace of mind, and the mountain scent that emanated from the Yamagami's body could satiate people as thoroughly as standing in a glade deep in the forest.

The camphor tree in the center of that garden rustled in the breeze. A sleeping Reiki dried its shell on the large rock, while the kirin snoozed on the arched bridge. Oryu frolicked in the air above them, jumping about like a flying fish.

And in one corner of the garden, the Yamagami reigned from its position in the center of the veranda. At its side, Minato sat in front of a low table.

—*Cheep, cheep.*

A row of birds was perched on top of the fence, twittering softly. They seemed to be waiting for their leader.

The ho'o had been asleep for days.

It lay deep inside the stone lantern and had yet to emerge. A few days ago, it had expended all of its energy to revert back to its original form and send out an emergency beacon when Minato had been pulled inside a kami realm.

The Yamagami had declared that it would recover with sleep.

Minato glanced anxiously at the stone lantern. A pearlescent pink light flickered intensely inside the flame housing. It glowed more brightly than it had on previous days.

"…It's getting stronger."

"It shall wake soon enough."

"That's good…"

It had been an accident, but Minato still felt guilty.

"It would take much more than that to kill the ho'o."

"Still, it weakened it. And right when it was starting to recover."

Lying on its cushion, the Yamagami peered up at Minato's downcast expression.

When Minato had returned with the martens that day, the Yamagami had explained to him that this accident had happened because he was becoming more easily drawn to kami realms and warned him to be careful in the future.

Even so, the Yamagami knew that Minato couldn't handle this all on his own. That was why the kami had removed all the abandoned realms between the Kusunoki residence and Minato's usual destinations. The Four Spirits didn't possess too much power between them, however, so they had waited in the garden.

Minato hadn't left the house since.

Thanks to the efforts of the kami, fewer entrances now surrounded the Kusunoki residence. Yet they hadn't been able to remove all of them.

The task was essentially impossible. Innumerable kami realms existed throughout the natural world, and the wind and rain carried them to different places. It was a game of cat and mouse —one that didn't have an end.

The Yamagami sighed deeply, pondering the best strategy.

"Yamagami, you're tired."

"…Nay, that is not it."

Minato looked dubious.

"Everyone looks exhausted, though—the martens, Fujin, Raijin…"

The previous night, those familiar faces had all stopped by the Kusunoki residence, each tinged with weariness.

The Yamagami hadn't informed Minato of any of the kami's mundane efforts. Truth be told, it was the great wolf's influence that had caused Minato to develop this particular constitution.

These changes couldn’t be reversed, but the Yamagami couldn’t look him in the face and tell him that.

Regardless, something had to be done.

The day of the accident, the ho’o had heard a report from the kirin and decided to accompany Minato shopping to make sure he didn’t get hurt. Had Minato been sucked into the kami realm all on his own, he might still be trapped inside. Yet it wasn’t as if someone could go with him every time he left the house.

Sitting next to the quietly concerned Yamagami, Minato put a small box made of paper back down on the desk.

“This isn’t quite right, either…”

He was training in the ability the female kami had unexpectedly bestowed upon him. Boxes of varying shapes, sizes, and materials lined the low table. He had made them of washi paper, scraps of wood, and other materials that were lying around the house.

Minato picked up each one in turn, examining them from every angle.

“It’s no use, they all feel wrong. She granted me this power, so I’d like to be able to use it…”

The Yamagami was secretly impressed by Minato’s incredible luck.

First, that vagabond Fujin had granted Minato some of his power. Now an ancient kami that had long kept to herself had done the same. It was truly unusual.

A human having been bestowed with the power of two divine beings was unprecedented. Throughout its long life, the Yamagami had never seen nor heard of such a thing ever happening before.

“…It’s weird. I have this strange feeling that I can and can’t do it…”

Minato was practicing by attempting to place his own feelings inside a box.

“The power imbued in the object is leaking out like smoke.”

“I knew it…”

It seemed Minato could sense a little of his newfound power within himself. However, just like his dispelling power, he had to grasp ahold of that feeling—something he was having serious trouble with.

“You must picture the thing being sealed away in your *esprit*.”

“…O-okay.”

Minato looked down, his shoulders shaking. It often took all his effort not to laugh when the Yamagami used random words from other languages.

“You should just go ahead and laugh.”

“…I’m not laughing…”

“Torika informed me in no uncertain terms that my pronunciation is lacking.”

“She’s getting bolder these days.”

Stifling a giggle, Minato stacked the boxes in a pile. He was getting tired. He had tried all manner of things these past few days, but so far, he had nothing to show for his work.

“Maybe I can’t do it because something as vague as my own feelings can’t be contained…”

“Perhaps.”

“Is it because sensations like hunger or starvation are hard to seal away? Or because it’s me doing it…? That kami had so many boxes, though…,” Minato muttered to himself. He seemed stuck.

The Yamagami had no intention of leading him by the hand with everything. It typically looked down on people who came begging for help without making any effort of their own. Minato was the kind of person who learned through trial and error, and he would figure things out if left to his own devices. The Yamagami enjoyed watching that from the sidelines.

It swished its tail back and forth.

“Shall we have a short break?” the wolf suggested.

With that, Minato stood up and walked inside the house.

The Yamagami snorted, and its ears moved restlessly. The swishing tail covered an unbelievably wide area. Its eyes followed Minato’s movements as he carried the tray. Still on the floor, it hadn’t yet seen the sweets resting on top, but it had already deduced what they were.

The great wolf rose slowly to sitting. It kept its front paws neatly aligned and sat up straight. It was the picture of dignity.

Yet its sharp gaze stayed glued to the plate on the table, overflowing with *uguisu mochi* dusted with a sweet green powder

and *sakura manju* wrapped in leaves.

Pretending not to see its gaze, Minato slowly poured the tea with exacting precision.

The Yamagami stared at the sweets the whole time, not moving a millimeter. Its true form was that of a huge, unmoving mountain, so something like waiting patiently for tea to be poured posed no challenge to it. The unavoidable drool dripped from its mouth to form a small pool, yet it sat there good-naturedly, simply waiting.

The Yamagami always waited for Minato to offer it food before eating. After all, it was his neighbor. No matter how much time it spent here, the Yamagami was still a guest, and refreshments were served for visitors.

So it waited to be invited to eat.

Minato enjoyed this noble behavior, so he would draw out the time it took to pour the tea.

He definitely didn't do it to be mean.

The Yamagami's massive tea bowl gave a *thunk* as Minato set it on the table.

The rising steam carried the scent up to tickle the great wolf's whiskers. It had a fresh, fragrant scent that would certainly pair perfectly with *wagashi*. The gust kicked up by its tail blew at the day's maximum wind speed.

Minato finally sat down.

"Please, help yourself."

"Thank you very much."

Minato had a hard time making out the muffled words. He strained to suppress the laughter rising within him.

With a half-smile, Minato split the *uguisu mochi* with a bamboo skewer. The warblers that served as its namesake hadn't returned in quite a while. He hoped they would be able to sing well without instruction from the ho'o.

"Oh, by the way, the people who were going to come and see the house called and canceled."

Munch…munch…munch. Eyes closed, the Yamagami seemed too absorbed in its snack to have heard.

"—Ah… Is that so?" it finally replied.

“Oh, you did hear me. This is the third time people have canceled right before a viewing.”

“…Humans are fickle creatures.”

“Well, there is a lot to consider when buying a house. It’s a big purchase most people only make once in their life. And it’s not like you can return it if you buy it and then decide you don’t like living there.”

“…Naturally.”

“And this place only works for people who want a one-bedroom house. It’s spacious, but only a couple can live here comfortably. I don’t think anyone with children would buy it. It’s also hard to go shopping without a car.”

Minato kept listing off the house’s flaws.

“That said, it would be perfect for a summer house. It’s quiet and has a gorgeous garden, plus it comes with a mountain kami.”

“Included without exception.”

Minato laughed heartily. He sipped his tea and glanced inside. It looked like a room from a model home and didn’t feel at all lived-in.

“They said a lot of people would come to see it, so I cleaned every nook and cranny…”

“And as a result, these *wagashi* became mine.”

“I bought you your own.”

“In that case, you have my thanks for buying twice the usual amount.”

Hovering directly above the mochi, the Yamagami looked straight down at it, careful not to scatter any of the powder.

“The green color of the *uguisu mochi* and the light pink of the *sakura manju* are truly sublime. And they complement each other so well. Neither of the pale colors demand too much attention, the harmony of which evokes spring…”

The Yamagami’s deeply reflective murmurings rippled across the garden. A deciduous tree next to the rear gate trembled slightly, and an instant later, it had transformed into a cherry blossom tree.

A single weeping cherry tree in full bloom had appeared among the deep green of the deciduous trees. Minato watched, transfixed, his teacup raised to his lips. He swallowed, then coughed slightly at the amount of tea he’d inadvertently drunk.

This was his first time seeing the garden redecorated in real time. It had previously transformed from an empty yard into a Japanese garden, and had later rearranged itself to include an *onsen*. He'd grown accustomed to these sorts of changes, so he didn't get flustered.

As Minato stared in stunned silence at the cherry blossoms, another miracle occurred.

"Aye, it does not feel like spring without sakura. Experiencing the season with all five senses is the true balm of the heart and bringer of joy. The salt-pickled cherry blossom atop this mochi is insufficient."

The Yamagami cast its gaze from one corner of the garden to the other.

That was all it took. With that one small gesture, every tree in the garden except for the camphor tree morphed into a flowering cherry tree. The garden changed from a lush, vibrant green to a field of fluttering cherry blossoms right before their eyes.

Spring had arrived in the garden of the gods, perfectly complementing the hazy sky overhead. In the span of a few seconds, the yard looked completely different.

A breeze blew through the trees, as though welcoming the change. The branches of the cherry trees swayed, causing petals to flutter around the garden, and a curtain of cherry blossoms filled the air. *Elegant* was the only word to describe the scene. Their subtle fragrance permeated the air.

The camphor tree in the middle of the garden also rustled in the breeze, its leafy branches shaking, as if trying to speak with the cherry trees.

Minato's surprise defied description. He gazed around the space before him in complete awe—and as he did, a new shock awaited him.

"Yamagami?!"

The Yamagami had shrunk and now sat buried deep within its cushion.

About as big as a small dog, it was now the perfect size for carrying under one arm. It had grown much smaller than it had from the other redecorations.

It sank into the too-large cushion, tilting slightly to one side. It didn't seem the least bit disturbed about its diminutive body and continued munching on its sweets as though nothing had happened.

"…Aren't you at least a little worried?"

"The time for that has passed."

The Yamagami slowly crawled out of its cushion and looked up at the low table. The tip of its nose didn't even reach the edge of it, let alone the plate sitting on top.

"Hmph, this tiny body is rather inconvenient."

Minato placed the plate and bowl in front of the quietly growling Yamagami.

"…Are you going to be okay like that?"

"It may take several days for me to return to my usual size this time."

"If it's only a matter of time, then I guess it should be fine…"

"Mm! This is very good!"

More than half of the *sakura manju* it had bitten into stuck out of the Yamagami's small mouth, which made the sweet appear unusually large.

The Yamagami's eyes sparkled.

"The flavors of the smooth bean paste and sakura fill my mouth… The way the restrained sweetness of the bean paste and the saltiness of the cherry blossoms interact with and complement one another is undeniable… Oh, exquisite. I feel completely reinvigorated."

"I knew you must be tired… Those mochi would normally be bite-sized to you, and they'd be gone in a second. Was the trade-off worth it?"

"Very much so. I like this… Why did I not realize it earlier…?"

One bite was all it had taken for the Yamagami to become enamored with its new body. To Minato, however, it felt like the veranda's ever-present white mound had disappeared, and the loss conflicted him a little.

"Your big body's always there, so it feels kind of strange now that it's gone…"

Gazing up at the heavens as it chewed intently on the *manju*, the wolf wagged its tiny tail happily.

“I know you’ve done it before, but you just performed a miracle with nothing but your gaze.”

“That is what works best for me.”

“…It works best for you…”

Minato remembered something. Hadn’t the female kami he’d met said something similar? That she just happened to like wooden boxes? And told him, *Find the thing that works best for you.*

Minato grabbed his usual washi paper from underneath the table.

“Naturally, each being improves at their own pace. What works for one will prove useless for another. That is a matter of course. Rigid thinking only serves to block creativity,” the Yamagami said melodically.

Splish. A spray of water leaped from the pond.

Minato glanced toward it. On top of the large rock, Reiki had stretched out its neck toward the stone lantern.

The glass door covering the flame housing was just opening. A pale pink light came pouring out, and at the same instant, flocks of birds came rushing from all directions—brown, white, black, and at the very center, the green of the bush warbler.

—Hoh, hoh, kekyo!

A myriad of beautiful birdsongs layered one atop the next. Minato squinted up at the spectacle.

“Those calls go well with this spring garden.”

“Indeed.”

—Hogeh!

“…With one exception… It seems that little one could not improve on its own. It is time for the master to show them how it’s done.”

Emerging to stand on the edge of the flame housing, the ho’o puffed out its chest sharply. It seemed full of energy as it looked down at the assembled warblers and began speaking to them.

Spring had only just begun. It was too early to give up.

“…I’m not going to give up, either.”

And just like always—no, imbued with a new vitality—Minato brought his brush down onto the paper.

Chapter 5
The Yamagami's Extensive Family

Kami have a rather vague sense of the concept of time.

It's typical for them to go to sleep and wake up anywhere from a couple of days to several years later. And when kami get together for a party, they can drink for days on end. Yet even uninhibited kami who indulged their every last whim refrained from such egregious behavior at the Kusunoki residence, a simple, ordinary household.

However, it was fine to do so every so often. The residents of the Kusunoki household had been drinking the night away with Fujin and Raijin—no strangers to the house—in celebration of all their hard work.

The deep indigo sky was starting to brighten. The sun sat poised to finally replace the hazy crescent moon, ready to assert its everlasting presence.

Fujin and Raijin dangled their legs over the veranda's edge, while next to them, the minuscule Yamagami licked from a bowl of sake larger than its own head.

It looked completely satisfied.

"This tiny body is actually perfect for eating and drinking."

"I know how you feel. Every bite is like a whole mouthful."

"When, actually, the amount of food is the same."

Fujin and Raijin agreed with the Yamagami, knowing the feeling well.

They ate and drank leisurely, rambling on for hours. The Four Spirits sat in a circle nearby, each happily drunk on their liquor of choice.

Reiki lifted its head from its small sake cup.

“Dragon, you’re floating.”

“…Mm.”

Oryu had already drifted over to above Reiki’s head, a wineglass held between its hind legs. It spun around nimbly, laughing raucously through hiccups. Drunks often find the smallest things funny, so it was understandable.

Beside Reiki, the kirin looked up at Oryu spinning circles in the air and sighed.

“Such an ill-mannered drunk. It sometimes seems like the normally stern Oryu is an entirely different being.”

Oryu turned its horns toward the kirin and charged. The kirin struck out with its antlers in response. The sharp crack of the impact rang around the garden.

Though the two of them always competed with one another, they weren’t enemies. They simply enjoyed roughhousing. Both pushed back with equal force as horn and antler interlocked.

“They say that alcohol brings out one’s true colors,” the ho’o commented, pecking at the plum in its *umeshu*. It drank with the others when the mood caught it, and tonight, for the first time in a long while, it had imbibed a fair amount of the plum liqueur it adored.

The kirin had been pushed to the edge of the veranda, its whiskers standing on end.

“That makes sense. Drinking brings out one’s true self, which is normally repressed by the logical mind. Oryu, cut that out or I’ll send you flying into the pond!”

“Don’t make me laugh! You are no match for me!”

“…Is Dragon suppressing its true self…? I always thought it simply did whatever it wanted…,” Reiki murmured, the sound drowned out by the clashing of horns.

“It’s about time I headed off to sleep.”

“Sleep well, Ho’o,” the kirin chimed as the ho’o stumbled drunkenly away. Having grown tired of playing with the kirin, Oryu followed after it.

Wings fluttering, the dragon gazed inside the stone lantern.

“What a lovely place to live… That cushion…looks so soft…”

“What’s wrong, Oryu? Are you tired of living in the water?”

“No, no. Not at all. I don’t want to live anywhere but underwater… The pond is the best place for me…”

The breeze carried the drifting Oryu over to the pond.

“I might have drunk a little too much. Me and Oryu both.”

Lightheaded, the ho’o spread its wings and flew into the lantern.

“I’m fed up with this tiny child’s body.”

Leaning back on the veranda, Raijin started kicking and flailing his legs.

“I want to go back to my grown-up body right now!”

“That is impossible,” said the Yamagami. “You keep drawing on your power like water from a faucet, so it will take some time for you to return to your normal size.”

“It’s right. If you want to get bigger, then use less power.”

Fujin poured himself some sake from a bottle hovering in midair, and Raijin thrust his cup out toward him. The lightning kami’s frustration simmered as he watched the cup fill with sake.

“You’re still small, too, though. You use just as much power as I do.”

“I like this size perfectly fine. My old body was too big and cumbersome.”

The two kami had previously been giants, standing well over three meters tall. The Yamagami nodded in agreement.

“Although the veranda here is spacious, two giant bodies would make it a bit too crowded.”

“You’re right about that… We wouldn’t be able to stretch out like we are now… And that’s quite a thing to hear from someone who likes to take up as much space as you.”

“The size of the body reflects the status of the kami. That is just the way of things.”

The tiny wolf proudly puffed out its chest, looked up to the sky, and harrumphed. The lack of a halo was an adverse side effect of using too much power to renovate the garden.

“No way. Even this small, you’re still so regal on the inside.”

“It *is* the Yamagami. A Yamagami that isn’t proud is no Yamagami at all. By the way, I tossed those humans who came here to inspect the house into my kami realm for a little while,

and I let them go soon after," Raijin said offhandedly, before draining his cup.

"Hmm, you were not overly harsh with them, were you?" the Yamagami asked, not particularly surprised.

Raijin shrugged.

"It would've seemed like two days to them, so it probably just felt like a little vacation."

"I'm not sure many people would enjoy vacationing in a tiny dugout in the middle of an empty plain."

"That's just rude. I made a nice palace for them. There was lots of food, too. It was perfect. They didn't touch any of it, though."

"They probably thought it was *yomotsuhegui*. It seems like there are still some sensible people out there."

Yomotsuhegui—food cooked in the realm of the dead. It is said that anyone who eats it can never return to the mortal world.

"It was nothing of the sort."

Fujin gave a faint smile, then rummaged through his bag of wind. He took out some dried squid to nibble on, only to see Raijin's red hand thrust out toward him.

The people coming to view the house had all been secretly lured into the kami realms.

They would spend a little time in the realm before being returned to the real world. It was incredibly peaceful in a way. Instead of the Kusunoki residence, they were forced into touring an unfamiliar kami realm. And without exception, every person who experienced the kami realm canceled their viewing of the house.

Whether they were returned to the real world at the same time as they'd left or several days later varied according to the whims of the three divine beings. Kami are arrogant and selfish—they would never sit idly by and watch a place dear to them change without their approval, so it made perfect sense that they would use the full extent of their powers to stop it.

The Yamagami shook its head languidly.

"That was quite cruel of you."

“You’re one to talk. I mean, you locked away someone for more than half a month because they tried to kick the gate. Don’t you think that was a little excessive?”

“No, that was warranted,” chimed in Fujin. “Kicking the entrance to a kami’s house is inexcusable. I think you were gracious to let him leave with his life. You might even have been *too* lenient. He should’ve groveled in appreciation that you even let him go.”

“Precisely.”

“No way, you two are *evil*,” Raijin said, but he was laughing.

Kami do not have the same moral foundation as humans. They place little importance on mortal lives. If a person steps on a colony of ants, do they mourn them and lament it like it’s the end of the world? No. To kami, the value of human life is no greater than an ant’s.

Fujin looked up at the sky. A fierce wind blew, shaking the trees on the mountain.

Distortions speckled the sky above the garden.

“…They’re back.”

“Perhaps it’s just my imagination, but it looks like there are more of them than before.”

Raijin and the Yamagami turned their attention to Fujin, who averted his gaze.

“…It seems my children have been very attentive…”

The sheer number of abandoned kami realms around the Kusunoki residence was the result of the winds purposely bringing them here.

The winds weren’t particularly intelligent. All they were doing was bringing the kami realms to Fujin so he could dispose of them more easily. They had carried them here from far and wide with that purpose in mind.

“They mean well…”

“…It’s kind of considerate, in a way…”

“They’re overdoing it, though. Tell them to stop.”

Raijin blamed Fujin for being too soft on his children. But Fujin just tilted his cup back with an innocent look.

Raijin pursed his lips, a piece of dried squid still in his mouth.

“Look at all this. It makes all the work we did seem pointless.”

“It’s not pointless, just endless.”

“It really would be best if he could get out of them by himself,” Raijin said, addressing the Yamagami. But the great wolf just stayed silent.

“There’s very little of my divine power in his wind right now,” said Fujin. “He uses it in a very different way from me… Maybe I should loan him a little more of my power.”

“Nay. Grant him more power, and Minato will cease to be human.”

“He’s received power from two kami now. It’s rare even just getting it from *one*. Plus, he has the blessings of the Four Spirits. I’ve seen all sorts of humans over the years, but there’s never been someone as unusual as him.”

The three kami gazed toward the mountain, where that rare human—Minato—had just set out with the martens.

“He thinks nothing of it.”

“It’s unprecedented. Say, did you tell him that the kami realms pull him toward them?”

“…Aye, I did.”

“But did you also tell him that *he* pulls the kami realms toward him?”

At Fujin’s blunt question, the Yamagami looked away and bit into an *ohagi* sweet rice ball. Reiki and the kirin hurriedly left for their beds.

“He’s human, and yet he lives in a kami realm, breathes the same air as kami, and bathes in divine water every day. Plus, he has the blessings of the Four Spirits. All of that has combined to change his body. It’s no wonder he’s becoming more like a kami.”

“…The inside of the house remains a part of the mortal world.”

“But he spends most of his time out here on the veranda.”

They were old friends, so Fujin and Raijin wouldn’t listen to any of the Yamagami’s excuses.

“Well, it’s a little late to bring it up now.”

“What’s done is done. What matters most is what we do next.”

Kami get over things quickly. They don’t spend time endlessly fretting over issues or regretting the past.

The night sky began to lighten as they talked. Distortions floated on the crisp morning breeze and soon completely covered the sky above the garden.

The three kami scowled at the masses of them.

“Hmph, we have no choice but to make Minato stronger.”

“I’ll teach him the next time I stop by,” said Fujin.

“All right, then it’s decided. First, though, I’m gonna go take care of those things.”

A ring of Japanese drums appeared behind Raijin.

The kami realms carried over on the wind were the creations of low-grade beings. Kami could tell at a glance whether *something* existed inside an abandoned realm, but all of these were old and dilapidated. Eradicating them all at once would be a burial service of sorts for the beings that had once lived in them.

Resting its head on folded paws, the Yamagami squinted at Raijin.

“Be careful not to miss and cause an accident, like blowing a hole in the western part of the town.”

“Come on, there’s no need to bring that up. That was a long time ago!”

Raijin hit the drums as he stressed the end of his sentence, and innumerable bolts of lightning shot out from his body into the sky overhead.

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“…Was that thunder? Is it going to rain…?”

The weather in the mountains could change quickly.

Walking down a mountain trail with Seri and Utsugi, Minato glanced back over his shoulder. Trees covered one side of the path, while the other was open, exposing a clear dawn sky. There was no sign of thunderclouds, just like when they’d entered the mountain.

Minato looked warily at the sky. Walking alongside him, Seri stepped into the beam of Minato’s flashlight, his dark eyes shining.

“That was Raijin’s divine thunder.”

“…That’s an unsettling thought. Is Lord Thunder upset…? I even left some extra sake at the house.”

Having previously seen his immense power, Minato had decided that Raijin was the being he wanted to anger the least.

He shivered slightly, then continued walking.

Minato and the martens had left the house before dawn. They weren't going on a bear hunt—but to hunt for bamboo shoots.

Skipping a few paces ahead, Utsugi jumped up into the air, spun around, and landed in front of Minato. Then he ran around the area, bursting with energy.

"Minato, Raijin said he would loan you some of his power, so why not take him up on his offer? Then you could create thunder and lightning, too. Make it go *rumble* and *crash*! That would be so cool."

"You say that like it's nothing, but it's a terrifying power. It's dangerous, though I guess wind power can also be dangerous, depending on how you use it."

"I guess. A long time ago, Raijin got annoyed and opened up a hole in the west of the town with just a wave of his hand."

"See, that's scary."

"The lake in the southern part of town is also there because Raijin accidentally struck the area with a lightning bolt."

"…That's on a completely different scale. That lake is so big, I wouldn't be surprised if some gigantic creature lives there. Don't underestimate Lord Thunder. I hope he doesn't get angry."

Minato prayed for that with all his heart.

As they talked, one side of the gentle mountain path changed to a bamboo grove.

"Anyway, where's Torika?"

"She'll join up with us later."

With a murmur of understanding, Minato switched off his flashlight. The sun hadn't yet fully risen, but it was light enough to see the path in front of him. The martens also emitted a glow of their own, so he could see fairly well.

"Minato, we're almost there."

"This trail is so much easier to walk than the one along the cliff."

"Sure, but that's only to be expected after Fujin's wind carved away that area."

"…Fujin did that…?"

The wind kami appeared peaceful at first glance, but the occasional ferociousness he sometimes displayed must have been his true nature.

Minato adjusted his backpack and walked silently along the mountain trail.

They wove through bamboo that reached up toward the sky, their footsteps crunching on the thick layer of fallen leaves covering the ground.

The sounds of Minato and the two martens blended in with the rustling of the multitude of animals surrounding them. Rabbits bounded, squirrels scampered, and tanuki lumbered through the grove, all headed in the same direction.

Wild animals had begun to swarm them the moment they entered the mountain, and the number had now grown to an unbelievable size. Standing in the center, Minato looked like their leader. Any human that spotted this procession would run away screaming.

Yet the animals didn't do anything. Instead, they just stared at him, seemingly wanting to say something.

"…I didn't think that this many wild animals would come with us. Some birds usually follow along when I go out with Bird, but that's about it."

"Yes, they usually travel solo. This is also a first for us, seeing so many animals in one place."

"The Yamagami has quite an extensive family."

As they were chatting over such trivial matters, a serow approached them. The antelope-like animal was more physically imposing than Minato, and he watched it silently.

It slowly plodded forward to stand in front of him.

"It says, 'Thank you for looking after my leader,'" Utsugi explained.

"You're very welcome."

At Minato's words, the serow swayed its head and vacated the path.

"You've learned to understand animal speech."

"Yeah, I worked really hard at it!"

He didn't know how much training they'd done, but the kin had been created to grow continually with hard work and effort. That was what the Yamagami had said.

“Being able to do things you couldn’t do before is fun, and it makes you happy, doesn’t it?”

The two martens agreed. They enjoyed improving themselves. It seemed the Yamagami’s plan had worked.

Utsugi suddenly looked to the side.

“There’s a lot of bamboo shoots that haven’t sprouted yet over that way.”

Minato looked in the direction where Utsugi was pointing and saw two deer scratching at the fallen leaves. Approaching, they caught a glimpse of the tips of the shoots just poking out of the ground.

“We left so quickly, I forgot to bring a hoe…”

Minato removed a hand trowel from his backpack.

“Maybe this will work…”

It was so small compared to the gardening hoe at his parents’ house. As he looked down at it, a shadow fell across his hand.

He looked up to find a bear staring down at him.

The huge Asian black bear peering over his shoulder was about twice his size. The sharp gaze was paired with a scar that ran across its cheek. Every millimeter of it exuded power.

Amid the sound of crunching leaves around him, he hadn’t heard the bear approach.

Frozen solid, Minato and the bear stared at each other.

What do I do? What were you supposed to do if you encountered a bear? Play dead? Now? When we’ve already stared each other straight in the eye?

Minato’s mind raced back and forth. Chills and sweat broke out all over his body.

“She’s saying to let her do it.”

“…Oh, okay. Thank…you.”

Trying to slow the hammering of his heart, Minato obediently moved aside.

The bear crouched down, then began to clear away dirt with its front paws, as though drawing a circle around the shoots. A single brush of its paw revealed the pure white of the bamboo shoots, and a merciless snapping sound filled the air as a huge number of the excavated shoots were broken.

Its long powerful claws had peeled away the hard ground with ease. Watching from a distance behind the bear, Minato wiped

the sweat from his face with a towel draped around his neck. He was really glad the bear was friendly.

Utsugi grabbed Minato's lower leg and shook it.

"Hey, why're you so shocked by a bear? All the other animals we've met have been friendly."

"…Well…I guess because of their size and reputation…"

Minato kept his eyes on the hunched shoulders of the bear as its sharp claws pierced the bamboo shoots, broke them off, and harvested them with ease. Its arms and paws moved skillfully. Minato's thundering heart didn't seem able to calm down.

Looking around, the other animals were also digging through the soil.

And so the harvest finished in less than ten minutes.

Looking at the mound of bamboo shoots piled at his feet, Minato couldn't help but grin sheepishly.

"I thought we might've headed out a little late for a morning harvest…but we made it in time. I didn't do anything, though… Really, I wonder how long it would have taken to collect this many on my own… It kind of feels like I cheated."

"It's their way of showing their appreciation."

"Thank you, everyone."

At Minato's words, barks and howls rang out from all around.

He bent down and picked up the shoots in his gloved hands. They were pure white. When exposed to light, bamboo shoots harden and become bitter. For that reason, it's said that to get the best-tasting shoots, you need to dig them up before they start growing in the morning, right after they finish absorbing nutrients and water from their parent stalks during the night.

The bear held a shoot between its claws, offering it to Minato.

"She says you should eat some now, as this is when they taste the best," Seri explained.

"…Thank you. But I was actually planning on eating them after I got home," Minato replied, respectfully accepting the shoot with both hands. He didn't feel comfortable casually eating them right here with a bear watching.

Utsugi covered his mouth with his front paws, stifling the laughter brought about from watching Minato act so humbly.

But the next instant, he lowered his paws and wagged his tail excitedly.

Minato looked confused. Something seemed off. Utsugi never acted like that, nor did martens in general. He'd never seen it before.

In fact, Utsugi looked just like someone who should be home sipping tea at this very moment.

"You need not fear. She is strong yet gentle."

His wide eyes weren't black but gold.

"Yamagami?"

"Naturally."

The powerful voice vibrated the ground and air. It was the Yamagami, without a doubt.

"You're inside Utsugi's body…"

"I believe I told you they are a part of me. This is simple enough to do."

"I'm not sure Utsugi will be happy about it, though," Seri muttered. Next to him, the Yamagami in Utsugi's body stood tall.

"Now, let us eat the bamboo shoots from your morning harvest."

"…You want to eat them here?"

"There exists no greater joy than eating freshly picked produce right when it is in season."

"It's the height of luxury."

Seri had already begun peeling bamboo shoots, knowing that once the Yamagami made up its mind, it couldn't be swayed.

Also well accustomed to the Yamagami's ways, Minato reached inside his backpack.

"I came prepared, just in case."

He removed a small knife, a cutting board, paper plates, and a small bottle of soy sauce.

The Yamagami wagged its tail. It looked over its shoulder and examined the big, bushy tail with displeasure.

"This body is quite difficult to move… Well, I shall grow accustomed to it soon enough. I see you came ready for a feast. Did you bring wasabi?"

"Of course. It's right here."

Minato pulled out a tube of wasabi and waved it lightly.

The Yamagami looked toward the center of the bamboo grove.

"There should be some mountain wasabi near the marsh."

"There is. That's also in season."

“It’s a little far from here, though. We only have so long we can eat the bamboo shoots raw, so let’s make do with the tube of wasabi for now.”

Looking rather dissatisfied, the Yamagami picked up a bamboo shoot. Although it didn’t have much experience using those hands, it still deftly managed to peel it.

“Hmm, these nimble front paws are quite useful.”

“They’re good for climbing trees, too.”

“Oh-ho, I shall have to try that later.”

The two martens—one with black eyes, the other with gold—sat down on the ground and peeled the skin off the bamboo shoots. Minato watched the scene with a smile as he washed his hands with water from a plastic bottle. Seri handed him a peeled shoot, and Minato cut it into pieces with the knife. After arranging the pieces on a plate, he looked up.

The bear had rolled a huge rock over and set it in front of the Yamagami.

“Thank you, Bear.”

It raised a paw and walked off. Minato watched the bear’s black figure recede into the distance until it disappeared. He’d worried about placing everything directly on the ground, but the considerate bear had solved his problem for him.

Even with the paper plates on top of it, the rock didn’t wobble or tilt. It made a good table.

“Do you think Bear would like any?”

“She has a formidable sweet tooth.”

“Just like you, Yamagami.”

“Come, now, let us hurry up and eat before they become too bitter. Help yourselves.”

With that, the Yamagami reached out and grabbed a skewer of bamboo shoots.

Together with the crowd of wild animals, they relished the young white bamboo shoots they’d harvested that morning.

As Minato drew near the clear, calm river, all variety of fish approached from both directions. They looked up at him, their bodies wriggling. The leader of these scaled creatures was Oryu.

“Your leader is doing well.”

Whenever he left the house these days, Minato had to repeat this set phrase time and time again. Hearing these reassuring words, the fish jumped above the water’s surface.

“They’re extremely devoted.”

“I understand how they feel,” Seri said with a resolute nod.

The Yamagami passed by him, its tail dragging lightly over the ground.

They ate the entire pile of bamboo shoots, except for those that Minato could carry with him. Afterward, the topic of going to harvest some mountain wasabi had come up again, so they set out toward a mountain stream.

They passed through a steep ravine and arrived at a narrow marsh, where they made their way into a dense grove of trees. The thick forest air surrounded them, and the stream babbled continuously. Everywhere around them was calm and peaceful and would make anyone completely lose their sense of time. As he breathed deeply, the air purified every nook of Minato’s body and soothed his soul. He felt at one with the mountain.

Birds sang loudly on every branch, but it didn’t overwhelm Minato. He was used to it by now.

The white shapes of the two martens peeked out through the tall grasses running alongside the marsh. Minato strolled leisurely behind them.

“Say, do you not find these legs to be too short? The ground is so close, it makes walking difficult.”

“All these compliments and complaints are keeping you very busy.”

The Yamagami had been muttering a stream of complaints, but every so often, it would see a thick tree and jump on it, playfully scrambling up the trunk. In the end, it had begun to jump gracefully from branch to branch.

Minato watched in awe. It moved so rapidly, he couldn’t follow it. The monkeys and squirrels on the trunks and in the branches

either leaned forward excitedly to watch or followed along behind the Yamagami. The rustling of their surroundings grew louder.

“Yamagami, you’re like a flying squirrel.”

“I am a marten,” the Yamagami replied immediately, its voice echoing.

It landed several paces ahead of Minato, and leaves fluttered to the ground around it.

“Well, I seem to have accustomed myself to climbing trees.”

Seri raced along the ground after the Yamagami.

“You learn faster than we do…”

He seemed rather disappointed about that.

“Be that as it may, I still cannot move in absolute silence. I also dislodge many leaves.”

The Yamagami picked up a leaf and twirled it around. Minato walked by it.

“What are you trying to do? Become a ninja?”

But as he murmured those words, Minato heard a branch snap.

Looking up, he saw a baby monkey falling directly toward him.

He pointed a finger toward it and released a gust of wind. The monkey landed on the cushion of air, still holding a branch as it squirmed. Once it realized it was safe and unharmed, the baby monkey leaped up and ran off to play.

Minato smiled.

“It’s a good thing it has so much energy…but it should be a little more careful.”

Its mother hopped down quickly from her branch. She snatched the child up, tucked it under one arm, then disappeared into the trees.

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Finally making use of the hand trowel Minato had brought, the group finished harvesting the mountain wasabi and headed home.

They proceeded down a grass-covered slope. The group of animals around them had gradually thinned until none followed anymore. In the silence, only Minato’s footsteps could be heard. Seri walked noiselessly a few paces ahead.

The Yamagami, meanwhile, rested its hind legs on Minato's backpack as it relaxed atop his head.

"This is quite a pleasant ride."

"You're using me as a palanquin."

They hadn't gone too deep into the woods today, staying mostly in the foothills. The bamboo shoots weren't heavy enough to tire him out, and the marten didn't weigh all that much. He walked down the hill easily.

"It really is peaceful here."

"It is now."

"…What do you mean, 'now'?"

It was a discomforting comment. What had happened on this now tranquil mountain?

"I used to be a rather active volcano."

"…Wait, you…? I thought you finished erupting ages ago. I didn't see any steam here."

"This is where the *onsen* water is drawn from. It overflows with the volcano's *force majeure*."

"…That's true."

Minato's backpack shook slightly as he stifled a laugh. The Yamagami seemed to go out of its way to incorporate French words into its speech.

"Regardless, that *onsen* water is a remnant from events that happened more than one million years in the past."

"That long ago…? I can't even imagine time on that scale."

"Please don't make the Yamagami angry. He can still inadvertently blow his top," Seri said.

Minato stopped in his tracks, and Seri turned around with a mischievous smile.

"I was joking."

"Phew. Don't tease me like that."

"…But truth be told, it *is* possible."

Unsure how much he should believe, Minato looked up at the marten on his head. Its golden, upside-down eyes were narrowed in a smirk.

A pond appeared just as the hill flattened. The tops of reeds poked out of the calm surface of the water.

It was quiet. Almost unnaturally so.

Needless to say, a wide variety of wild animals called the mountain home—yet there wasn't so much as a sign of life nearby. Minato carefully scanned the area, but not even a single insect buzzed. Before he realized it, the Yamagami had jumped down to the ground and was gazing at the water.

"They gather here easily."

Standing behind the Yamagami, as though in support, Seri simply gazed at the reflection of the trees on the water's surface.

Minato didn't need to ask what *they* were: The Yamagami was talking about evil beings. It was a well-known fact that they congregated easily around water.

The faint rustling of leaves filled the air.

Minato glanced to his side and saw Torika standing there.

"So this is where you've been."

"Yes… I had to take care of some things."

Torika blinked once, seemingly leaving something unsaid. A thought tugged at the back of Minato's mind, and he took out his notepad.

"…There's nothing around here now. My writing hasn't disappeared, and the words don't even appear faded."

"That's because I already took care of them."

"They really do gather here easily, huh?"

Torika pointed to the other side of the pond. It was just a spot covered in trees, and it didn't seem out of the ordinary in any way. Minato couldn't sense anything amiss.

"There's a spirit path over there."

A spirit path is a route walked by the dead that leads to the underworld.

Minato preferred not to ask questions about such topics, so he kept quiet. He didn't want to learn something the living shouldn't know. He would find out either way once his life ended, and knowing something like that while still alive wouldn't change anything. Or at least, that's how he saw it.

"Aaah! I wanted to eat bamboo shoots, too!"

Utsugi's sudden yell echoed around the hills. He raised his black eyes to the sky, puffed up his yellow-tipped tail, and stomped the ground.

The real Utsugi was back.

His ears and tail hung low after his frantic outburst of frustration.

“I was so looking forward to it…then the Yamagami hijacked my body…”

“Watch what you’re saying,” Seri scolded him.

Minato held out his backpack to Utsugi.

“There’s still some bamboo shoots left, see?”

“Raw ones?”

“Oh, well, no… I know—tempura! Let’s make tempura!”

“Fried in oil?! With cheese?!”

Utsugi’s eyes sparkled. The martens had recently become obsessed with dairy.

“Of course. We can even do cheese fondue.”

Utsugi jumped around excitedly, asking what fondue was, and Minato chuckled to himself. But when he looked down—

“We *did* eat too many raw shoots,” Seri whispered.

Standing next to her elder brother, Torika looked up wordlessly. Minato flinched. That gaze said she’d wanted to eat some, too, and Minato couldn’t help but fold before those cute, round eyes.

○

The group walked single file down the mountain, arriving back home around noon.

It was time for lunch. The Yamagami, the martens, Oryu, the kirin, and the ho’o all gathered together for a three-course meal of fried food made from the spring bounty of the mountain.

Reiki was nowhere to be seen, so it must have gone off somewhere, as it often did for days at a time. Raijin and Fujin had already left as well. They tended to drop by on a whim and were sure to bring more souvenirs soon. Most of what they brought were products from the sea, which were always greatly appreciated.

In the garden, Minato set a pot over a portable gas stove, then fried the produce from the mountain in quick succession. There was no hesitation in his movements. The actions were all familiar to him.

Frying food takes a lot of time and effort. The preparation goes without saying, but when factoring in the cleanup as well, it's no wonder why premade fried food is so popular. Most bachelors living by themselves would choose that option.

Minato, however, decidedly did *not* live by himself, and he frequently cooked for a being with a discerning palate and a disposition for gourmet food, especially seasonal delicacies. As such, he often fried food in the garden, since it made cleanup easier.

The oil began to crackle and pop, and Minato used a pair of long cooking chopsticks to remove the pieces of bamboo shoot tempura that rose to the surface of the oil. Subtle vibrations from the still-frying food traveled up his chopsticks, letting him know when it was perfectly fried. As Minato set the tempura on the draining rack, Utsugi gazed hungrily at it from the side.

"Just a bit longer… Just a little bit longer…"

The marten watched the dripping oil reproachfully. The food was still too hot to eat, meaning he had no choice but to wait.

Once the bamboo shoots had finally cooled, Minato placed one inside Utsugi's gaping mouth, and it let out a satisfying crunch as he bit into it. Covering his cheeks with his front paws, Utsugi did a little dance.

"It's so good! And so crispy!"

"Most things taste better when you deep-fry them. Should we do the chicken tenders filled with cheese next?"

"Absolutely!"

That was just premade frozen food, but no one complained.

Minato gently lowered the chicken tender into the oil.

The Yamagami and the rest of its kin sat on the veranda. The tiny wolf—the smallest of the three—occupied the middle, flanked by Seri and Torika.

Seri looked down at the Yamagami.

"It feels strange…being taller than you."

"You're too small. You overdid it this time."

Torika glanced around the changed garden and let out a small sigh, then set down a plate of sliced, raw bamboo shoots in front of the Yamagami.

The Yamagami looked away.

“I do not require any more.”

“…You more than ate your fill on the mountain.”

The Yamagami could sense everything its kin experienced, and vice versa. Torika knew that the Yamagami had entered Utsugi’s body and gleefully wolfed down as much raw bamboo as it could eat.

“It is already too bitter.”

“Is that really why you don’t want any more?”

Furrows formed in Torika’s brow as she bit into a slice of bamboo. Seri, who’d also eaten his fill of the fresh shoots, looked away as he nibbled on some *taranome tempura*.

Three beasts sat removed from the Yamagami clan as they talked. Today, they had devoted themselves not just to drinking but to snacking: Oryu ate processed cheese, the kirin ate edamame, shell and all, and the ho’o devoured *ohagi*. They weren’t the slightest bit interested in seasonal delicacies, so each kami munched happily on its favorite snack.

Like the Yamagami, Minato had eaten his fill of bamboo shoots and was busy frying skewers and croquettes.

He bit into a skewer as soon as it was ready to eat.

“Oh, this is good. The onion’s so sweet. It really is best freshly fried.”

“Right? I can’t wait to eat the cheesy tenders!”

Utsugi blew at the cheese-filled chicken tender on his plate.

“Whenever we do this, it feels like we’re camping at home,” Minato said.

“It sure does. And you sleep on the veranda pretty often, Minato. We could almost call you feral, huh?”

“I sleep out here because the garden’s so comfortable… I’m always nervous about the house getting dirty, so it’s hard for me to relax in there. Do you think something might be happening to me…?”

On the veranda, the Yamagami and the three auspicious beasts exchanged restless glances.

The spring harvest disappeared as soon as each piece of food left the fryer.

Minato set up the fondue pot next. The martens would finally get to taste the long-anticipated cheese fondue. A mountain of cheese bubbled away inside the pot. As it heated up, a faint scent of garlic intermingled with the cheesy smell.

Soon after, one marten appeared, followed by another. The last of the kin approached, and they all stood huddled around the pot.

Utsugi's nose twitched nonstop at the head of the line.

"The cheese…. There's so much… Are you sure we're allowed to eat it all…?"

"It seems so…l-luxurious."

"…Yeah. It smells…so good… I can't move away."

Their captivated faces looked as melted as the cheese.

Minato laughed, a small bottle in one hand.

"Step back a little bit. I'm going to add the salt and pepper."

The second the word *pepper* reached their ears, the three creatures rushed back to the veranda, where they covered their noses with their front paws.

There was a reason behind their dramatic reaction, of course. Recently, Utsugi had accidentally inhaled some pepper that Minato had been using, and he hadn't been able to stop sneezing. Although Seri and Torika hadn't experienced it firsthand, they had been immediately vacating the area whenever pepper was mentioned ever since, out of caution.

Remembering his discomfort, tears welled at the corners of Utsugi's eyes.

"The Nyamagami iz doo small do hide behibd."

"What is this? How dare you use me as a shield?!"

He was trying to hide behind the Yamagami, who was smaller than he was.

After the cheese was safely seasoned, the martens crowded around again. Minato handed each of them a sausage on a skewer. As one, they dunked them into the sea of cheese, then lifted them up, still connected to the fondue with sticky threads.

"Ooooh."

"Don't eat it yet; it's still hot!"

“I know. I—I know…”

Laughter shook Minato’s shoulders as he watched the three excited creatures.

The martens simultaneously took a bite. For a while, only the sound of chewing could be heard.

“…Oh, wow, this is dangerous.”

“It’s too good. I want to dip everything in it.”

As Seri and Torika nodded to one another, Utsugi chewed silently beside them.

The Yamagami jumped down off the veranda, walked up to them, and sniffed at the air.

“Come, now, give me a bite as well.”

“That’s rare.”

“It happens every so often.”

The Yamagami typically preferred Japanese cuisine. But recently, the martens, who would try anything once, had inspired it to try different types of foods.

The Yamagami examined its front paws, then jumped up on Minato’s folding stool.

“You can’t hold anything with those paws.”

“I was doing precisely that before, however.”

Minato and the Yamagami looked at Utsugi, who in turn stared resentfully at the wolf.

“What are you upset about? I told you ahead of time that I would enter your body.”

“So what?! It’s not okay to possess someone! This is my body!”

“Ahh, so this is cheese *fon-doe*.”

“Close. It’s pronounced *fondue*.”

The arrogant kami ignored Utsugi’s bared fangs, only showing interest in the skewers Minato had set down.





The Yamagami preferred its tea lukewarm, but hot things are meant to be enjoyed hot. Biting into the skewer that had come straight out of the fondue, he looked up at the blue sky, blowing out puffs of hot air.

The three creatures gazed jealously at the small wolf.

“Couldn’t you have made us with mouths that can handle hot food?”

“Good question.”

“No fair.”

“What are you saying? I tried to create you as close to existing animals as possible, even down to the most minute of details.”

Minato moved the Yamagami’s tea bowl from the veranda to in front of the chair where it was reclining.

“Why you’d obsess over something like that, I have no idea.”

“Perfectionism.”

Chuckling, Minato dipped a piece of baguette into the sea of cheese.

When there wasn’t even a droplet of cheese left in the pot, a rainbow-colored light spilled forth from the pond. It formed a dome over the water from edge to edge.

The light came from the jewels set in the roof of the submerged Ryugu Gate, which glowed whenever a being passed through it. Minato had been looking in that direction just as the light appeared. It seemed Reiki had returned.

Just as that thought went through his head, he saw Reiki poke its head out of the water.

A black box rested on its back.

Detailed in gold and held shut with a red string, the extravagant lacquer box balanced precariously on the turtle’s pointed shell.

Horrified, Minato took a half step backward.

“N-no way… Is that—?”

Reiki slowly plodded toward him.

“It appears to be a souvenir,” the Yamagami remarked casually, having returned to its usual position on the veranda.

Now at Minato’s feet, Reiki gestured to its shell with its head, as if telling him to take the gift. It did so with supreme serenity, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Minato didn’t want it, yet he couldn’t refuse the gift so blatantly.

“Th-thank you.”

He accepted the box with shaky hands, his arms sagging from its considerable weight. What in the world was inside? If it was the fearsome smoke of legend, then it shouldn’t weigh a thing.

“Apparently, it only contains seafood,” the Yamagami said with a smirk.

Minato felt a little embarrassed at having jumped to such a hasty conclusion. Yet even after hearing that piece of good news, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the box. It reminded him of the *tamatebako* from the tale of Urashima Taro, which had released smoke that turned the young fisherman into an old man.

He began to wonder where it had come from. Would the food inside be safe for him to eat?

“Well, go on. Open it.”

“…Okay.”

Minato set the box down on the veranda, where everyone was. If they were going to die, then they would all die together.

“We do not age. Nor can we die.”

“I figured as much…!”

The martens crowded around the box without concern, waiting excitedly for Minato to open it.

He answered their expectations by sliding the string free, then slowly lifted the lid with both hands. Arms outstretched, he tried to move his face as far away as possible.

Eventually, his squinting eyes caught sight of the variety of seafood packed tightly into the multi-layered box. Seaweed of various colors filled more than half the container, accompanied by squid, octopus, sea cucumbers, and other delicacies.

It was all things he knew. There was nothing bizarre inside.

He couldn’t see any shellfish, but that was fine. Minato breathed a huge sigh of relief.

The three martens stared in astonishment.

“Minato, you’re so naive!”

“You should’ve told us you’re still a kid at heart.”

“I mean, I understand your hesitation…but you didn’t need to worry about anything happening. Urashima Taro is just a fairy tale made up by humans a long time ago.”

“The story is true.”

“What?!”

The Yamagami’s offhand remark was buried beneath Minato’s and the martens’ shouts of surprise. They immediately turned to Reiki.

The aged turtle raised its head from its sake cup and smiled, its drooping eyes squinting happily.

Even though Minato hadn’t dug up any bamboo shoots himself, he’d still broken a sweat climbing the mountain and had eaten a fair amount.

Naturally, that meant his next course of action was to bathe in the *onsen*. Of course he’d take a bath. Who would choose to do anything else if they had such a sublime bath in their very own home?

“No one, that’s who,” murmured a completely satisfied Minato, submerged up to his shoulders.

The stone-encircled open-air bath sparkled perfectly today, too. It was simply heavenly. Minato had bathed in the *onsen* at his family home ever since he was a small child, but even growing up with such a luxury, he understood that this one was something special. It not only looked superb, but soaking in it would relieve all fatigue and keep your body warm for a long time afterward. It was on a completely different level from normal *onsen*.

“The Yamagami Hot Spring feels as good as ever today.”

“It is neither too hot nor too cold. It is perfect.”

Doggy paddling—no, wolf paddling—easily through the water, the Yamagami passed in front of Minato.

Cherry blossom petals sprinkled down, adding to the mineral deposits drifting through the water. Yet the petals vanished the instant they touched the surface, leaving only their faint scent behind.

They didn’t actually exist, after all. But even so, they perfectly mimicked the real thing in both appearance and smell.

Minato held out his palm. A petal landed on it before melting like snow.

“It’s nice not needing any bath salts.”

“What a bland topic of conversation. Is there nothing else you wish to converse on?”

While the Yamagami certainly enjoyed its daily bath in the *onsen*, it usually floated in the center of the water. Today, however, it was swimming around. When it reached the edge, it turned around and swam back.

“Yamagami, you sure seem livelier than usual.”

“It is rather pleasant to have a small body that maneuvers easily.”

“Are you swimming because of Utsugi?”

The small wolf had probably been inspired by Utsugi, who always swam in the *onsen*. Its kin had already gone back home.

“Aye. I may have synced with his body too much. I just cannot seem to sit still. My body seems to move by itself.”

“I can tell. Are you okay?”

“Well, I am not entirely sure, seeing as this is a first for me.”

As Minato watched the Yamagami swim around happily, the rainbow-colored light once again emerged from the pond. He looked toward it in surprise.

After all, it only emitted that rainbow glow when something was passing through to come here. And Reiki and Oryu were asleep on the rock.

So who was passing through the Ryugu Gate?

It couldn’t be human. Not even a baby could fit through that tiny gate.

It had to be some kind of kami.

Who knows what it might do or what form it might take? It could even be female.

Minato panicked. He was completely nude. He would feel absolutely ridiculous greeting a kami naked.

The beings that always surrounded him took on the forms of animals, so he never felt embarrassed, but this less-than-ideal situation confounded him.

“Hey, Yamagami, someone’s coming through the gate!”

“…Ah, it is nothing to worry about.”

“It’s not?!”

“Beings wander in here from time to time, as seems to be the case now.”

“…This is the first I’m hearing of it.”

Minato stared at the Yamagami, but it placed its front paws on a rock, as if it wasn’t concerned in the least.

“I’m the caretaker here, so please make sure you tell me things like that.”

“I shall act accordingly in the future.”

Yeah, fat chance of that happening.

As Minato sighed, something splashed up from the surface of the pond. Amid a huge spray of water, it sat on a rock, leaning on one leg.

It was a man. That much was clear from its appearance. Just knowing that provided Minato with some relief.

He was short and slightly pudgy, clad in hunting clothes and wearing a black pointed *kazaori eboshi* hat. He had a fishing pole in one hand and a red snapper under his other arm. His plump, shiny face wore a gentle smile that seemed to be his natural expression.

He looked like someone who brought good luck with him. Minato felt as if he’d seen this man recently.

That’s right, this was the kami depicted on the can of beer that had been next to the kirin’s favorite brand.

His famous name rose to mind, but Minato didn’t speak it out loud. The Yamagami had told him previously that he shouldn’t go around addressing kami casually, even if he knew their names.

Some kami have difficult personalities, and many don’t like being addressed by someone to whom they haven’t told their name. Names possess the power to restrict a being’s very existence, and powerful beings can make someone obey them simply by saying their name. For that reason, kami do not casually address humans by name, either.

Minato had also heard that kami didn’t typically introduce themselves.

The small man noticed him still soaking in the *onsen*.

Seeing Minato’s glance flicker between him, the fishing pole, and the snapper, the man nodded and gave a broad smile.

“Sorry to disturb you. I’m not dangerous at all. I probably don’t have to introduce myself, but I’m Ebisu.”

The kami had introduced himself without the slightest hesitation, so perhaps he’d heard wrong.

Minato glanced over at the Yamagami, but it simply bobbed up and down in the water. There are exceptions to every rule, so this kami must just be extremely friendly. Probably.

His characteristics were so well known, there was likely no point in trying to hide his identity.

“Feel free to call me ‘Ebby,’” he said.

“…It’s nice to meet you, Ebby.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

He seemed incredibly easygoing and had practically ordered Minato to call him by his nickname. So that was what he did.

People who walk around with a constant smile glued to their face are disturbing, in a way. You can never tell if their smile is genuine, and what makes it even worse is that you can’t tell where they’re looking or what they might be thinking.

The kami Ebisu looked around at his surroundings, then wandered closer. His small frame was about half the size of Minato’s.

Yet even so, he was too big to fit through the Ryugu Gate.

Kami truly are mysterious beings. Although they were plain, Ebisu’s high-quality hunting clothes weren’t even damp.

“My, what an elegant garden.”

“Thank you.”

Minato was genuinely pleased to receive a compliment from a kami.

After Ebisu had taken in the entire garden, his gaze fell on the veranda—and his eyes went wide. Crouching there was the kirin, its four legs braced firmly against the floor and its head low as it glared at Ebisu.

It was trying to intimidate him.

Minato was shocked. The auspicious beast could say and do the wrong things, at times, but this was the first time he’d seen it on such high alert. It was acting as if its nemesis had appeared before its very eyes. Fierce sparks flew between the two.

Ebisu tightened his grip on the fishing pole, and his entire body began to shake.

“Wh-what is this feeling? This burning desire that I can never allow myself to be defeated by that being?!”

“…What indeed?”

“Ah! Don’t tell me, could this being possibly be my one true love…? Has spring finally come…for an old man like me…?”

“No, I seriously doubt that’s it.”

Minato had a good idea what this was about, but he feigned ignorance.

Kirin faced off against Ebisu, and they glared at each other for a while.

When the kirin finally averted its eyes, Minato took it to mean that whatever battle the two kami had just engaged in was over.

Ebisu exhaled and made his fishing pole disappear, then moved to the edge of the *onsen*. His gentle smile deepened.

“Where am I anyway?”

He asked as though it was no big deal. He didn’t seem uneasy or nervous but simply stroked the snapper cradled under his arm. It had glittering crimson scales and didn’t seem at all troubled to be out of the water.

What a strange fish. It’s probably Ebisu’s kin.

Its lips flapping, the fish turned to face the sacred pond, and Oryu looked up from the large rock it was on. It seemed to be saying hello.

“I hadn’t seen Otohime in a while, so I went down to the palace under the sea to say hello. I must have walked into the wrong room on my way out, because the next thing I knew, I was here.”

Minato couldn’t ignore the name he’d just heard.

But first, he told Ebisu where he was.

“Hmm, don’t know it. But, well, I’ve never been good with Earth names.”

“It’s the next town over,” the Yamagami commented sleepily, its eyes half-closed.

“Oh, is that so?”

Minato pressed a hand to his mouth in utter disbelief. He had just inadvertently learned one of Japan’s seven mysteries.

That famous palace was nearby. In which case, that gift from earlier really had come from—

“Well, I can pass through the gate again to get back.”

Ebisu’s optimistic words interrupted his train of thought. The kami looked fondly at the Yamagami Hot Spring.

“An *onsen*, huh? How nice.”

“You can come in, if you’d like.”

“Well then, I just may. Kami of the Mountain, do you mind if I join?”

“Do as you please.”

“Thank you. Take this, as a token of my appreciation.”

Ebisu casually reached inside the snapper’s mouth. He extracted a small paper bag, and the Yamagami immediately looked over from the *onsen*.

Even Minato’s duller sense of smell soon detected the sweet scent.

“It’s *taiyaki*. Enjoy them with everyone later.”

“With smooth bean paste?”

“I have all kinds. Including smooth bean paste, of course.”

In the midst of this peaceful exchange, the snapper suddenly jumped into the *onsen* with a splash. It slipped through the water, then poked its head up right in front of Minato. He stared at the fish wordlessly as it opened and closed its mouth.

How in the world does its body work?

Ebisu gazed over at Minato and smiled knowingly.

“You really are becoming *out of this world*.”

What was that supposed to mean?

As Minato struggled to find an answer, the Yamagami narrowed its eyes at Ebisu.

Chapter 6
An Unexpected Visitor

A drop of rain hit the ground.

More soon followed, swelling to an endless barrage. But the downpour wouldn't last long.

Minato looked up at the sky as he stood at the rear gate. A thin band of light-gray clouds stretched across the blue sky, yet they freely exposed the sun.

It was a sun shower. These types of things occur frequently in mountainous areas. As clouds pass over the mountains and dissipate, the wind carries the rain down to the ground.

Minato passed through the gate into the garden, where he didn't need to worry about getting wet. He walked the path up to the veranda, in the middle of which slept the Yamagami nestled deep within its huge cushion. Its body was still small. The tiny mountain rose and fell gently, not having moved from that spot in over a day.

When it was in the garden of the Kusunoki residence, the Yamagami spent most of its time sleeping. It moved aside when Minato cleaned, though, so it never got in the way.

Minato observed the sky again, but he couldn't see any signs of rain.

"Well, they say a sun shower means a fox is getting married, so I guess the ceremony's over."

"Oh, come now. We wouldn't get married purely based on the weather."

Minato had been speaking to himself, but some other being answered him.

The voice came from a creature sitting on top of the wall facing the mountain.

It was a small fox with shiny black fur. It had a symbol on its forehead. About the same size as the Yamagami right now, a tail as big as its body swished slowly behind it.

Minato stared at the unfamiliar creature.

Yet the black fox's gaze was focused on a point diagonally below it. Those slanted eyes were fixed on the *onsen*, which glittered with its usual overwhelming presence. Who could blame anyone for being captivated by that?

"Who knew there was such a splendid *onsen* nearby…? Certainly not I…"

It stared, enchanted. It must like hot springs.

What was this fox, though? It could speak human language, so it was most likely some kind of kami.

But its body was black.

Minato had believed that every being associated with kami was white. In his experience, white beings were good, while black beings tended to be bad. However, this excited fox didn't seem to harbor any ill intent. It just seemed to really like *onsen*.

The Yamagami and the Four Spirits didn't seem perturbed. Reiki and Oryu swam playfully in the pond. The kirin slept curled up at the base of the camphor tree. And the ho'o rested inside the stone lantern. Not a single one of them seemed bothered by the visitor.

The black fox suddenly looked toward Minato, its vertical pupils contracting.

"Is this your house?"

"No, it's not. I'm the caretaker."

"…Is that so?"

It stomped its feet on the top of the wall as it spoke.

"Do you really want to get in that *onsen* so badly?" Minato asked.

"…No, it is not that… You see, right now, I am in the middle of an important errand…and…"

“Are you in a hurry?”

“No… Not…particularly…”

It was so indecisive. The fox leaned forward, its front paws looking as if they’d fall off the wall.

It should just admit it.

Minato got the impression that this black fox wasn’t a kami. It didn’t seem to exude that overwhelming sense of divine authority. There was a good chance it might come right out and say its name, just like Ebisu had.

Minato decided to try tricking it into telling him its name.

“We’re having *inari sushi* for lunch today.”

The black fox’s eyes went wide. Atop the wall, it adjusted its front paws and sat upright.

“I am Tsumugi, kin of the kami that inhabits the neighboring mountain! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance!” it yelped loudly.

“It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Would you be so kind as to allow me to join you?!”

“Of course. Please, come eat with us.”

Whether it’s humans or cute animal creatures, honesty is always the best option. Minato grinned. He did worry a bit that the kin of the kami had been so easy to trick, though.

That said, his prediction had been correct: The fox wasn’t a kami. It seemed accustomed to the physical world, just like the Yamagami’s kin. The way that it had said the kami *inhabits the neighboring mountain*, in particular, piqued his curiosity.

As Tsumugi had said, there was indeed a small low-lying mountain beside the Yamagami’s. It must have meant that one.

The kami next door to the Yamagami was, in a sense, its neighbor. Which meant that they should get to know each other.

“Excuse me, however, there is something I wish to ask you…,” the fox said, looking directly at him.

It was incredibly sly; it knew it could use its cute appearance to its benefit. Minato caught a glimpse that there was more to it than met the eye.

“Is the *inari sushi* homemade? Oh, uh, store-bought is perfectly fine, of course. I would gladly eat that, too! Truly! However, it tastes best when made by hand!”

“It’s homemade. And it’s filled with mountain vegetables.”

“R-really?!”

Tsumugi vibrated, overflowing with excitement. Minato was speechless.

“You haven’t even had any yet… You might not like it once you try it.”

Tsumugi shook its head vigorously side to side.

“It was made with care by human hands. That alone makes it more than sufficient.”

“I see.”

It spoke earnestly and looked grateful from the depths of its heart.

“And if they’re triangular, then all the better.”

This kami’s envoy was surprisingly picky. Although, Minato hadn’t known any being related to a kami to hold back, given half a chance. He was glad he’d decided on a whim to fold the *inari sushi* into triangles. Tsumugi was sure to be pleased.

Just then, the small white mountain moved on the veranda. The Yamagami stirred and opened its eyes.

Standing up straight once again, Tsumugi gave a short bow.

“Kami of the Mountain, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Mm.”

Still lying down, the Yamagami lifted its head and gave a relaxed nod. It glanced at Tsumugi, who was casually looking down at the *onsen*.

“You may enter. Do as you please.”

“It would be my absolute pleasure!”

Tsumugi jumped down into the garden and raced forward. As it did, Minato trembled.

“Yamagami, you usually don’t appear so dignified, but you sure seem quite the kami now…!”

“Do not be impertinent. I am the great Yamagami.”

The tiny wolf puffed up its chest, a halo of light emanating from behind it.

“…That’s quite a high-ranking kami you’re talking to…,” Tsumugi murmured quietly.

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Having given in to its hunger, Tsumugi sat on the veranda, savoring the *inari sushi*.

"I haven't had homemade *inari sushi* in so long… It's so good. The juices seep out of the fried tofu when I bite into it… Not too much, not too little, just the right amount… That sweet, salty liquid goes so well with the vinegared rice. And the mountain vegetables provide such a nice texture… I can feel it warming my soul… It's delicious."

"Thank you."

As Tsumugi heaped on the praise, Minato sat next to the fox, admiring its thick black tail. It trembled faintly, as if to express the joy of Tsumugi, who seemed as satisfied as it had claimed.

The creature had so much fur. Thick forests of fluffy hair covered its entire body. It was singularly impressive, different from the wolf or the martens.

Peering closer, Minato spied a cloth-covered parcel buried deep within its fur. Tsumugi really was out running an errand.

It was a good thing that, as the kin of a kami, it wouldn't shed. Minato also appreciated that it could speak human languages. He could only guess so much about a being's emotions from gestures —something he felt keenly whenever he couldn't understand what the Four Spirits were trying to say.

"…I'm so happy. Are you sure you don't mind me partaking in this delicious food alone…?" Tsumugi murmured. But it didn't stop eating.

The Yamagami looked over toward the low mountain. It appeared to be keeping its thoughts private.

The kami living on the next mountain was probably an old friend of the Yamagami's.

"I must give you something as thanks for such delicious *inari sushi*."

"Don't worry, it was nothing. You only ate one or two…or five pieces."

The enamored Tsumugi suddenly turned serious.

"I must return the favor on principle. I shall make you accept my gift by any means necessary."

"In that case, I accept."

Tsumugi deftly removed the parcel. Inserting two paws into a gap, it removed something from within.

“This is a peach picked from our domain. Please take it.”

Something small rested in its front paws. It was undeniably peach-shaped, yet the color was anything but ordinary.

It was a golden peach. Even the thin fuzz covering it shone gold.

It radiated with a light no less dazzling than that from the Yamagami’s eyes. That alone made it unique, but the peach also emitted a shower of gold dust that scattered in endless whorls. The gold color stood out even more when held by the black fox.

It was clearly not from this world.

“…You picked this on your mountain…?”

“More accurately, it comes from the kami realm that is our garden, like this one. It is made for a kami, so it might be best if you didn’t eat it. However, it smells nice and makes a pleasant decoration. It will never rot.”

Even without the warning, Minato wasn’t brave enough to try eating it. It looked as if it would awaken some sort of power if consumed, like turning someone young again or granting them immortality. Golden fruit in most myths around the world typically extended a person’s life.

Was this peach the legendary fruit that had once been frantically sought by heroes all across the world?

Minato didn’t actually want it, but he hesitantly accepted the gift.

“…Thank you. Yamagami, I ended up taking it.”

“I shall eat it later.”

If the Yamagami happily devoured it, then it wouldn’t be a problem.

Minato didn’t even have the slightest interest in eating the peach, but it smelled wonderful, and simply looking at it invigorated him. It smelled frighteningly tempting.

But if he carelessly bit into it, there would be serious consequences.

“…Feel free to get in the *onsen* once you’re done with your *inari sushi*.”

“Oh, thank you very much! Am I correct in assuming that you bathe in this hot spring as well?”

“Every day.”

“I understand. That explains why you are not like most humans.”

“Huh?”

It spoke that shocking truth as casually as if it were relaying tomorrow’s weather.

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After the creature soaked in the *onsen*, Tsumugi’s fur glistened even brighter, and it stepped lightly—no, *flew* away—through the air. The black fox galloping through the sky on its four stubby legs was a sight to behold.

Minato watched until he couldn’t see it anymore.

Sitting opposite the Yamagami on its cushion, Minato wrote on the low table, casually scrawling letters in his notepad. These talismans were for his own use, so he didn’t need to put as much effort into them.

The Yamagami had just explained to him that he was prone to being drawn into kami realms.

“I’m not like other humans,” he said distractedly.

The Yamagami didn’t respond.

“I’m not going to be human anymore.”

“…Nay, you shall remain human.”

The answer had come after a pause.

Minato’s expression didn’t change. Nor did the power he was imbuing his words with. He was only using his dispelling power, however, not his sealing power, which he had gradually been improving with. After all, he wasn’t entirely in a normal state of mind.

“What Tsumugi said before really affected me, but it’s not like I wasn’t expecting it.”

The Yamagami looked resolutely at Minato as he continued.

“When I went out earlier, people didn’t seem to notice me as much, and now I understand why. It also explains why I’ve been finding myself drawn toward strange places.”

He quietly set his pen down.

“I mean, this place isn’t normal. I *know* that. There’s no way that it wouldn’t affect a regular person like me.”

Minato looked around the garden. Cherry blossom petals danced in the breeze, an endless cascade of pink that endlessly frolicked on the wind. The cherry trees stayed in full bloom at all times, their vibrant elegance everlasting.

The scene depicted a mysterious beauty that couldn't be found in the real world.

The branches of the central camphor tree swayed gently. That camphor, too, moved of its own accord—something that normal trees do not do.

None of this would ever happen in the real world.

"…When I die, will I die as a human?" he whispered hoarsely.

After a pause—

"Of course."

—a firm, unwavering voice answered him.

Minato let his shoulders relax. The Yamagami simply watched him.

Then his gaze fell on the *onsen*, and he smiled.

"Who could live in a house with such a splendid *onsen* and not use it?"

Even now, knowing that the *onsen* had caused this change within him, Minato couldn't resist soaking in it.

Chapter 7
May These Wishes Reach You

Something seemed off with Reiki.

Since the morning, it had been sitting on the large rock, leaning with its shell against it. Minato had never seen it make that pose before, and he caught himself doing a double take.

The turtle's typically half-closed eyes were now wide open and perfectly round. It actually looked kind of cute.

It wasn't moving at all, though. It didn't even blink. In fact, it looked terrified.

Walking close, Reiki gave one slow blink, as if to tell Minato not to worry. It didn't look sick, so Minato let it be.

However, Reiki wasn't the only one acting strangely.

Oryu also seemed off.

For one thing, it was jumping out of the water. It leaped so elegantly, it could have been mistaken for a flying fish. Although it had done this on occasion before, it had gradually increased the frequency and height of its jumps. It now soared as high as the top of the camphor tree, a new record. When Oryu emerged from the water veiled in a shimmer of silver-blue light, it brought with it high arcs of water that fell like rain and dispersed into a rainbow. The sight was breathtakingly gorgeous.

But he'd done it far too many times.

Water splashed outside the pond, irritating the kirin. Yet Oryu just kept on jumping.

The kirin was also acting strangely.

It had always been a little peculiar, but now it was a different kind of bizarre. It usually spent its time on the arched bridge or

nestled among the roots of the camphor tree; however, it had inexplicably started to sleep on the roof.

It had chosen this unusual location a few days earlier.

The day it had locked eyes with the kami Ebisu.

A thought flashed through Minato's mind.

Was the kirin consumed by thoughts of its rival? Based on the intensity with which they had stared at each other, it was certainly a possibility.

And it was now spring. The season of love.

Most animals have a designated mating season, which is typically in the spring.

The kirin suddenly darted across the veranda. Minato watched it go, though he only recognized it as the kirin by the pearly cream blur it left behind.

It moved faster than normal. And he thought it was shining brighter. It couldn't seem to sit still.

It had to be because Ebisu hadn't come back since his last visit.

After his sudden appearance that day, Ebisu had gotten out of the bath, drunk one of the kirin's beers, said, "All right, then, see you later," and left happily through the Ryugu Gate.

The *taiyaki* he had served them were delectable. The crisp exteriors gave off a wonderful smell, and the bean paste inside was warm and fresh. That scrumptious flavor had made Minato completely forget the mystery of the red snapper's body.

And, of course, the Yamagami, who only ate smooth bean paste, had been completely satisfied.

The kirin leaped up to the roof without so much as a running start.

Its recent agitation was probably causing this odd behavior.

Just then, a question suddenly popped into Minato's mind.

What gender is the kirin?

It could be described as either male or female. Oryu, too.

So, then, what was the gender of this kirin, who had just flown down from the roof and bounded over the wall in a single leap?

Hang on. Wait a second.

Could the kirin and Oryu already have mates?!

It would be chaos. Any lovers' quarrel would turn the place into a scene of carnage. A massive fight would be unavoidable. The yard would be covered in a rain of blood, turning this beautiful garden of the gods into the scene of a tragedy.

The cleanup would be horrendous. And who would be responsible for it? That's right, Minato. That's who.

Covering his eyes with one hand, Minato looked up toward the ceiling, when—

"*Chirp, chirp!!*"

Strict teacher ho'o let out a cry, interrupting Minato's trivial concerns. His mental wanderings had caused him to neglect his talismans.

Minato readjusted his posture and sat up straight. He bowed to the ho'o, who sat on the table, staring up at him.

"I'm very sorry."

"*Chirp!*"

"Yes, I'll focus."

He readjusted his grip on the brush.

A gust of wind mixed with divine might blew through the garden, and a stream of cherry blossoms trickled down from the roof. Covered in hundreds of petals, the camphor tree shook its *shimenawa* rope.

—Hoh, hoh, kekyo!

The birdsong drifting in from outside the residence seemed like it was trying to comfort him.

Thin jade-green threads stood up off Minato's palm like the ghostly shimmers above a flame. There were far fewer than before because he had sealed some of his dispelling power into the washi paper. The Yamagami watched from its cushion opposite him.

Covering the surface of the piece of paper was a beehive design—silver threads arranged to create an array of hexagons. They sealed the jade green of the dispelling power imbued in his brushstrokes within the washi paper.

The hexagons weren't all the same size, and many were deformed, so the effect was a far cry from a beautiful hexagon design. But he was improving.

About a week had passed since Minato had gained this new power, but even in that short amount of time, he'd gotten a lot better. Without a doubt, he had the ho'o to thank for that. It was with him even now, looking intently at the washi paper.

The ho'o didn't shy away from its role as teacher, nor show any hesitation.

"No, the one before was better... That's right, just like that. Good. Now, maintain that and match my breathing. Apply a good amount of force when you exhale, and stop when you inhale."

Minato couldn't decipher a word of its incredibly detailed advice. Yet even so, he managed to do almost exactly as instructed. The ho'o altered the pitch of its voice so Minato could discern the praise from the criticism.

Minato had tried out a variety of different methods to discover the best way to imbue talismans with power.

"He has improved, yet it is far from perfect."

"Yes, he still has a way to go, but he's a fast learner. It must be because he practiced with Fujin's power."

The Yamagami and the ho'o spoke telepathically, so Minato couldn't hear them.

"He requires further practice to fully control Fujin's power."

"*Don't worry about that right now. Just let him focus on this*," the ho'o said, not taking its eyes off the piece of paper.

Although they were communicating telepathically, the Yamagami's front paws kept moving, playing with something between its paws and the cushion. The movements looked almost exactly like a cat kneading a soft piece of fabric.

The Yamagami gradually began to shape it into a ball, and it emitted a blinding flash of bright light that disrupted Minato's concentration.

The ho'o spun around with a glare.

"My apologies. This body is so small that sometimes I cannot control it well."

It didn't sound too apologetic, nor did its paws stop moving.

"Yamagami, are you making something?"

"Aye, that I am."

At first glance, it looked like the white orb that had flown off toward Echigoya, but this one didn't emit a constant golden glow. It seemed to be something different. Minato could guess what the Yamagami might make.

"You're not thinking of making more kin, are you?"

"Correct. Three seems insufficient."

"Well, your home is big."

The Yamagami seemed unbelievably involved in the process, completely unlike its normal lazy self. Minato had to admit he was surprised, but couldn't help but feel deeply emotional at the thought of creating new life.

Actually, it was a little different from that. The Yamagami split off a portion of its spirit, so it was more like a clone of it than a new being. It didn't want to make something exactly like itself, though, so it imbued each one with a unique personality.

"So there's going to be more martens?"

"Nay, this is no marten. You shall find out soon enough, so wait and see."

"…Okay."

The intense light dimmed to a low glow, and then the orb disappeared.

Minato was curious about what form this new kin would assume, but the Yamagami kept its mouth shut tight. He knew it wouldn't tell him. The Yamagami had told him to wait, so that was all he could do.

Minato looked back down to find the ho'o staring at him, so he quickly resumed making talismans. He imbued each stroke of his brush with dispelling power, sealing it inside the paper. He repeated this process again and again.

This was just practice, so Minato drew lines instead of words. Left to right, then down the page, alternating between each to make a grid.

Minato didn't know he was creating the pattern of the Nine Seals.

It was just a simple design he drew on the back of Saiga's hand from time to time.

Lines of equivalent power wove together, and the ho'o nodded, satisfied.

Just then, a machine seemed to whir faintly. It sounded like an electronic device starting up. A laptop computer sat before the Yamagami, and its front paws clacked on the keyboard. It seemed fairly used to typing like this.

The screen showed the home page of a certain *wagashi* store.

"Ah, Echigoya, as haughty as ever."

An image of the chubby master of Echigoya filled the screen, a smile on his face and *amazake manju* held in one hand. His complexion didn't show so much as a trace of ill health.

It seemed to express the joy of life.

The Yamagami always spoke loudly to itself. In the back of his mind, Minato thought it must be gathering information on the internet again.

The Yamagami operated computers with ease. It always painted an amusing picture to see the wolf tap the keys with the tips of its large claws. Right now, however, the tiny Yamagami was smaller than the laptop.

Minato wanted to see it.

The tip of his brush wavered, bending the line. The ho'o looked displeased.

Oh, shoot. I need to focus. I don't want the ho'o giving up on me. Focus, focus.

Minato concentrated and cleared his mind of unnecessary thoughts.

“As rotund as you were in your youth, I see…”

Shaking its head, the Yamagami placed a front paw on the touchpad and moved the pointer around.

“What is this? Another new product? Hmm… He may be aging, but I admire his continual efforts to challenge himself.”

It clicked the banner at the top of the screen announcing *mitarashi dango* as a new item on sale for spring. An image of the lightly seared mochi balls popped up on the screen. One of the balls lay split in half, sweet soy sauce flowing out from the open center.

The sauce that typically coated *mitarashi dango* wasn’t on the outside of these mochi balls but inside them.

The Yamagami’s black nose moved so close to the screen, it seemed to touch it.

They looked delectable. Biting into one would cause the sauce to ooze out, and it went without saying that the chewy mochi and sweet, salty soy sauce would pair together exquisitely. And the texture, slightly different from that of normal *mitarashi dango*, would surely delight the tongue.

The small wolf’s face moved away from the screen.

It wasn’t smooth bean paste.

“Oh, twelfth master, never forget that only you have *amazake manju*.”

And with that, it quickly opened a new web page.

Echigoya updated their website frequently, and the Yamagami checked it every time it went online. The website always included the master’s face, making it easy to stay up to date on his current condition.

When Minato first arrived here, the Yamagami had never seen a laptop computer and hadn’t shown much interest in it. Yet the second Minato had pulled up a few images of *wagashi*, the Yamagami had learned the controls and could soon use the computer unassisted.

Honestly, Minato felt a little guilty. He wasn’t sure whether a kami should become so involved in earthly matters.

Kami should be tranquil and dignified. They were meant to live free, unrestrained existences. Minato thought that they shouldn’t

concern themselves with human affairs and instead present themselves with confidence.

When a country's kami appear untroubled, the people living below them feel secure.

However, the Yamagami seemed unaware of Minato's hopes and was quickly becoming more involved with the ways of the human world.





After scrolling through most of the recent news, the Yamagami shut the laptop. The moment he did, it disappeared and materialized on the dining room table. The Yamagami made a beckoning motion with a paw, and the magazine on the kitchen counter vanished, reappearing at the Yamagami's feet.

The glass door separating the Yamagami from Minato was closed, so it could casually use its divine power where he wasn't looking.

The tiny wolf relaxed on its cushion, flipping through the pages. Naturally, the magazine contained information on the local area. The Yamagami was only interested in news involving the area near its mountain. It didn't read national publications and couldn't care less about other places.

The Yamagami was a kami of the mountain. And an immobile mountain cares only for its own surroundings, never concerning itself with events happening elsewhere.

Even with its smaller body, the Yamagami's habits didn't change.

Flip, flip. It turned the pages of the magazine almost mechanically. Its gaze didn't budge. As anyone knows, you can get information quicker online than by reading a magazine.

Skimming through things it had already read, the Yamagami scanned local news that couldn't be found on the internet. Until, finally, it reached the page before the article it had long been waiting for:

The Spring Sakura *Wagashi* Special.

Collecting itself, the small wolf turned the page, and its entire body began to tremble.

"…Oh…. Ohh…."

It could hardly speak.

The flood of cherry blossom–themed *wagashi* captivated its eyes, brain, and heart.

"H-how sinful…"

A variety of pink sweets filled the page. Naturally, most of them were *sakura mochi*. In Japan, spring means cherry blossoms, and

cherry blossoms mean spring. You can't have one without the other.

There are two types of *sakura mochi*:

Kanto style, or *Chomeiji sakura mochi*, made by covering smooth bean paste in stretchy wheat flour dough.

And Kansai style, or *Domyoji sakura mochi*, which uses sweet red bean paste and coarse mochi rice flour, and is wrapped in a salt-pickled sakura leaf.

They lived in western Japan, so the Kansai-style *Domyoji sakura mochi* were the most common around here. The majority of the *sakura mochi* blanketing the page were the kind with coarse, pink mochi sticking out from inside a leaf.

The Yamagami, of course, loved both styles.

Beginning from the top right corner, it carefully examined each item in turn. With every passing second, its eyes seemed to melt a little more, and its mouth drooped lower. Once it had taken in every sweet, the Yamagami blinked once and tilted its head in confusion.

Something wasn't right. The article had omitted the town's premier store for *sakura mochi*. It didn't include Echizentei's famous Kanto-style *sakura mochi*, a treat whose popularity was unrivaled among other stores. Every year, it pushed the Kansai-style offerings aside, dominating the centerfold.

"What is going on…?"

Confused, the Yamagami turned to the next page. More *sakura mochi*. The special feature continued.

Echizentei finally appeared, receiving special treatment with a picture of the master standing in front of the store. The familiar man held a tray loaded with sweets in one hand. He was of medium height and build and looked to be in his fifties. His thick head of white hair looked good on him. It was easy to imagine he must have been popular with the ladies as a young man.

This renowned store was the only one that had received its own spread.

"Oh, well deserved, Echizentei. You burst onto the scene thirty years ago, when you opened your first store in this town and quickly gained a following of regulars and young women. Echizentei, I eagerly await this year's—"

The Yamagami's words and breath suddenly stopped. But it rebooted instantly, its mouth wide and its eyes bulging.

"This cannot be! The master of Echizentei is dying?!"

The master was smiling on the page.

Yet his expression was awfully stiff. Examining the picture closer, the Yamagami saw that the man's arms appeared strangely thin and pale. It was an unsettling sight.

Golden threads shot out of the Yamagami's body as it growled, the innumerable points of light coalescing around its nose to form a spiral. It gradually resolved itself into a sphere. It had taken longer to form than last time, most likely due to the Yamagami's weakened state.

The edges of the magazine still pinned by its small paw fluttered, and the birds sitting in the trees on the mountain all rushed to be the first to escape into the sky.

Meanwhile, Minato had finished putting away his work tools. The washi paper was also safely stored, and all the house's windows were shut, so there were no problems there.

The ho'o was tucked away in his breast pocket. Everything was ready on standby.

I'm ready whenever.

All the preparations complete, Minato stood with his back to the garden.

Humans learn through experience, and Minato Kusunoki wasn't the type of person not to learn from his own mistakes. The last time, he had received the full force of the Yamagami's gale and had only barely hung on.

Not today.

He had developed some techniques to help resist it. And the Yamagami was weaker than he had been previously, instead of being at full power.

Minato knew he could put up a good fight.

In no time at all, the white orb at the tip of the tiny wolf's nose was complete. It wasn't very big, only about the size of a golf ball, yet it gave off an incredible number of golden particles.

A vicious gale erupted, with the Yamagami at its center. The wind roared.

It's here.

Minato immediately deployed a defensive wind, surrounding not just himself but the garden and veranda in it. The trees on the mountain deformed under the full force of the gusting wind, and the house's windows shook violently.

Yet the wind racing toward Minato had been halted completely, redirected upward instead.

The camphor and cherry trees behind Minato were unaffected by the crosswind, and the camphor tree even played with its *shimenawa* rope, spinning it around. Reiki stayed where it was, on top of the large rock, while Oryu sank to the bottom of the pond. The kirin wasn't home.

The peaceful garden remained the same as ever.

Minato had nothing but gratitude to the wind kami for lending him his power.

"I'll have to go buy Fujin some sake as thanks!"

"*Chirp!*"

"Want to come?"

Minato had handled it with surprising ease.

The Yamagami raised a front paw, its fur fluttering in the wind.

"Hear me, Echizentei. Should you recover your health like Echigoya, do not take up your old womanizing ways."

It swung down its paw powerfully, cutting through the air—but it missed.

Seeing the white sphere still floating in front of it, the Yamagami blinked in surprise.

"Hmm, it seems I misjudged."

Both its paws and the sphere were tiny.

The Yamagami took aim again and brought its front paw down—but this time, the tip of its fluttering fur tickled its nose.

"*Achoo!*"

As it sneezed, its claw grazed the side of the sphere, sending the orb flying off in the wrong direction. It shot through a window and soared through the living room before flying over the wall, leaving only a band of light behind inside the house.

It had gone off in the complete wrong direction. And yet—

"…Oh well. It shall suffice."

The earth is round, so the sphere would eventually—or rather, immediately—traverse the globe and find its way safely to the master of Echizentei. Its destination had been set, so there was no other place it would go.

The Yamagami sat back down on its cushion and immersed itself in its magazine. Minato had started laughing partway through the spectacle, but he finally dropped his wind guard and returned to the veranda.

Behind him, the branches of the camphor tree swayed in laughter. The cherry blossom petals that had been lifted up into the sky now fluttered back down to the garden.

Chapter 8
The Spring Evil Spirit Festival Continues

Medical equipment and other items lay scattered about the room of the abandoned hospital, and cracks ran across the walls and floor.

An evil spirit in the form of a terrifying beast rampaged around the room. It ran across the floor, walls, and ceiling, using them as platforms to charge at Saiga standing near the doorway.

Following its agile movements with the naked eye proved extremely difficult, and Saiga couldn't target the creature. Emboldened, the evil spirit began to move faster. Saiga deftly dodged its attacks at the last second, and the beast's eerie screech raked against his eardrums. Then it repeated its provocations.

It kicked off a wall and charged toward Saiga, who sank a leather-gloved fist into the spirit's face. It had presented itself as an easy target. The spirit swelled for a moment, before exploding and dissipating completely.

Yet its form had begun crumbling even before Saiga's fist touched it.

"This really is easier."

Saiga made a fist again, the new leather squeaking.

His opponent had materialized as a mid-grade spirit. Saiga hadn't squared off against something that could attack him in a while, and hitting the thing had felt good.

He smirked, satisfied. But dark shadows rested at the corners of his eyes.

Two weeks had already passed since the start of the Evil Spirit Festival, and Saiga had only just changed his strategy to dispelling beings by directly punching them with Minato's talismans.

Simplified or regular, the Nine Seals were inefficient in fights that demanded speed. The seals took time to create, and casting them across a wider area consumed a lot of spirit power, so it wasn't something he could repeat continuously. Instead, he'd started placing talismans inside his gloves and on the insoles of his shoes to dispel evil spirits with punches and kicks.

The gloves were new. They were unlike the ones he'd used before, and while they cut the talismans' potency in half, they also extended their usable life span. Talismans were consumables, and while Minato would write one on the back of Saiga's hand out of kindness, he couldn't ask him to do it every time.

Saiga dashed across the room and into the one next door.

After just one step inside, he came face-to-face with a black human-shaped spirit walking forward on all fours. It came at him as a blur, but Saiga effortlessly kicked it in the side.

He continued attacking the other evil spirits that approached from above and the sides, aiming for their heads as he lashed out mercilessly with both fists, and he unhesitatingly kicked the spirits to dispel them. The reason he mainly aimed for their heads was because that was the closest target.

Even if Saiga didn't go to all the effort of punching and kicking the evil spirits, he only needed to remove one talisman from his case to take care of the entire swarm.

But he chose not to. He was blowing off steam…no, preserving his talismans. No matter how good a deal Minato's talismans might be, they weren't free.

Anyone watching from the sidelines could tell that Saiga relished fighting. He was in his natural element.

However, there were others who viewed this method of eliminating spirits as excessively violent.

"Well, it looks like you're having fun…but you're freaking your old Uncle Katsuragi out a little. Fighter types sure are scary," the old man murmured, as he used talismans to dispel the evil spirits swarming in the hallway.

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The nest of evil spirits had once been a three-story general hospital. It contained a lot of rooms and a separate wing, so it was too much for Saiga and Katsuragi to handle on their own, and a large group had been assigned to dispel the spirits.

Naturally, that included Ichijo and Horikawa, who were currently clearing the second floor.

Having finished dispatching the spirits on the third floor, Saiga and Katsuragi headed downstairs. They walked right past the second floor, but as they started to descend to the first, they heard Ichijo yell something from behind them.

They couldn't quite make out what he'd said, but it didn't sound like he was in any danger. His tone sounded more like he was trying to intimidate someone.

Saiga and Katsuragi exchanged a glance.

"He's either really hyped up or yelling the name of some technique… Doesn't he know how to do his job quietly?"

"Do you think he does it to show off?"

"Nah, it feels sort of different to me… Anyway, we might as well check it out. I'm concerned for Horikawa."

"…Yeah."

Ever since Ichijo had realized he had feelings for Horikawa, he'd become drastically more annoying, so Saiga preferred to keep his distance. Ichijo must have gotten some sort of weird idea in his head, because he'd redirected his misplaced jealousy onto Saiga, causing him nothing but headaches.

Saiga had originally been scheduled to partner with Horikawa today.

But, of course, Ichijo had done everything in his power to change that. Saiga didn't care, since he was more comfortable and used to working with Katsuragi anyway.

"He threatens every man who gets near Horikawa. He really has lost his mind."

"Probably because he never had a crush on anyone as a teenager. You know, my guess is that he's had these feelings for her for a while and just never realized it…"

Has Ichijo ever liked anyone…? Saiga had known Ichijo since childhood, and he searched his memories for someone Ichijo had

shown an interest in, but he couldn't think of anybody. He didn't even have the vaguest idea.

But that was understandable. After all…

"I've never cared much for him, so of course I don't remember anything like that."

"That's sad," Katsuragi said dejectedly. "You've known him since you were three…"

The two of them stepped into the room where Ichijo and Horikawa were.

At that exact moment, a powerful evil spirit flung itself toward Horikawa.

She was unarmed; her stock of talismans must have run out. She tried to jump out of the way but tripped, and she fell backward.

With his back to her, Ichijo turned and pointed the sign of the blade at the spirit. Its black form immediately dissipated. But the force behind it wasn't even half of what it had been a few days earlier.

Ichijo was a man who didn't know the meaning of the word *restraint* and always banished spirits with everything he had. He possessed an extraordinary amount of spirit power, but it wasn't infinite. It looked like he and Horikawa were both on their last legs as well.

Even so, he'd managed to save the girl of his dreams. So of course he looked beyond pleased with himself as he extended a hand to Horikawa.

Katsuragi turned on his heel, following after Saiga, who'd already walked a long way down the corridor.

"Ahh, it's spring, all right."

"It sure is."

"I tell you what, Ichijo might be acting differently, but I still don't think Horikawa's going to warm up to him."

"How could she? The invisible scars she racked up over all those years of putting up with him run deep."

As they left the second floor, Saiga recalled Horikawa's look of disdain at Ichijo's outstretched hand and knew that her feelings hadn't changed at all.

The entire stairwell was crawling with evil spirits, and a brown stain spread across the floor. Saiga didn't know what it might have been, nor did he want to, and he stepped around it.

Crawling in front of Katsuragi was Number Five—a whale with its mouth open wide that swallowed evil spirits whole. Thankfully, it got rid of the spirits, but it couldn't do anything about the stifling air or the foul atmosphere.

Human emotions still lingered here. They pressed heavily down upon the *onmyoji*, making it difficult to breathe. It didn't take any special powers to feel that.

Old hospitals tend to retain a lot of negative emotions. Many beings find themselves unable to cut off their ties to the world and end up trapped.

The site needed more than just the spirits to be eradicated. Unless the entire area was purified, this would just keep happening again.

So for Saiga and the other *onmyoji* here who specialized in eradicating spirits, there was very little they could do.

After quickly and thoroughly clearing the stairwell of spirits, Saiga and Katsuragi arrived at the first floor. They stepped out into a large hall that looked like it must have been a waiting room. A few battered chairs still remained.

Five people from the Harima clan had been tasked with clearing the first floor. Saiga's sisters, a cousin, and two of his second cousins had each gone their separate ways, using their own specialized weapons and techniques to dispel the spirits.

"There are far fewer spirits here now."

"Yeah, no kidding."

When they'd first arrived at the hospital, black spirits had crowded the room, dense enough to block the sight of the opposite wall. Yet now, only a few remained near the periphery. The handful of stragglers were incredibly persistent and would reemerge soon after being dispelled.

Thick pillars supported the high ceiling of the messy hall, providing ample room to wield longer weapons.

A *naginata* arced through the air, cutting down an evil spirit.

The one wielding that fierce weapon was Saiga's younger sister, Fujino. Her long bladed polearm was perfect for dispelling spirits in larger spaces.

Because her weapon didn't work well in tight quarters, Fujino was frequently tasked with dispelling spirits in open areas and outside. She seemed delighted at the opportunity to finally swing her beloved *naginata* indoors. Her graceful appearance clashed with the ebullient grin of someone enjoying a good fight.

Opposite her, Saiga's older sister, Tsubaki, swept the blade of her long *tachi* sword horizontally. That alone was enough to completely clear the area around her. Tsubaki's expression showed no emotion. It betrayed no amusement or joy. She was simply focused on the task at hand, her impassive yet stunning features an intimidating sight.

The Harima clan produced tall beauties.

Saiga's sisters were exceptionally gorgeous, as were the other female members of his family. Be it passionately or unemotionally, the sight of these women swinging a weapon and dispelling evil spirits was truly a sight to behold.

Katsuragi looked over at the Harima clan's only male. Saiga's gaze was vacant.

"…You know, I think this every time I see them… The women in your family might be pretty, but they don't make for the best eye candy."

Saiga didn't know how to respond. After all, it was true. Every single one of the women in his family was brave and strong. Especially his sisters.

His head drooped slightly, and Saiga adjusted his glasses.

"…All that matters is their dispelling ability."

"I figured. And they are really cool."

Simply being born as a woman into the Harima clan didn't automatically mean you were able to use one of the family's treasured extermination weapons. A person had to be chosen by the weapon itself to wield it. And some, like Saiga Harima, were unable to.

His cousins, like him, fought only using their spirit power. The Harima clan had gained their reputation as a family of spirit

exterminators simply because their extermination weapons amplified their spirit power, not because they had a natural abundance of it.

Saiga's cousins were also using Minato's talismans before they exhausted their own spirit power.

Evil spirits continued to emerge, one after another. There was no end to them.

Four of the women looked toward a cousin in a newsboy cap, who nodded. She removed one of Minato's talismans from a special case.

Immediately, a blinding jade light filled the entire hall, and every member of the Harima clan squinted.

The only one who didn't avert his eyes was Katsuragi. Even though he could feel the effects of the power contained within the talisman, he couldn't see the jade light. Regardless of a person's aptitude at banishing evil spirits, individual differences existed in what people were able to see and hear.

The light filled the high-ceilinged hall and even extinguished the spirits on the other side of partitions.

Most extermination talismans require physical contact with their target to be effective; however, the light from Minato's could flood an area and completely dispel even the strongest evil spirits. It would banish every spirit without a trace, returning them to nothing.

To those that used them, that near indiscriminate lethal power was a godsend. But if there was one flaw to Minato's talismans, it was that particular care needed to go into storing them. It would be easier to use them if they worked just like regular talismans.

No one complained, though, because just having them was a boon.

The evil spirits prowling the first floor had vanished without a trace. The talisman in the cousin's hand had released a wave of divine might radiating out in all directions. And it had only been a tiny amount.

Even so, the talisman had contained enough power to completely transform the stagnant air all around them. The lingering human emotions had been snuffed out like a candle.

Minato's talismans were imbued with a trace amount of divine energy, which not only completely eradicated spirits but purified the area afterward.

Saiga's sisters sighed lightly and set down their arms.

The Harima women visibly relaxed.

"…I'm so glad we have those."

"Yeah, me too."

"I am truly grateful to the Jade One."

Everyone except for the two sisters looked to be on the verge of tears.

The Jade One, of course, referred to Minato. That was what the female members of the Harima clan respectfully called him.

The women assembled around Saiga and Katsuragi.

"Once this wretched festival is over, I'm taking a vacation. No matter what!"

"They call that sort of thing a death flag," Fujino commented bluntly, seeming much livelier than the cousins.

"I just want to relax at home. I'm going to take the longest bath, then work through my list of movies I want to watch. I can't wait!"

"Make sure you drink plenty of water."

"I…want to go back to our family home… I want to eat mom's cooking."

"You should come to our house today. My dad's definitely going to make something good."

Everyone was exhausted.

"This is that last one…," the cousin said, holding the talisman in both hands. After gazing at it for a while, she carefully returned it to the case.

The Spring Evil Spirit Festival is a battle of endurance. They still had to take care of the separate wing of the hospital, then go to another location. Their job was far from over.

"Saiga," his older sister called out, her voice dignified. It was the sort of voice with the power to make anyone obey

unquestioningly.

Saiga automatically straightened his back.

Having silently returned her sword to its scabbard, Tsubaki motioned to the hallway with the pommel.

“Go.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It was his sister’s succinct way of commanding him to go and buy more talismans.

Tsubaki was next in line to lead the family. He couldn’t disobey her orders.

Next to the docile Saiga, his cousins came to life. They crowded around, surrounding him on three sides.

“Saiga, you’re going to see the Jade One, aren’t you?”

“What is he like?”

“It *is* a man, right? Is he good-looking?”

The three of them were all in their twenties, so they were interested in men.

Saiga wasn’t sure how to answer. Minato Kusunoki looked young, and Saiga thought he had a well-proportioned face, but something like whether he was good-looking or not was a matter of personal preference.

“You’ll have to cut him some slack,” Fujino chimed in. “My brother can’t tell whether a person’s pretty or ugly. He likes creepy-cute things, so his tastes are a little, y’know…”

He didn’t need his sister trying to help.

The cousins clearly appeared disappointed, muttering things like, “Oh yeah, that’s right.” Girls really did talk a lot. Saiga had grown up around women, so while it didn’t intimidate him, it had caused him to speak up less.

Fujino stared at Saiga, and she gave him a cheerful smile.

“The omen of death hasn’t shown itself over you today, Brother, so you can relax.”

“…Okay.”

Fujino specialized in prophecy.

Whenever Saiga visited the kami’s home, she almost always saw inauspicious fortunes. Although he sometimes encountered life-threatening situations, Saiga always came back in one piece, so he only half listened to what she said.

“I wish you good fortune in battle,” Fujino whispered, all emotion suddenly gone from her expression.

Although he found it suspicious, Saiga put it out of his mind and looked over his shoulder. Behind him, Katsuragi was pointedly minding his own business.

“Would you mind if I left the rest here to you?”

“Nah, of course not. You just take care of yourself.”

Katsuragi saw Saiga off with a grin.

Chapter 9
The Mysterious Garden

A car stopped at the front gate of the Kusunoki residence.

Sitting in the back seat, Saiga looked at the driver in the rearview mirror.

“You’re sure you don’t want to come with me today?”

“Very sure, thank you.”

Saiga observed his subordinate in the mirror. The man had the body of an athlete, yet nervous tears pricked the corners of his eyes. He had helped carry in gifts on two previous visits to the Kusunoki residence. The rush of divine energy when the front gate opened had almost made him faint.

Once again, Saiga had brought the usual *amazake manju* from Echigoya, so honestly, he didn’t need any help.

“We’ve been to some really tainted places recently, so maybe a little pure air would do you some good, don’t you think? The first time’s always the hardest.”

“No, sir! It’ll shorten my life span!” he vehemently refused.

The driver could see even hidden kami, which had given him an unequaled respect for divine beings. Fearing it would be discourteous toward the kami, he wouldn’t even sit on the veranda of the Kusunoki residence.

“I shall wait right here. Be safe, sir!”

“…I’ll be back soon.”

“Please, take as long as you need.”

The driver looked visibly relieved.

Saiga got out of the car. Just standing this close to the front gate, he sensed that the air already felt different. He instantly felt

purified. Saiga was grateful for the pure air, likely because he had recently spent so much time in places infested by evil spirits.

As always, the camphor trees surrounding the outer wall stood there, as if to guard the house. Sunlight poured through the gaps in the treetops, spotting the area in front of the gate.

Saiga walked down the gravel path and stood before the door. Once there, he paused to settle his nerves and took a few deep breaths. He had visited the Kusunoki residence on several occasions by now, so he was somewhat accustomed to the overpowering divine pressure of the place. Yet even so, he couldn't deny it took a huge toll on his heart.

Saiga looked up and squeezed his hands into fists. In one white-knuckled hand, he carried a plastic bag.

Offerings, check.

He had all his bases covered. Summoning up his courage, Saiga pressed the intercom button.

He'd e-mailed Minato ahead of time, so the answer came promptly.

"Hello, Mr. Harima. Come on in to the garden."

"…Thank you."

Lately, Minato hadn't been coming to the door to greet him.

He bowed deeply, then slid the latticework gate aside. At that very instant, a wave of divine might rushed toward him. The force of it made it difficult for Saiga to keep his eyes open and almost pushed him backward.

Leaning forward at quite a steep angle, Saiga stepped onto the property.

Back in the car, the driver watched Saiga's valiant figure and swallowed hard.

The latticework gate slid quietly shut. The entrance to the kami realm—the kami's house—closed, and with it, the outpouring of dense, chilling divine might ceased. In its wake, a pleasant, pure energy filled the area, and the trees swayed in the breeze, as if laughing joyfully.

Tension fled the driver's body. He slowly opened the window all the way, letting some of the diluted divine energy flow into the car. Only then did he finally take a deep breath.

This amount of divine energy was more than enough to bestow its effects. In fact, higher concentrations weren't good for the body, and even just looking at a kami could damage one's eyes.

The driver turned to face the Kusunoki residence, brought his hands together, and bowed deeply.

"Good luck, Mr. Harima."

He gave thanks to the kami and prayed for the safety of his boss.

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Divine energy pressed down heavily all over Saiga's body, as always. Even simply breathing was painful.

Three steps into the residence, Saiga staggered. He stopped, righted himself, and lifted his head. This was just the initial cleansing. He couldn't call himself a man if he gave up here.

He advanced, step by step. The farther he walked, the closer he came to the place where the kami sat, and the more that pressure intensified. The soles of his shoes left clear footprints in the ground.

It knew.

The Yamagami was particularly fond of Echigoya's *amazake manju*, which always caused its divine energy to swell.

A couple of store names were usually written on the back of a talisman. The list always included Echigoya. It was a constant. The store wasn't too far from the Kusunoki residence, and they never sold out of *amazake manju*, so he could purchase some anytime.

The list was a kindness from Minato Kusunoki. Saiga recognized that. Minato understood that Saiga traveled all over Japan and that he was incredibly busy.

However, as long as he brought these, he had nothing to worry about. They were a foolproof gift.

Saiga didn't necessarily need to bring a gift for these transactions, but he insisted on it. Regardless of whether it was for work or not, he'd been raised to always bring something when visiting a person's house, so showing up empty-handed was out of the question. On top of that, it also acted as a gesture of gratitude for the astonishing deal he'd received for Minato's

exceptionally effective talismans. Gifts like this helped ensure that the arrangement went smoothly.

These days, the payment for the talismans was transferred directly to Minato's bank account.

Saiga took his time walking the few meters along the side of the house.

And then his view suddenly opened up.

A row of sakura trees lined the outer edge of the garden, and cherry blossom petals fluttered through the air. Although the intense pressure of the kami remained, the magnificent garden had almost completely erased it from his mind. They had undoubtedly been created to match the season outside. The first wave of cherry blossoms was currently moving up the Japanese archipelago and would soon leave this area behind.

The garden had always been captivating—mentally, as well as visually—but its appeal seemed to have grown.

Saiga was rooted to the spot, enchanted. He stared speechlessly at the sight. He had experienced this exact same feeling the first time he'd laid eyes upon the garden.

At a glance, the yard seemed nothing more than a regular Japanese garden. The decorations, the pond, the arched bridge, the stone lanterns, the stepping stones across the water—none of it was particularly unique. And yet every part of the garden exuded an intense divine energy and glittered faintly in gold.

If his sisters, who could see kami, were to gaze upon this sight, everything would appear even more vivid, and Saiga was sure they'd be even more awestruck than he was.

Saiga looked down. Not so much as a single petal lay upon the ground.

That only made sense, though, since they disappeared noiselessly once they touched the earth. They weren't real. Most likely, the trees themselves weren't real. He remembered that they'd originally been a different variety.

Even as he gazed at the trees around him, they seemed indistinguishable from real ones and didn't look fake at all. Saiga

shuddered at this reminder of the kami's abilities and at how this place sat isolated from the real world.

However, the biggest reminder by far was the camphor tree that towered in the center of the garden. It had suddenly been added one day, appearing out of nowhere even though its roots seemed to sink deep into the ground, as if it had been growing here for centuries. Green leaves covered its gently swaying branches throughout the year.

Yes, it was moving.

A constant breeze graced the garden, but that wasn't why the tree stirred. It moved of its own accord.

Just now, when Saiga had stepped out into the garden, only the leaves facing him had begun to rustle and sway. It was bizarre, but it wasn't dangerous. In fact, the tree actually seemed friendly, like it was saying hello. Saiga gave it a tiny, almost imperceptible nod each time in response.

The last time Saiga visited, he'd been given a bundle of branches that had fallen from that same divine tree. Minato had handed them over casually, saying that he had more than he knew what to do with.

Regular camphor trees were naturally insect repellent and good at removing odors. The branches Saiga had received smelled much stronger, making him think that nothing could rival their ability to deter insects. But of course, that wasn't all. They also contained an unbelievable amount of evil-repelling power.

He shivered at the true power of the divine tree.

This gorgeous scenery never failed to amaze him whenever he came here. And it wasn't just the view. The scents and the soft breeze on his skin calmed all five of his senses. That's what it felt like.

He also sensed that time worked differently here. Although time seemed to pass at the same rate as on the outside, being here made you forget all about the real world.

The wrinkles on his forehead that had deepened with each passing year faded slightly.

Splish. A spray of water erupted from the surface of the pond. Something had leaped out of the water over the arched bridge and landed back in the pond.

Saiga couldn't see the being. He didn't so much as catch a glimpse of its otherworldly, glittering, silver-blue body. But he could feel its presence. And he sensed other beings as well.

Something was on the large rock that protruded over the pond. Another being dashed by him with incredible speed, so fast it would be difficult to catch. Saiga thought it must be the same one that always stared at him with such an intense, probing gaze.

The first time he'd come here, Saiga hadn't understood what they were. However, everything had become clear when he'd taken a certain talisman back home with him. His father knew all about the different types of kami, and he had determined that the claw print undeniably belonged to the great kami Reiki. He'd raised it up high, weeping with joy.

That talisman stamped with the footprints of both Reiki and the Yamagami still decorated a picture frame in his father's study.

Reiki's blessing of wealth had been immediate; however, the Yamagami's blessing to prevent a person from getting lost had yet to manifest itself.

The door to the stone lantern's flame housing was closed, but Saiga also felt a weak presence emanating from there. It was the being Minato had rescued during the spirit-dispelling job Saiga had asked him to do.

These four presences resembled one another, and Saiga was certain that they were the same type of being.

It could only mean that the Four Spirits lived here.

This residence was truly one of a kind.

Splash. This time, something jumped into the open-air bath, sending a spray of water onto the surrounding rocks.

Looking over in that direction, Saiga could sense two sources of intense divine energy drifting across from the *onsen*. It was probably the two beings that had been flying in the sky the other day. He often sensed those two kami here.

The *onsen* had simply appeared one day, like the camphor tree. The ring of stones surrounding it glittered. He wondered what kind of rocks they were.

He felt the presence of three beings from the veranda. Two headed straight for the rear gate, while the other circled Saiga before following after the others. They must be the kami's kin. Saiga could clearly tell that they weren't anywhere near as powerful as the Yamagami.

They didn't seem to live here, but he often felt their presences.

As Saiga approached the veranda, the caretaker, Minato Kusunoki, stuck his head out from inside the house.

"Mr. Harima, would you prefer your drink cold?"

"Yes, thank you."

"It's no problem," Minato said with a carefree smile.

Saiga had visited here more times than he could count on both hands, so Minato had become quite relaxed around him. He figured Minato must be a naturally friendly guy. His parents operated an *onsen* inn, and he'd helped them out, which explained why he was able to make his guests feel so at home. He was the perfect host.

Minato had a boyish face. The first time they'd met, Saiga had assumed he was a college student of around twenty or so and had been surprised to discover that Minato was only three years younger than he was.

Yet this young man created those incredibly precious talismans.

Minato's natural talents were outstanding, but now that he'd become aware of them and trained them, Saiga couldn't believe just how much faster and more potent the dispelling effects of his talismans were.

Minato looked down at his side.

A giant cushion lay there. It was about the size of a beanbag chair, and Saiga could tell from a glance that the stuffing filled every corner. Custom made, no doubt.

A small indentation depressed the center of the cushion.

"Yamagami, you prefer yours hot, right?"

The deep-purple cushion—the color of nobility—didn't move at all.

Yet Minato nodded and walked back into the house.

A voice that Saiga couldn't hear had answered Minato.

Saiga continued walking toward the veranda, keeping his eyes on the cushion in the center. He couldn't look away, even if he wanted to. It would be rude to avert his eyes from a place that radiated such intense divine energy.

The center of the veranda was the center of this place—the kami realm.

The being that reigned over it looked in Saiga's direction, the lord of the realm blessing him with its attention.

Saiga reflexively tensed.

Shameful as it was, he couldn't forget the fear that had overcome him when he'd once been struck with that divine might. It had been quite traumatic. Still, he steadied himself, to keep his pride.

On the whole, mountain kami are arrogant and harsh. If you treat them with respect, however, then they won't do you any harm. So long as Saiga avoided his previous mistakes involving the kami, it would leave him alone.

Only a few steps separated him from the veranda. The gaze penetrating him shifted to one of his hands. He felt the divine energy intensify, and the weight pressing down on his body lightened. It had seen the gift.

The kami's joy swept over him like a wave.

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Sitting down opposite Minato on the veranda, Saiga bowed his head.

"Thank you, as always, for having me."

He handed Minato the plastic bag containing the *amazake manju*.

The kami's gaze never left it. Saiga felt his body instinctively relax, but he forced himself to remain vigilant, and Minato cast him a sympathetic look.

Pretending not to notice, Saiga picked up his glass. The cool cup comforted him deeply. As he took a sip, an unnatural wind

fanned him from the side.

Minato looked at the cushion next to him. The indentation there kept changing, inching forward.

It was close. It had sneaked closer without his realizing.

“Well, are you happy, Yamagami?”

The wind intensified, buffeting Saiga’s torso.

“…The Yamagami seems very pleased… This *amazake manju* was made by the twelfth master.”

Saiga had noticed it as well. He felt the difference in the Yamagami’s joy each time he came bearing *amazake manju* from Echigoya. Today, he’d received them directly from the hands of the twelfth master himself and was positive the Yamagami would enjoy them.

Minato had once been hesitant to speak with the Yamagami or even recognize its presence in front of Saiga. But not anymore. Saiga understood the situation, so Minato figured there was no reason to hide anything from him and openly spoke with the Yamagami.

“Thank you. We’ll enjoy them later.”

Minato placed the bag on the corner of the table near the Yamagami.

Drops of what was unmistakably drool stained the cushion. It must have been fighting so hard to restrain itself. Saiga always thought this was commendable, but he considered that thought rude to the kami.

Nominally, the offerings were given to Minato, so although Saiga wanted to tell the Yamagami to dig in and help itself, it couldn’t eat them without Minato’s permission. He sympathized with it on that front, but as a guest, there was nothing he could do.

Minato seemed to purposely make the Yamagami wait. On the surface, he seemed like he wouldn’t hurt a fly, yet the man had a surprisingly mischievous streak. Saiga couldn’t see the Yamagami, but Fujino had once told him she’d never seen a mountain kami take any form other than that of a wolf, so he figured that was what it looked like.

It was probably wagging its tail furiously. Saiga thought it seemed rather small now, however. It usually covered the entire cushion.

“Here are the talismans.”

The bundle of washi paper from Minato contained even fewer than usual.

That was understandable, though. It hadn’t even been half a month since his last visit, and these talismans weren’t something that could be made that quickly.

He wondered if they would last until the end of the Evil Spirit Festival. Or, rather, he’d have to make them last. Saiga was examining the thin bundle of papers as he thought, when—

“I also have this for you…”

—Minato held out a piece of paper covered in a grid.

A doubtful look crossed Saiga’s face. The design certainly contained elimination power, but not very much at all. The jade light glowed stronger in some places and weaker in others, as if the light was incapable of staying contained and instead seeped out in a number of places.

“What is it…?”

“…Well, I actually received a new power recently…”

Saiga’s eyes bulged, and Minato looked away.

He didn’t need to ask from whom. It was easy enough to guess that it had come from a kami. The man was surrounded by divine beings, so he must have met a new one somewhere.

Saiga knew someone who was unusually attracted to kami, and Minato Kusunoki had a similar air about him. For one thing, he didn’t want much. He was generous and not overly attached to material goods. It almost felt as if he was from some sort of eternal land, and there was an ephemerality to him that made it seem like he’d vanish the moment you looked away. As he sat here among the cherry blossoms, that impression only seemed stronger.

For that reason, Saiga had thought that Minato’s family must have been overprotective of him growing up.

He’d come to the conclusion that Minato was unselfish because of the trifling amount of money he asked for the talismans. Minato didn’t seem to care much about money or show any interest in making a lot. He seemed content to earn just enough to get by and didn’t even try to hide how he felt on the subject.

Honestly, he could charge a lot more for talismans as powerful as these. Other makers certainly would.

Some *onmyoji* could craft talismans, and some couldn't. And among them, only a limited number could create talismans able to banish evil spirits. Minato should feel proud of his talents. He certainly shouldn't be underselling himself.

The price for his talismans had been set when Minato—who knew nothing of how much they sold for—had asked for the same amount Saiga paid for the ones from his previous supplier. Saiga had been stunned. Minato hadn't shown even the slightest concern that Saiga might lie and try to talk the price down—not that he would do such a thing in front of a kami, of course.

Saiga couldn't have wished for a better deal. Especially since the efficacy of the talismans had improved while the price remained the same.

Saiga silently prompted Minato to continue.

"…I used that new ability to seal the dispelling power into this talisman. It shouldn't activate until it comes into contact with its target. If I make them like this, then you won't need a special container, right?"

"…Yeah. That would be a huge help."

"The Yamagami said it was good enough like this, but… No, Yamagami, I don't doubt what you told me. I don't… Anyway, I still haven't tested it, so I'd like you to use this one as a trial."

Minato grinned. He'd started speaking to the Yamagami halfway through his sentence.

Saiga felt the Yamagami's gaze upon him. That pressure insisted that he would have no problems with the talisman, and Saiga nodded in response.

"Mr. Harima, you look pretty tired… Oh, right! The *onsen*'s right here, so why don't you—? …Uh, actually, never mind."

Minato had cut himself off short, and he tried to cover it up with a smile.

Saiga couldn't tell if he was simply being considerate or if there was some other reason for it.

Minato had stopped short of suggesting the *onsen* because he'd remembered something: The Yamagami Hot Spring bestowed

additional benefits. He'd never be able to forgive himself if Saiga started getting dragged into kami realms.

As he looked at the *onmyoji* sitting up straight across the table from him, Minato thought Saiga appeared more exhausted than ever before. It seemed like the shadow of death was about to descend over him. Minato wasn't great at reading people's faces, though, so he couldn't be certain. At the very least, the bags under Saiga's eyes and his almost translucently pale skin seemed like bad signs. He looked like he might fade away at any time.

The beings surrounding Minato weren't just healthy—they were brimming with life. Reiki circled the pond, Oryu played high jump in the pond, the kirin ran around the garden and leaped up onto the roof, and Fujin and Raijin soaked in the *onsen*. Each and every one of them was overflowing with vitality.

The juxtaposition of that against the grim expression etched on Saiga's face, all while he remained resolute even in his half-dead state, only made him look all the worse.

Minato was glad to see him excited about the new talisman, but that wouldn't do anything to help ease his fatigue.

Just being in the garden soothed tiredness. Even now, Minato could see the tension leave Saiga's body the longer he sat. He should try to keep him here as long as possible.

Minato's parents ran an *onsen* inn. Many people stayed there to heal themselves in the water from the hot spring. Customers would arrive tired, and the longer they stayed, and the more they soaked in the *onsen*, the more visibly refreshed they would become.

Minato had seen it happen with his own eyes time and time again ever since he was a child. That was probably why he almost obsessively embraced the idea that people who had lost their vitality should plunge themselves into an *onsen*.

Yet that only made the current situation such an incredible shame. This absolutely superb *onsen* was right there, and he couldn't let Saiga use it.

"He would not change were he to use it," the Yamagami said offhandedly.

"Huh? He wouldn't?"

"Most likely."

"If you're not sure, we shouldn't risk it."

Even while talking to him, the Yamagami didn't look at Minato. It kept its gaze locked on the table. The kami didn't seem to want to wait, yet Minato wasn't going to let it wolf down Saiga's offering in front of him like it had before.

He'd asked it to try to be patient during these transactions. Thankfully, the martens had gone back home just before Saiga arrived, so the ever-persistent Utsugi wasn't around to nag him. Saiga's visits were short, so the Yamagami wouldn't have to wait long.

Still, for a being that had absolutely no sense of time, the Yamagami's ability to relax and wait patiently had improved remarkably. The forest scent emanating from the Yamagami, however, intensified.

The interval between Saiga's blinks seemed to lengthen.

"…Yamagami…"

Minato couldn't believe it. The Yamagami was blatantly relieving Saiga's fatigue so he'd leave quicker.

"Come, now, the tea has just reached the perfect temperature. This green tea shall pair exquisitely with the *manju*," the Yamagami said, nonchalantly lapping at its tea.

It looked like Minato didn't have much of a choice.

He extended a hand toward Saiga, palm up, and the other man placed his own rough hand on top. They'd done it enough times by now that they didn't need to speak.

As he went to write on the back of Saiga's hand, Minato instinctively reached for his calligraphy brush. Although he was more familiar using his oil-based pen, the brush imbued power better.

"Do you mind if I use this today? That's fine, right, Yamagami?"

"Indeed."

Saiga looked perplexed. He seemed concerned that he might have to be more careful with ink, compared to using an oil-based pen that didn't rub off easily.

"Do I need to worry about washing my hands…?"

"No, I don't think normal water will wash it off."

"…I see. Then go ahead."

Minato really appreciated that Saiga didn't ask any unnecessary questions. He was simple and straightforward. Nothing mattered to him so long as he could fight off evil spirits.

Saiga was also the sort of guy who didn't bother with anything that couldn't harm him. His first encounter with the moving camphor tree had surprised him, but now he answered its greeting with a subtle nod. He was highly adaptable.

Silently and carefully, Minato drew the lattice pattern on Saiga's hand, using both of his powers. It took a little longer than usual. A pattern of silver hexagons formed atop the jade light, sealing it in. The small shapes connected, though they didn't fit together properly.

Able to see the pattern, Saiga watched intently through heavy eyelids. Minato finally drew the last line, and with that, the silver honeycomb pattern covering the jade light disappeared without a sound.

"How does your body feel?"

"Good…"

The fresh ink marks of the lattice pattern were thicker than normal. When Saiga touched the lines, they didn't disappear or smear, and turning his finger over, he saw that nothing had rubbed off on it.

"It's new, so I'm still working on honing this power," Minato said, sounding a bit bashful.

Saiga continued to stare at the back of his hand.

He could see things that Minato couldn't, something Minato envied him for. He knew that he would be able to improve his sealing power faster if he could see it with his own eyes.

But there was no point in worrying about something like that, that he couldn't do anything about. Minato understood that his power was already plenty unique and admonished himself for being too greedy.

Having silently watched the exchange, the Yamagami stood.

"Now I shall grant him some of my power."

"You will…? That's unusual."

"Bring his hand here."

"Sure thing."

Without saying anything to Saiga, Minato moved his hand in front of the Yamagami. The tiny wolf stood on its hind legs, stretched out a front paw as far as it would go, and touched the honeycomb design.

It looked just like a dog being told to shake. Minato's expression softened.

Saiga, on the other hand, was wholly confused. Some small, warm *thing* was pressing against his hand. The moment it touched him, golden particles started to flutter around the point of contact. And when the particles disappeared, he noticed the jade light had vanished completely.

Minato, of course, didn't see any of this. He let go of Saiga's hand and looked at the Yamagami.

"Yamagami, what did you do?"

"I completed your incomplete charm."

"You sealed it?"

"Aye."

"…Sorry you had to do that."

"You may express your gratitude with *amazake manju*."

"Please wait just a little while longer. Saiga, the Yamagami has completely sealed the power in… Uh, hang on. I just realized you won't be able to exterminate evil spirits with this unless you touch them directly."

"…That's how I've always done it."

"Wait, seriously?!"

Minato hadn't known that Saiga exterminated evil spirits by punching them. He'd always imagined that the *onmyoji* took off his glove and got up close to them.

Saiga looked like the sort of person who was quiet, polite, and calm. You would never think that he used violence as a way to fight evil spirits and relieve stress.

Saiga looked pleased as he thanked them. If he fought with his fists, then that wouldn't be an issue. Nodding, Minato thought he needed to rethink his assumptions about Saiga.

Saiga took a long, deep breath.

"We've been really busy these past few days."

He hadn't intended to let that slip out. He must have let his guard down.

"I'm sure. You look rather worn out."

Minato had also mostly dropped the pretense with Saiga. He'd never been a shy person, having worked directly with customers since a young age, and he didn't try to pander to the people he did business with.

“Evil spirits appear more often this time of year.”

“I didn’t realize they had seasons.”

Saiga cast a glance toward the rear gate.

“We cleared out the evil spirits swarming around here not too long ago, but they’ll come back again soon enough.”

He turned his gaze back at Minato.

“The area around here is clear now, but there’s a place nearby where evil spirits gather. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this, but be careful.”

“…I will.”

He must be talking about the pond Minato and the martens had passed by on their way back from the mountain the other day. That was the direction Saiga had been looking in.

“Honestly, he looks as pale as ever.”

“He seems a bit better than before, at least.”

Raijin and Fujin had floated up and out of the *onsen*. They didn’t need towels, though. Not so much as a single bead of water dripped from their feet as they sauntered over to the veranda, their bodies already completely dry.

Raijin walked up to Saiga and examined his profile. The man’s complexion had only just improved, but it suddenly turned pale again. He was sitting as straight as a ruler.

“…He looks really tired. I feel bad for him. Should I give him a little electric shock?”

“If you do, let me know first.”

There was no way to stop the carefree Raijin, but maybe Minato could give Saiga a bit of a warning. Minato had experienced Raijin’s electricity before. The shock had coursed through his entire body, but it had certainly worked.

It couldn’t hurt to try.

“…Wait, when you did that to me, it was because I was more sore than tired.”

“Here I go!”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll work… Probably. Saiga, Lord Thunder is saying that he’s going to give you an electric shock.”

“…What?”

Raijin stood behind the trembling Saiga, a huge grin on his face.

As Saiga let out a silent scream, the kirin dashed away, kicking up dust around the veranda. The fluttering cherry blossoms near

the gust of wind joined in, swirling in circles.

Reiki walked the perimeter of the pond at a speed no ordinary turtle could achieve. Oryu soared high above the water, besting its own high jump record. The crown of the camphor tree swayed, dancing with the flurry of cherry blossom petals in the air. Only the atmosphere around the stone lantern seemed different as the light inside flickered faintly.





Chapter 10
That Eternal Radiance

One of Minato's daily tasks was watering.

Leaves rustled in the breeze. The large vortex of wind swept a mist of sacred water up to every branch of the happily swaying camphor tree. Not a single cherry blossom petal was caught in the gale. For some unknown reason, the shower of cherry blossom petals paused whenever Minato watered.

The trunk of the camphor tree had already grown to over a meter in diameter, and the roots spread uninhibited across the surface of the ground. Trying to water them with Minato's tin watering can would have been quite the chore. So instead, Oryu splashed water out of the pond, and Minato swirled it into a vortex with his wind power and carried it from the roots to the crown.

The bright rays of sunshine. The clear sacred water. They helped the camphor tree grow quickly… Except it didn't.

The camphor tree hadn't changed at all since Oryu used its power to help it grow. It was only slightly taller than the roofline of the single-story house. The crown had spread out in a wide sphere, as tends to happen with camphor trees when nothing surrounds them, and the dense canopy shone with a vibrant green.

Even though it had stopped growing, one glance was enough to tell that the tree was healthy. Its branches swayed lazily of their own volition, and it even played with the *shimenawa* rope held up by its lowest limbs.

The camphor tree let the wind enveloping it rustle its leaves, yet none of them were caught in the gust. Lately, the leaves and

branches had only been falling on certain days, which made tidying up the yard easy. The camphor tree truly was wonderful.

"Is that about enough?"

Rustle, rustle. The tree shook vigorously.

"You got it."

Not yet. Just a little bit more.

Somehow, Minato had come to understand what it was saying. He happily granted its modest request and continued to water it with his wind until the tree had drunk its fill.

It was extremely helpful to have a tree that told you when it had had enough water.

Soon after, a branch on one side of the trunk waved.

"Okay."

The Yamagami had told Minato that that meant the tree was satisfied and that he should go and water the other trees.

Speaking of which, the Yamagami had gone out—or, he guessed he should say, gone home, which was a rarity. It would come back soon, though. He couldn't help but think of this as the place it "came back" to.

Minato finished watering the other trees, and the very top of the camphor tree shook once. With that, the cherry trees burst forth with a shower of petals.

Minato looked up from the foot of the camphor tree.

"You're kind of like everyone's leader, aren't you, Camphor?"

The branches protruding from its thick trunk swayed all the way down to their bases. These writhing, dancing branches looked more animal than plant.

The gourd-shaped pond took up about one-third of the garden.

Sitting atop the large rock that jutted out over the pond, Minato gazed into the water. White gravel glowed between the green reeds. Nothing muddied the water, and no moss grew in it. The water was tremendously clear today, as it was every day. And Minato didn't even need to do anything to clean it.

Still, that didn't mean he could neglect it. He checked it every day. After all, the Ryugu Gate had suddenly appeared from out of nowhere. Although it wasn't dangerous, as the caretaker of the

house and garden, Minato would sound stupid if he said he hadn't known it was there.

The smaller side of the pond, Reiki's home, contained a wide variety of aquatic plants that swayed playfully. A spring bubbled up directly beneath the arched bridge. The source was, of course, the Yamagami's mountain, yet even with an active spring inside it, the pond never overflowed. Who knew how that worked?

This place just keeps getting more and more mysterious.

Minato stared down into the water. There, at the bottom of the pond, stood the Ryugu Gate. The beautiful jewel embedded in the roof seemed to shine with all the colors of the rainbow, yet it wasn't glowing at the moment.

He didn't see Reiki, who until yesterday had been single-mindedly running laps around the pond, and he supposed it must have gone through the Ryugu Gate somewhere.

"…Is it out seeing someone? So long as it's not bothering them, I guess it's—"

The jewel flashed. Stopping midsentence, Minato stared at the Ryugu Gate.

Light permeated the water, expanding to form a dome on the surface—a sign that something was coming through the lower plaster-coated portion of the gate.

Minato had never witnessed it up close before, but this time, he'd happened to be in the right place at the right time.

He stared at the entrance to the gate. A pair of claws emerged, the familiar pearly yellow of Reiki. It was a relief to see the turtle return so soon.

However, when it was halfway through, the tip of its shell caught on the upper part of the gate. Reiki struggled, flailing its front arms and head. It could neither get out nor move backward.

"Hold on a second, I'm—"

But just as Minato was about to jump in, a pearly yellow membrane peeled off the part of its shell caught on the gate.

"What?!"

Finally free, Reiki continued swimming forward, leaving the membrane behind. It glided to the surface and poked its head out of the water. Then it heaved itself onto the large rock and looked up at Minato.

Its body was now a completely different color.

Reiki's head and legs had a whiteish hue. On its back wasn't a pointed shell anymore but what could only be described as a mountain, complete with rocks, trees, and a stream. It even had a waterfall.

"I saw Bird's true form, so I sort of knew what to expect, but that's awesome."

Reiki closed its eyes, looking satisfied. It moved to its regular position next to Minato and quickly went about drying its shell, the endless trickle of water on the mountain presenting a profound mystery.

The restlessness it displayed up until yesterday had vanished. Reiki was back to acting like its old self. Its string of bizarre behavior of late must have been because it was about to molt.

Minato's face softened, finally understanding the cause of this unusual activity. He wanted Reiki to relax and take it easy. That was what made the turtle who it was.

The normally serene garden had been unusually busy, and that had also affected Minato's mood.

But what about the carapace it shed? Minato couldn't just leave that where it was—it glittered and clashed with the surroundings.

The Four Spirits are miraculous beasts. They differed from regular animals in almost every way imaginable, so their husks probably wouldn't go bad or rot.

Minato looked at the gate and the membrane attached to it. He thought he saw something poke out of the entrance.

He leaned forward. He couldn't quite make it out, but it appeared to be shaped like the fin of a fish. If he wasn't mistaken…

"…It almost looked like a gossamer silk gown…"

Minato waited for a while but didn't see it again. Perhaps the beings on the other side in that famous palace had also gotten worried.

"Turtle, can I collect that husk you left behind?"

Its eyes still closed, Reiki nodded to Minato. Then it turned its head to the other side of the pond toward Oryu.

Minato followed its gaze. Beyond the arched bridge, the dragon's elegant body slipped partway out of the water. Oryu didn't seem as rambunctious today, either. It appeared silently without a sound or a ripple, as though ascending into the sky.

The bluish-green body. The white bat-like wings. The two golden horns, and the three golden claws on each of its feet.

The Oryu had made its appearance, the very image of a majestic dragon kami.

It turned its slitted eyes toward Minato and approached, beating its wings slowly, a pearly blue skin clutched in its three claws.

It stopped in front of the stunned Minato, proffering the gift.

Its eyes seemed to be telling him to take it.

"Th-thank you."

The skin glittered so brightly that, honestly, he was a little afraid to touch it. But he knew the kami wouldn't give him anything harmful.

Minato looked worried as he reverently accepted the gift in both hands from the delighted-looking Oryu. And with that, the presentation ceremony was completed smoothly.





The skin felt incredibly thin and smooth to the touch. Holding it up to the light, he could see faintly through to the other side. He tried gently pulling it taut, but it didn't seem likely to rip or tear. It felt tough. Spreading it out, Minato could see distinct areas for horns, whiskers, and wings.

It was obvious it had come from a dragon.

If anyone found this skin, it would cause a huge commotion. It should never leave the house. Reiki's husk would also clearly be recognized as belonging to a divine being. He couldn't think of any normal turtle that had a pointy, mountain-shaped shell. He should treat it the same way he did Oryu's skin and take great care of them both.

"One of my children told me that humans put discarded shells in something called a wallet. Those from my children don't grant any special benefits, but mine will attract money. He should put it in his wallet."

"He wouldn't like that."

"Why not?"

"It would bring all kinds of luck, along with money, and rain down on him like a flood wherever he went. It's too much for one human being. It would disrupt the balance of power in the world. I am not much better, but you, Dragon, are far too out of touch."

Minato quietly watched the conversation unfolding between Reiki and Oryu, not understanding any of it. Oryu was disappointed, but Minato couldn't tell from its stoic face.

"I thought such a rare item would make a good gift…"

"And it does. It should be fine if he only puts a part of it in his wallet… Perhaps just the whiskers."

"Why just the whiskers? Why not the entire head?"

Minato felt like Reiki and Oryu wanted to tell him something. He couldn't grasp their true intentions, though, and assumed they were entrusting their husks to him.

"Turtle, I promise to take good care of yours, too."

Minato decided to discuss this with the Yamagami.

As the two auspicious beasts began to relax on the large rock, Minato spread their glittering husks out beside them. Unlike their bodies, the husks were wet and required drying.

Oryu seemed much calmer now. In the garden, the serene curtain of cherry blossoms danced through the air.

The kirin, who'd been tearing paths through those petals all the time lately, was also absent. It was the most rambunctious, so Minato worried about that little troublemaker.

"I hope it's not bothering anybody…"

It could be up to anything. A bamboo broom in one hand, Minato approached the arched bridge—and stopped dead in his tracks.

Countless glowing objects lay scattered across the bridge, the curved stone path speckled by a pattern of pearly cream dots.

He picked up one by his feet.

It was a scale. About the size of his thumbnail, it looked similar to the scales of a fish scale.

"Based on the color, it looks like it came from the kirin…"

It didn't seem like it had shed its skin, though. He wanted to see its body, but where was it?

Minato suddenly sensed a presence behind him. Turning around, he saw it. The kirin gazed coolly at him, as if it had been there the whole time.

It looked like it had finished molting, or whatever you called leaving scales everywhere. Its entire body was surrounded by a yellow glow, and the long mane down its back shone black, white, red, blue, and yellow. Parts of its body flickered in a similar way to the ho'o's.

It hadn't grown—its head still barely reached Minato's knee—but it now seemed that little bit more imposing. The same opalescent glimmer radiated from its body as from the other three auspicious beasts.

The kirin beckoned with its front paw, and the scales scattered on the bridge lifted into the air and assembled in front of Minato. There were enough to fill both his hands.

"…I'll look after them… But just having them won't turn me into a lord or anything…will it?"

The kirin blinked its large eyes, then narrowed them into slits.

"I am not asking you to look after them; I'm giving them to you. They are freshly shed, so it matters not to me what you do with them."

"Couldn't you find a better way to phrase that?"

“You think so? It’s the truth, though, is it not?”

The kirin replied unconcernedly to Reiki’s chiding, when—

“Who knows what sort of effects they have?”

“Oryu, please stay out of this!”

—the kirin bared its fangs at Oryu.

Minato had been taken aback the first time he’d seen Oryu and the kirin roughhousing, but he was already used to it. It happened that frequently.

He watched them, assuming they were playing like always, but something seemed different this time. Every other time, they’d ended up locking horns. But not today.

A flash of light erupted from Oryu as it hovered over the large rock, shooting straight up into the sky.

Minato looked up in disbelief.

Clouds rapidly blanketed the clear sky. Oryu’s immense power had created a blanket of clouds large enough to completely cover the property.

Apparently, molting had increased its power.

With the sun completely obstructed, the sunlight dimmed, yet Minato could still see clearly by the opalescent light emitted by the three auspicious beasts.

Rain began to fall, pouring down from above the kirin’s head. But the kirin quickly ran off. It darted erratically across the ground, and the rain followed it, falling only where it treaded.

“…Oh, okay. It looks harmless enough.”

He should consider himself lucky so long as lightning didn’t strike.

Minato had heard that the auspicious beasts didn’t have any fighting capabilities. Localized storms soaked the ground in places, but they didn’t damage anything, and the kirin had run everywhere but near Minato, most likely not wanting to get him wet.

The kirin had made its way up and down the camphor tree, soaking it completely, but the tree played happily with the raindrops.

“I guess I didn’t need to water today, after all…”

The rain hadn’t just soaked the camphor tree but the entire garden. It would be impossible to sweep up like this. Minato went to pack away his bamboo broom, but the camphor tree gave a

vigorous shake. Caught off guard by the unusually large movement of the tree, Minato looked back, as if struck.

The kirin sat at the very top of the camphor tree, its face screwed tight, as if it felt it had messed up.

Looking toward the large rock, Reiki shook its head in exasperation and sighed. Oryu's whiskers stood on end; it was still focused on the kirin.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

Not having an interpreter at times like this was really tough.

The camphor tree twisted its body. Although it should have been rigid, the trunk was unbelievably flexible, able to be manipulated like molten candy. It was bizarre behavior, but the camphor tree didn't look as if it was in pain. If anything…

"…Are you enjoying this?"

The branches shook, almost as if they were dancing joyously.

The next moment, the trunk extended upward and outward. It surged higher, its branches stretching toward the sky, and the number of leaves grew exponentially, like flowers blooming.

At this point, the giant camphor tree was easily higher than the roof, and it was still going. It seemed to be enjoying this almost too much, like a cat drunk on silvervine.

The trunk was now almost three meters wide.

"I really hope it doesn't get any bigger than this," Minato said in a panic.

But at that moment, the *shimenawa* rope snapped. Minato had made it long enough to hang with plenty of slack, but it hadn't been enough.

Suddenly, the tree stopped growing.

Minato was overcome by relief, and only the leaves began to tremble slightly.

It's sad…

Sensing its sorrow, Minato approached the camphor tree, and the leaves just above his head shook.

"Did you think I was angry? It's okay, I wasn't, but is your body all right? Do you still want to keep growing?"

It felt like the tree was earnestly apologizing to him.

It's going to be hard to come to an understanding like this.

As Minato considered how to go about it, Reiki appeared at his side. It passed by him, crawled over the thick roots of the tree,

and worked its way slowly toward the trunk. Once it got there, Reiki gently stroked the tree to comfort it, and the camphor tree stopped trembling.

He wasn't sure if Reiki had persuaded it to stop or had soothed it, but either way, the camphor tree seemed to have calmed down.

Reiki had employed the wisdom of its many years. Or no, perhaps it was the wisdom that came from being a turtle. It applied either way. Among the Four Spirits, Reiki was the oldest.

Minato looked up at the camphor tree. How tall had it grown? It was probably in the top ten tallest camphor trees in Japan.

"…The best thing to do now would be to wait for the Yamagami."

The Yamagami could redecorate the yard as it saw fit. And it had its own personal vision for the garden, so it would surely do something about this.

As Minato gazed at the tree, a branch hanging close to the ground extended out. Its tip picked up the fallen *shimenawa* rope and offered it to Minato. Taking it in his hands, he saw that the glow hadn't diminished, but it had been brutally torn apart.

They couldn't use it anymore. And it certainly wouldn't fit around the camphor tree at its current size.

"I'll make you a new one."

The branch stroked the *shimenawa* rope, then retracted.

The camphor tree just kept getting stranger.

"You'll end up walking around soon."

The leaves above him rustled noisily. Its enlarged trunk and canopy made the garden feel tiny, but Minato didn't mind, so long as the camphor tree was okay.

Suddenly, he was overcome with worry that he might not be able to sell a house with such a strange, gigantic tree.

Clack, clack.

Minato suddenly heard a strange sound. It had come from the rear gate.

He went toward the back of the property, where he found the Yamagami on the other side of the gate. It was still tiny, yet as imposing as always. It sat pristinely, with its chest puffed out.

“I heard some sort of strange sound just now.”

“It was I, tapping the doorplate.”

“Why’d you do that again…?”

“The power has almost vanished.”

“Oh, it has?”

Minato stood before the doorplate. It was still new and smelled of wood.

“I just replaced it a month ago, though…”

Minato couldn’t see it, but the doorplate had almost run out of spirit-banishing power.

He took it off and ran his fingers over the word KUSUNOKI carved into it. Without its power, it was just a regular doorplate. It was a waste, but he had no other choice but to dispose of it.

“Perhaps I should split it to inform you of such.”

“If you do, then can you break it straight down the middle? Like our *doji* used to do?”

The *doji*, a *zashiki-warashi* house spirit that inhabited Minato’s family home, had split their doorplates perfectly in half. Its skill was at the level of a true craftsman.

“I shall do so with the next one,” the Yamagami said with a deep chuckle as it passed through the gate.

But it suddenly stopped. It was looking, of course, at the camphor tree that had grown as tall as a six-story building.

“I returned because I felt an unusual presence. So it was this.”

“You knew?”

“Of course.”

It squinted up at the giant tree.

“Is the camphor tree okay?”

“It is as healthy as ever. Although it does regret having grown so excessively large.”

“There was nothing we could do about it. It was an act of God.”

“Aye, that it was.”

They both looked toward the pond.

Oryu’s eyes poked out from the middle of the water, looking incredibly sheepish. Behind it, the kirin perched on the handrail of the arched bridge, gazing away with feigned ignorance.

With this strange event having settled down for the time being, Minato glanced inside the stone lantern.

The ho'o had heard none of the commotion going on in the garden and remained sound asleep. It had stayed locked up inside there for the past few days, but the flickering pearly pink light still shone brightly through the glass.

If it kept resting like this, it should return to its original form soon. Minato hoped the ho'o would have that same caring yet strict personality it had before.

He quietly wandered away.

○

Minato finished installing a brand-new doorplate on the rear gate and stepped back a few paces. He crossed his arms, checking his work.

He frowned, completely unsatisfied.

He didn't like how it had come out. The lines were different thicknesses, and the balance of the letters seemed off. Something this poorly made didn't belong on the impressive *sukiya* gate.

Minato had been making doorplates since elementary school, so he was already at the level of a craftsman and couldn't compromise on the quality of his work.

"…I already made it…but I don't like it…"

Truth be told, very few people ever actually saw the doorplate on the Kusunoki residence's rear gate. It was mostly just the animals that stopped by every now and then to visit the Yamagami household.

Yet the craftsman in Minato couldn't allow such an unsightly doorplate to adorn his home. Even if it was hidden at the back gate and no one ever saw it.

"The Yamagami made me laugh when I was making this, and the knife slipped…"

Minato pursed his lips. He couldn't blame anyone else, kami or otherwise. If he'd lost his focus, it meant that he still needed to practice. He certainly couldn't blame the Yamagami, who'd been lying belly-up on his cushion, emitting a constant commentary on sweets.

Just now, that same kami had made a beeline for the veranda, collapsed onto its back, and fallen asleep. Sleeping there with its stomach bared to the sky, the kami made Minato think that the tiny wolf let its guard down too easily, yet he also couldn't help but feel genuinely happy that it was comfortable enough to relax like that.

Minato had once taken care of his neighbor's dog when he was a child. He'd been bursting with excitement, wanting to play with it and take it for walks. But he remembered bitterly that when it finally showed up, it hadn't been the least bit friendly, nor had it relaxed around him. The dog would growl whenever Minato looked at it, and bark and snarl to threaten Minato whenever he got close. It went without saying that he hadn't been able to play with it or even take it on walks.

The fact that the dog's rejection had been so unexpected only hurt him all the more.

"The Yamagami isn't a dog, though."

After spending so much time together, he couldn't see the Yamagami as anything but a wolf. Yet he wondered if people unfamiliar with wolves would immediately assume it was a normal wolf if they came across it unexpectedly, like Minato had.

Its front legs were a little farther back than a dog's, and it had more muscular jaws and higher cheekbones that angled its eyes a little. The curve from its forehead to its nose was smoother as well.

Only someone who knew a fair bit about wolves would be able to tell the difference.

"…It's been almost a year already since then…"

Minato gazed at the house and garden through the rear gate. The garden looked so radically different from the bleak state it had been in when he'd first seen it. The house had been practically new when he'd moved in, and even now, a year later, very little had changed. The colors hadn't faded, nor were there any signs of deterioration.

Probably because it had become a kami realm.

A strong wind suddenly swept across Minato, interrupting his thoughts. It ruffled his hair and caused the trees on the mountain to shake violently. It blew a second time, then a third, powerful enough to make him stagger.

“…That wind sure is strong today.”

It deformed the tops of the camphor trees encircling the wall.

Those camphor trees weren’t sacred trees imbued with divine power. They were regular trees. Taller than a two-story house, they had towered over the sacred camphor tree in the garden at first, though the opposite was now true.

He was buffeted by another powerful gust. Minato closed his eyes and looked away, protecting himself from the sand and dust carried on the wind. It was unusually strong today.

The doorplate would be fine for the time being; Minato would replace it after he’d made a new one. The previous one had needed replacing after just a month, so this one would probably also have a short life span. In which case, he still had a little while.

The wind eased, and Minato opened his eyes.

The air in front of him warped.

A distortion about the size of the rear gate loomed before Minato, pulling him toward it. It was terrifyingly powerful. Although Minato resisted with all his might, he felt his feet being dragged forward, leaving lines gouged out of the ground.

The distortion pulsed. One more step, and Minato would be dragged inside.

Beyond that blur, he could see the beautiful garden of the gods. That ever-peaceful garden he knew and loved was so close. But if he got sucked into the distortion in front of him, Minato would be taken somewhere against his will. That was what his instincts were telling him.

The toes of his shaking shoes, now soiled with dirt, passed over the edge of the boundary.

Just then, a blade of wind descended from above. Completely different from his own wind power, the sharp gust cut the distortion in half with tremendous force. The entrance to the kami realm had been eradicated.

Nothing remained of it. The realm had disappeared without leaving so much as a trace.

The force pulling him forward suddenly vanished, causing Minato to fall on his backside.

"Made it just in the nick of time!" Raijin's cheerful voice called down from above, bringing with it both relief and exhaustion.

Looking up, Minato saw Raijin and Fujin floating above him. He knelt on the ground, faced the wind kami, and bowed.

"Th-thank you so much."

"Don't mention it. That said, it's about time."

"What do you mean?" Minato asked, looking up.

Raijin raised his index finger and floated closer.

"You have to be able to get rid of them on your own!"

"…On my own…? You want me to destroy kami homes…?"

"That's right. We won't always be here to help you, and we can't follow you around all the time. Some of them are seriously dangerous."

What sort of a home would be *seriously dangerous*? Minato broke into a cold sweat thinking about the kami realm he had narrowly avoided being sucked into.

Fujin descended to hover just above the ground. He looked at Minato, who was still kneeling.

"You seem to have really improved with your new power, so we thought it was time to see what you can do."

"…How do you know?"

"Don't worry about the doorplate. The only reason it didn't turn out well is because the Yamagami talks so much in its sleep. It's working just fine."

"…How do you know all that?"

"The Four Spirits might look cute when they play together, but they say some really vulgar things at times. A bit of advice for you: Don't get fooled by how they look."

"…Thank you for the warning."

"Their husks won't go bad, but you should dry them out in the sun every once in a while. Oh, right, they weren't asking you to look after them but giving them to you. You should carry around little pieces of them as well. That would make Oryu, in particular, very happy."

"Okay, I'll do that. You're really just telling me all this…?"

"Well, you should've been able to figure out this much by yourself…," Fujin mumbled, but Minato didn't quite hear him.

“By the way,” he continued, with a carefree smile, “it looks like the camphor tree’s gotten too big.”

Later, when retelling the story, Minato would say that Fujin’s smile held a ferocity he’d never seen before.

Minato had trained his wind power by cutting down a forest’s worth of trees in a kami realm created by the martens. He hadn’t practiced making wind blades since then, though, choosing instead to focus on less destructive techniques. That was how he’d gained his rejuvenating wind technique.

However, that gentle breeze couldn’t destroy realms created by kami. It would never even scratch them, let alone completely cut through the kami realms.

By its very nature, the power of a human could never hope to match that of a kami. Yet Minato’s wind contained a little bit of Fujin’s power—just a tiny amount to bring out Minato’s own unique way of wielding it.

“I was curious to see what sort of winds he would use.”

“Gentle winds suit him better, so he went off on an entirely different path to you.”

“Yeah. That said, he doesn’t have much of a choice, now that he has to deal with kami.”

Fujin and Raijin chatted as they watched Minato standing by the sacred camphor tree. Although it was a lighthearted conversation, a hint of sadness laced their words.

Minato turned away from the house, a perplexed look on his face.

He’d found himself here after obeying a smiling Fujin, who’d pointed to this spot and told him to stand there. Fujin and Raijin had then flown to the other side of the camphor tree, stopping directly above it on their way to discuss something. Minato hadn’t been able to hear what they’d been talking about.

The veranda was a few steps behind him. The Yamagami lay curled up there, snoozing. Three of the auspicious beasts lined the large rock, watching him with solemn expressions.

“We’re going to cut down the camphor tree.”

Hearing Fujin's voice come from directly beside him, Minato widened his eyes in surprise. He'd never known the kami could use his wind to carry his voice to a specific person.

Although Minato was surprised by the sudden volume of Fujin's voice, what shocked him the most were the words.

"Hang on a second! We don't have to cut it down! It's really healthy! All we need to do is trim some of the branches at the top, right?!"

"It gets in the way when it's this big."

"No! It doesn't! Not at all!"

"Really? But it draws too much attention."

It was true. Minato couldn't deny it. The camphor tree looked incredibly imposing when viewed from outside the Kusunoki residence. The sight of it growing so large, so quickly, must have been incredibly bizarre to anyone watching from a distance. They had only avoided causing a commotion because no one else lived in the area.

That said, people might already be talking about it somewhere and he just wasn't aware of it. Regardless of how much freedom the current owner had given him, there was no way they'd be okay with something like this.

"The camphor tree says we can cut it down."

Minato hesitantly looked up at the tree. It waved its leaves and branches, just like always. He might not know exactly what it was feeling, but it didn't seem scared.

If anything, it looked excited. The branches swayed, and its body twisted.

"All right, then, get to work and chop it up."

"…What?"

The camphor tree stood up straight and went completely still, then—

CRACK! It split down the middle.

Minato screamed. He hadn't had enough time to mentally prepare himself. The camphor tree he'd taken such diligent care of had been cut in half, from the *top*. Why there? Trees are typically cut down at the base of the trunk.

The tree began to creak and lean away from the bottom of the trunk. But for some inexplicable reason, it was only happening

on one side. That half of the tree toppled toward Minato. If it kept falling, it would crash into the roof.

"See, if you don't hurry up and chop it down, it's going to crush the house you're looking after, Mr. Caretaker."

This was incredibly cruel. Fujin's carefree tone sounded like he was talking about yesterday's weather. How could he be so heartless? Well, he wasn't human, for one thing, but a little *oni*.

Minato released a gust of wind. The blade shape didn't have enough force behind it, though. It was too slow, too blunt. It wouldn't stop it in time. All Minato could do was create a cushion of wind to catch the tree.

Leaves fell from the violently shaking branches, showering the stone lantern where the ho'o slept.

"Watch out, the other side's going now."

The remaining half of the tree, which had been standing upright until now, began to fall. It was inexplicably headed for the pond, where Reiki, Oryu, and the kirin were. Yet they just sat there, still, not showing any indication of trying to escape. The only conclusion Minato could come to was that the directions the trunks had fallen in had been deliberately chosen.

Regardless, he released a flurry of gusts to catch the falling tree.

Minato grew more and more flustered. All his practice so far had been conducted at his own pace. The Yamagami had always been there with him, but it just watched, never telling him what to do and never rushing him. It had decided to give Minato complete control over his training.

He'd never been in such a serious situation before.

"The tree's already been split, so we might as well put it to good use."

Fujin unleashed a blade of wind at one of the tree halves hanging in the air, cutting it right down the middle. Yet Minato's wind blade, which he'd fired at the other half, wasn't sharp enough. He was still doubting himself.

The branches of the camphor tree no longer shook. It wasn't even trying to move them.

It had just been so lively and happy, too…

"Freshness is life. Come on, hurry up and cut it," Fujin declared, and Minato looked over to see that the leaves had started to wither.

Minato was conflicted, and Raijin floated up by his side. An index finger pressed to his lower lip, he cocked his head and smiled maliciously.

“If you can’t do it, shall I?”

“I’ll do it!”

He couldn’t let that happen. Minato was positive that Raijin would burn it all to ash.

The wood of camphor trees has long been used to make furniture like dressers and cabinets because of its potency in keeping insects at bay. And that wasn’t all—it was also used for shrines, temples, statues, and carvings.

This divine camphor tree was far superior to normal camphor trees, so Minato was certain its wood would also be exceptional.

Am I really going to let the remains of my child go to waste?

Minato’s expression changed.

He formed a swarm of wind blades around him, then threw them all together in the direction of the tree. Each blade was small, no larger than his palm, yet they were much sharper than his previous attempts. The tree’s numerous branches and smaller shoots tumbled to the ground, and the next second, the trunk split in half.

As it did, the color of Minato’s jade blades began to change. The edges of the blades took on a blue hue, and as the color intensified, the blades became sharper.

The jade color was unique to Minato, while the blue was Fujin’s. Minato had managed to bring out more of the wind kami’s divine might.

The small, square pieces of wood fell to the ground, one after the next.

Fujin and Raijin smiled, their expressions so similar, they could have been mirror images of each other. On the veranda behind them, the Yamagami, enthroned on its cushion, along with the ho’o, Reiki, Oryu, and the kirin, all watched silently as Minato controlled his divine might-enveloped wind.

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Only the stump of the camphor tree remained.

Standing before it, Minato stared at the jagged surface of the cut. He gently shaved off all the sharp edges with his wind blades, as if caressing the tree.





Minato put a hand against the surface of the round stump. It felt slightly soft to the touch. Camphor was pliable, which also meant it scratched easily.

“Maybe we can use it as a table…”

Scratches would add character, but he would want to maintain its current pristine condition as long as possible.

As Minato pondered on this, the roots running across the ground quickly started to shrivel, and the stump began to wither and decay. The wood pieces piled up in one corner of the garden didn’t change, only what was still connected to the earth.

“Why are they the only things that didn’t change…?”

“Well, it’s a sacred tree.”

Torika had once said those same words to him, yet now they came from the Yamagami’s mouth. Looking over his shoulder, Minato saw the tiny wolf trotting toward him.

They stood side by side, watching the stump transform before their very eyes. It eventually withered into something indistinguishable from its original shape, before sinking into the earth.

The Yamagami walked into the center of that empty space, then began to dig with its front paws, soon extracting a small black object. It beckoned him closer, and Minato picked the object up.

It was a black seed. Studying it in his palm, Minato recognized it.

“…It’s the same one I planted earlier… It turned back into a seed.”

“The tree grew slightly too quickly, so it wished to return to its previous form. Plant it again, and it shall grow large once more.”

“Okay. Next time, it should take its time to grow.”

The seed vibrated when Minato stroked it with his finger. He smiled happily.

A breeze blew. The divine might-infused wind lifted up the withered debris and carried it toward the mountain.

As he watched it go, Minato started blinking more rapidly.

“…I’m suddenly…really sleepy.”

“You overtaxed yourself using your power.”

“…It’s been a while…since I’ve felt like this… A long while.”

“You should sleep.”

Not even able to reply, Minato headed toward the house, the camphor seed still in his hand.

Chapter 11
An Unwanted Invitation

Something seemed off with the Yamagami.

This kami had always acted and spoken peculiarly, but today, it was behaving particularly bizarrely. It rolled back and forth on top of its cushion, first to one side, then to the other. Once it reached the edge, it would roll right back again. It was surprisingly restless. It usually stayed in one spot, looking like some sort of sacred object.

“Yamagami, what’s going on?”

“…Hmph.”

“Are you itchy?”

“Nay, I am not.”

The Yamagami maintained a fluffy winter coat throughout the year. Minato had thought it might be time to finally shed that thick fur, but apparently, he was wrong.

Growling slightly, the tiny wolf rolled onto its back and started to squirm around. It certainly looked itchy.

“…I cannot seem to settle down.”

“Oh, I know. You’re going to grow soon.”

“Hmm.”

The Yamagami abruptly sat up and started scratching its neck with a hind leg. That was unusual. It didn’t usually behave so much like a dog.

Minato was truly grateful that such scratching didn’t result in even a single dislodged hair. He’d just cleaned the veranda.

“I was just thinking it was about time I should make some tea. Would you like *yokan* with it today? It’s *sakura yokan*, made just

for spring. It's a seasonal delicacy, so I bought it thinking you might enjoy—"

"No."

Minato stopped cold on his way into the house.

"N-no…? You mean you don't want any…?"

"Aye."

"…Seriously? You, with your huge sweet tooth, are saying no to *wagashi*? B-but you're always so eager to eat anything with smooth bean paste…"

"You are too persistent. I do not always crave sweets. I shall eat it later."

Minato couldn't believe it.

Dumbstruck, he looked up toward the mountain. Nothing seemed to be amiss. It just sat there quietly, showing no signs of erupting.

Sitting still, the Yamagami looked at the visibly relieved Minato.

"I shall not erupt anytime soon."

"…I hope not."

Minato turned back toward the Yamagami, but his gaze was too high. Looking down, he finally met the eyes of the tiny wolf. The Yamagami wasn't its usual size, so Minato invariably found himself looking at the wrong point in space.

"You seem unable to grow accustomed to this size."

"…Seems like it. It feels strange seeing you so small, but you'll go back to normal soon, right?"

"…In due time."

The tiny wolf rolled around on the cushion again.

"You are cute, though…"

Still, Minato couldn't quite relax while he was larger than the Yamagami and looking down at it.

—Hoh, hoh, kekyo!

As Minato continued toward the kitchen, a lone warbler, finally having learned to sing on its own, called out to him.

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Minato exited the rear gate, carrying a new doorplate.

He had no complaints this time about the glossy, inky black characters on the wooden block. The craftsman in Minato was

very satisfied with the result.

The doorplate had been made from the wood of the sacred camphor tree, and it gave off a strong scent. Though, of course, the smell wasn't its only unique trait. It also absorbed power much more easily than the wood Minato regularly used to make his doorplates and was much easier to carve.

Newly felled trees typically need time to dry before use—but this had been a sacred tree. The wood from it differed from normal wood, and he'd been able to use it for the doorplate right away. As he'd feared, the previous doorplate had reached its limits and exhausted all of its power after a few days, so Minato was replacing it with the camphor tree doorplate he'd only just finished making.

A deep crack ran down the center of the current doorplate. The Yamagami had split it, as promised.

"That's amazing. It has split as perfectly as the *doji* used to."

A white tail swished on the veranda.

Minato removed the doorplate and attached the new one.

Ting. A high-pitched sound rang out, and jade, gold, and silver—the colors of the camphor tree—raced across the wall. Once the house had been sealed in all four directions, it rose into the air, forming a cube of light. The camphor tree had added its power to the kami realm, making it stronger than ever.

Minato, of course, never heard the sound nor saw the cube of light.

Minato went to step back and admire his work, but he stopped and scanned his surroundings at the speed of light. He'd remembered the unexpected yet forceful invitation he'd received a few days ago when he'd almost been pulled into an unknown kami realm.

The wind was strong today, too, rustling the trees around him. But that was all. He saw no hint of any abnormal distortions.

Fujin had forced him into strengthening his wind power, and, while it wouldn't be strong enough to destroy a kami realm, it could open a portal home. Or at least, it *should* be able to. Minato hadn't tried it yet, but Fujin, Raijin, and the Yamagami had all given their seal of approval, so it should be possible.

Yet Minato couldn't shake the fear he felt at potentially having to face an opponent he had absolutely no chance of defeating even if he unleashed the full extent of his powers.

That day with the camphor tree, even though they'd subjected him to something truly horrifying, Minato had felt sincerely grateful to Fujin and Raijin. When they left, they'd called out cheerfully that they would come back soon.

"…Still, it really would be for the best if I could take care of things like that myself."

Truth be told, Minato still felt hesitant about shooting a blade of wind at a kami's home…although he also felt bad about all the trouble he caused the kami around him. He'd accepted that his body had changed, and he wondered if someday he might also accept that he could destroy a kami realm.

Minato stared at the mountain for a while, then turned back to his home. The square shape of the gabled *sukiya* gate framed the Japanese garden behind it, with its undulating green grass, mirror-smooth pond, and cherry trees surrounding the perimeter. It was a familiar scene by now.

However, the camphor tree no longer stood in the center of the garden, so he had a clear view of the veranda. The permanent fixture that was the white mountain in the center was gone. All he could see was a small white lump.

It was incomplete. Things that should have been there were suddenly absent. Minato didn't have the flexibility to quickly adapt to that.

He'd planted the camphor seed in the exact same location as before. He watered it every day without fail, but it had yet to sprout. The flat, bare earth only intensified his sense of loss.

"…It's best to let it grow slowly."

Those words felt like a kind of prayer.

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Minato and the Yamagami strolled along the cherry tree–lined road toward Echizentei.

The trees were mostly leaves. Not even a single petal lay along the path. Here in the real world, the cherry blossom season had long since ended.

After the cherry blossoms begin to fall, you can only see them for a brief moment.

Minato reminded himself that that was how it was meant to be as he passed under the branches of the cherry trees.

He walked extremely slowly. After all, the Yamagami was walking at its normal pace, and its short legs could only move so fast.

The sun shone brightly in the sky, and the tiny wolf beside him was shrouded in light. No matter which direction Minato looked in, a blinding brilliance met his eyes, both demonstrating the irreplaceable uniqueness of their existence.

“Yamagami, you’re shining like always.”

“Of course.”

“But it feels like…it’s not hurting my eyes as much at that size.”

Its imposing presence still proved incredible, even from the corner of his eye.

“My divine light reigns supreme at any size.”

“…It has dimmed before, though.”

“I do not know as to what you are referring.”

The Yamagami was quick to feign forgetfulness. It resembled a crafty old man in that regard. As it quickly glanced up, Minato gave it a skeptical grin.

They chatted away under the sun’s hot rays.

A fidgety long-haired Chihuahua about the same size as the Yamagami hurried past the ever-elegant mountain kami. As the distance between them increased, the Chihuahua wagged its tail and darted forward, pulling its owner by the leash.

“That’s exactly what small dogs are like. It’s so funny watching them walk so intently.”

“I am a wolf.”

“I know. But that little guy looks like he’s the one taking his owner for a walk.”

“Dogs believe that to be so.”

“…That’s kind of sad to hear.”

The Yamagami turned the corner ahead of the forlorn-looking Minato.

A person was standing at the exact spot. The unfortunate young man looked as if he was poised to kick the Yamagami. The tiny wolf quickly gestured to the side with its chin, and just as it did, the man's leg—on a collision course with the Yamagami—was swept out from underneath him. Minato reached out and grabbed his flailing arm. The young man blinked in surprise, having just barely avoided falling over. He had no idea what had just happened.

Of course he didn't. To his mind, he'd been walking normally when his leg had suddenly careened through the air.

"Are you okay?" Minato asked.

"…Uhhh, huh…?"

Minato and the confused man were left behind as the Yamagami continued walking without so much as slowing.

He hurried after it.

"That was mean."

"He was blocking my path."

"At least he didn't fall over, but that was far too inconsiderate."

"I restrained myself," the Yamagami said, without the slightest trace of apology.

Its tone seemed to convey it didn't abide anyone getting in its way.

Kami are self-indulgent beings, and things like what had just happened only hammered that point home to Minato.

"People usually avoid you, though."

"It is due to my current size."

Small though it may be, the Yamagami still boasted a firm sense of presence. Was there some difference that Minato couldn't perceive? It was a weekday afternoon, so very few people or cars occupied the streets, but it would be tragic if a bicycle hurtled toward the Yamagami. Everything had been fine so far, though.

Minato looked down and saw the Yamagami quicken its pace.

It had spotted Echizentei.

The log house stood on a large property, complete with a parking lot. The building's small size highlighted its tastefully aged appearance. The exterior looked more suited for a Western-style confectionery store than for one specializing in *wagashi*.

"Is this the place?"

"Yes. It has not changed at all. As dapper as always."

Minato couldn’t remember how many years it had been since he’d last heard the word *dapper*. He wanted to laugh but decided to let it pass.

He casually scanned the area. There were no cars or people. They would just get what they’d come for and leave. He wanted to avoid creating more victims of the self-indulgent Yamagami.

The Yamagami sat in front of the door, waiting for the increasingly conspicuous Minato. The small tail brushed continually over the asphalt. It could hardly wait.

Echizentei was unique in that it only opened in the spring, making now the only time you were able to buy their famous *sakura mochi*.

The Yamagami had waited a whole year for this. It had refused sweets just the other day, but that bizarre occurrence had only lasted until the next morning. It had returned to normal as though nothing had happened and had dedicated itself to going to Echizentei before it closed for the season.

Minato opened the door to the smell of cherry blossoms.

The scent of *wagashi* swept away all the atmosphere of the Western architecture. Following behind Minato, the Yamagami walked into the store with its nose held high, sniffing the air.

There were no customers in the store at that moment, but five people would be enough to make the small space feel cramped. Minato figured that the size worked for them, since they only sold *sakura mochi*.

Kanto-style *sakura mochi* lined the humble countertop. Minato still wasn’t used to seeing their unusual shape, which looked like a folded crepe, as he’d only ever had Kansai-style *sakura mochi* before moving here.

“They never sold anything like this where I come from.”

“Both types are delectable, though these are particularly so.”

“If you recommend them so highly, then I can’t wait to try them.”

At that moment, the wooden door on the other side of the counter opened.

“Welcome,” the owner announced as he stepped out.

The slender middle-aged man wore a chef's jacket, fully embodying the role of pâtissier. It was the same man they'd seen in the magazine, though his naturally smiling face brimmed with vitality, his movements were sprightly, and overall, he looked to be in great health. Minato had worried that the Yamagami's orb had flown in the wrong direction the other day, but apparently, it had reached its intended target.

Minato told the man how many *sakura mochi* he wanted, and the man added another three to the bag. Minato stared at him in confusion, but the master cast his gaze down toward the floor.

There sat the Yamagami.

"Please give them to your companion."

He'd seen the Yamagami. It puffed up its chest and wagged its tail.

"…Thank you."

The master smiled a lopsided smile that suited him to a tee.

○

The two of them left the store and walked down the road.

"Yamagami, did you use to leave your mountain a lot?"

"Not particularly. Perhaps once every few decades."

"…To make your rounds of the sweets shops?"

The Yamagami looked up at him, its eyes narrow and its mouth open slightly. It was smiling. For a wolf, it was very expressive. Yet there was also something hidden in that smile that made it look as if the kami was planning something.

The Yamagami was highly secretive. It never said anything it didn't want to. Minato wasn't a child, though, so he didn't feel the need to know every last detail about other people. As such, the Yamagami's furtiveness didn't bother him.

"That particular man comes to leave offerings for me."

"He could clearly see you."

"He has superb vision."

The master of Echizentei apparently brought offerings every year, for some reason placing them in front of the exact same Jizo statue where Echigoya placed his. The Yamagami seemed to be filled with nothing but gratitude for the man.

“You said Echizentei opened thirty years ago, so he must’ve started his business at a fairly young age. That’s pretty amazing.”

“He is the same age as Echigoya.”

Minato couldn’t believe his ears.

“…You mean, he’s over seventy…? He easily could’ve passed for a man in his fifties, or even his forties…”

“He does his best to make himself appear younger.”

“No kidding.”

The Yamagami let out a low chuckle as it cheerfully wandered on. It was walking much faster on their way home, most likely because it wanted to eat the *sakura mochi*, so the trip back wouldn’t take anywhere near as long.

Absorbed in his thoughts, Minato passed by a street lined with houses on both sides.

Thunk, thunk. It was the same wooden banging sound he’d heard a couple of days earlier, most likely more houses being built. A short way in front of him, the Yamagami turned at an intersection.

“Yamagami, you don’t seem interested in human creations like Bird is…”

“Hmm? How astute. You are correct, I am not interested in the least.”

“I thought so.”

The Yamagami looked back at Minato, then turned away again.

In the direction of its gaze was the friendly master carpenter. Behind him stood an impressive Japanese-style house that looked as if it could last centuries. The man was wearing casual clothes and hammering nails into a small box. He probably lived here and was in the middle of building something on his day off.

The small object in his hand was shaped like a house. It had a roof and a circular opening, so it was probably a birdhouse.

Minato passed by silently, not wanting to disrupt the man while he worked. As he did, Minato saw a number of birds pecking the ground near the carpenter, which made him smile.

The Yamagami was walking down the road with a spring in its step, when it suddenly looked to the side.

“Aah!” screamed a man in a white suit, leaping into the air.

Minato couldn’t help but notice how high he’d jumped.

The man instantly dashed away at full speed. A woman chased after him with an incredulous expression on her face. They both looked to be in their late twenties, but that was about all he could tell.

“Yamagami, did you do something to that man? Do you know him?”

“…Perhaps.”

The Yamagami quickly turned back and kept going in the direction it had been walking.

It seemed to know the man.

Yet Minato held his tongue.

Minato and the Yamagami found themselves walking through a quiet residential area. It was right on the border of the mountain, meaning it was close to that pond. Minato recalled seeing the sparse outline of rooftops from the mountain path. He’d never walked down this road before, though, and was simply following the Yamagami.

But as they continued walking, an unsettling feeling came over him.

Something felt strange.

Whenever they went out, large groups of animals would always gather around. Just moments ago, he’d been greeted by the cries of passing stray cats and birds flying overhead. However, ever since the street had narrowed, those encounters had completely stopped.

He couldn’t feel the presence of a single animal around them. Minato thought he was probably just imagining it. And the strange, heavy feeling the air had suddenly taken? He figured he was probably just imagining that, too.

They exited the residential area and, a little farther down the street, passed a variety of abandoned objects. The larger appliances—refrigerators, washing machines, TVs—drew their eyes, buried deep in the long grass. The rust on the metal components indicated that they’d been discarded some time ago.

“Yamagami, don’t you think something feels a bit off…?”

As Minato looked around, a distortion appeared directly in front of him.

The air warped, the scenery distorted—and he was suddenly pulled forward.

“Whoa!”

There had been no time to resist. Half his body fell right in.

Standing a short distance away, the Yamagami didn’t move a muscle, yet its gaze remained fixed to the spot. It looked displeased, a rare sight for the kami.

The Yamagami usually never got truly angry. Showing irritation was no more than a form of posturing. As a mountain, its true nature was one of kindness and generosity.

The distortion continued to consume Minato.

The Yamagami dashed after him.

An instant later, the two of them disappeared.

“Ow!”

“Hmm, it seems I misjudged.”

“Again?!”

Minato had collapsed, and the Yamagami lay flat atop his stomach.

“I couldn’t fight it off with my wind…”

“Well, such ruminations are pointless now. It appeared far too suddenly. You shall cut our way free.”

Minato could only chat casually like this because the Yamagami was acting normally. It lacked any sense of urgency.

Minato checked their surroundings.

It looked like a cave, with curved walls and a ceiling made of dirt. It was tall enough that Minato could stand without hitting his head, and it was wide enough for two adults to walk down side by side. Though there were no lights yet, it cast a dim illumination, and he could see down the serpentine pathways that stretched away on either side of them.

It seemed like a pretty normal cave, yet the air was bad. It felt oddly heavy and sticky, making it difficult to breathe.

Like it or not, it reminded him of the *onryo*’s kami realm.

“The air here’s awful… Yamagami, are you okay?”

“Of course.”

Minato couldn’t sense any deception in its tone; however, he didn’t want the Yamagami to stay too long in such an impure place.

So he picked up the Yamagami and held it under his arm.

“Yamagami, your fur is so nice and soft.”

“I am—”

“—the Yamagami,” Minato said, finishing off the phrase he’d heard so many times.

As he said it, Minato was struck by the realization that this was the first time he’d ever touched the Yamagami.

The Yamagami and other beings around him all took the form of animals, but that didn’t make them pets. For that reason, he’d never touched any of them.

“You’re heavier than I imagined, though.”

“My dignity would diminish were I to make myself lighter.”

“…Ah, of course.”

It didn’t have all that much to begin with, did it?

“Anyway, this is a tainted kami realm like the other one, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. A being without much power created this realm.”

“Where do you think it is?”

It gestured with its head in a certain direction, but all Minato saw was a normal cave passage, stretching as far as he could see. He couldn’t sense anything unusual.

The Yamagami, however, could.

Clouds of black miasma crept toward them. The moment one came into contact with the jade light emanating from Minato’s notepad, it shrank and dissipated.

“They are ephemeral, like light snow.”

“What are?”

“These beings you cannot see.”

Minato didn’t actually want to see them, but he had to admit he was a little curious. He strained his eyes but still couldn’t see anything.

Minato couldn’t see anything below an *onryo*-class malevolent being. Although he felt slightly disappointed about that, he figured that anything he couldn’t see shouldn’t be too tough of an opponent for him.

“Yamagami, there’s something I’d like to ask you. What would happen to the kami that made this realm if we just left without doing anything?”

“The corruption would worsen. It has already begun to affect the surrounding area.”

“You mean, it would impact people?”

“Aye, it would almost undoubtedly harm some.”

The Yamagami didn’t look sad or concerned. It simply stoically observed such things. After all, it was only natural that the Yamagami wouldn’t show any interest whatsoever in events that happened outside of its own mountain.





But Minato was human.

He didn't know or have a connection to any of the people here, but they were his fellow humans. He couldn't just ignore them. He had to do something. Not to mention, the Yamagami's mountain was a stone's throw from here, so this would surely impact it in one way or another.

The Yamagami looked up at Minato, who stared into the depths of the cave, and snorted.

"You cannot let this be, can you? You are too kindhearted."

"Probably, yeah."

"Yet that suits you."

Minato stepped forward, a faint grin on his face. Tucked under his arm, the Yamagami wagged its tail feverishly.

"Your way of holding me is highly unnatural."

"It's because I'm not used to it. You know, I've never properly carried an animal before. I'm not really sure how to do it."

"Hmm, you must support me with your entire arm."

"…Like this?"

"Slightly farther forward… Ah, that is better. Now, as if you are holding a ball of cotton, gently wrap your hands around—"

"Your neck?"

"How dare you? My body."

The two of them showed a complete lack of urgency.

The cave continued, with no end in sight.

Guided by the Yamagami, Minato traversed the branching paths of the cave, and the farther he went, the shorter and narrower the tunnel became. By this point, he was completely stooped over.

"This is killing…my back and my legs… Your weight's really making my arms ache now, too."

"Consider it similar to the training of the muscles."

Minato couldn't help but bust out laughing.

"You can just call it strength training."

"…Strength training."

It still didn't seem to have quite grasped modern terminology.

The Yamagami had seemed unperturbed so far, but wrinkles started to crease its nose. It growled lightly, the faint vibration

traveling up Minato's arms.

"Are we close?"

"Aye, only a little farther."

"Is the notepad still working?"

"It is fine. It shall eliminate them."

The tunnel around them was made of dirt, but even though Minato walked with his hand running along it, his skin didn't get dirty. The wall simply felt hard.

"The kami realm the martens made was on a completely different level from this. It felt so real, unlike here."

"Would you expect anything less from mine own kin?"

Minato wished he could show the martens how proud the Yamagami seemed of them. He understood that the Yamagami knew everything they did but that only certain information went in the other direction. And that connection had currently been severed.

After walking for a while, they finally saw the end.

A huge, deep gorge gaped on one side. The Yamagami peered intently down into it. Minato couldn't see anything unusual, but as he approached, he felt a change in air quality against his skin.

A long, thin object protruded from a mound of dirt. It was so covered in rust, it was impossible to discern its original shape. Although the light in the cave was dim, Minato could see it clearly, thanks to the glow of the Yamagami's body.

"What is it…?"

"It was once a sword."

"I would never have known that if you hadn't—"

Minato shut his mouth.

In an instant, the area around the old sword had turned black. It must be angry. His chest hurt for some reason, and he felt an intense sadness.

"…Was it originally a sword kami?"

"Nay, kami do not naturally inhabit things forged by humans. A human embedded the kami within this sword."

"So someone summoned this kami and enshrined it in this?"

"Precisely. In humanity's early stages, certain craftspeople could summon kami and embed them within human creations.

Very few such people exist now."

"If there was someone with that power now, could they trap you in something they'd created? …Because I'd really hate that."

It would be unforgivable if the Yamagami was forced to do the bidding of a human.

The kami sneered.

"Impossible. Only low-ranking beings can be summoned by the likes of humans and trapped inside their creations."

The miasma thickened, likely upset at the contempt in the Yamagami's words. However, it still couldn't get close to the Yamagami or Minato's notepad.

The tiny wolf looked up at Minato.

"Well? Will you dispose of it?"

Minato hesitated.

"The former kami here is angry because no one properly cared for it."

"What makes you think that?"

"Look at the rust on the sword. Had someone looked after it properly, that would never have happened."

Minato couldn't tamp down his anger at seeing it abandoned like this.

"Do you need a kami's permission to summon and enshrine them?"

"Nay, they are forced into doing so."

Minato's power dispelled spirits. He could only eliminate something and return it to nothing. There wasn't anything he could do to help here.

He didn't want to eliminate the kami. That would just be cruel. This once divine and noble kami had been forced to do humans' bidding for who knows how long.

"Set me down."

Minato placed the Yamagami on the ground as instructed, and it walked briskly up to the mound of dirt. Its annoyed glare dispersed any encroaching miasma. Resting a little higher than the Yamagami's gaze, the sword began to sway.

"I have also never attended to another kami before, so I cannot say what is about to happen. Come what may, it shall undoubtedly be an improvement upon the current situation."

"…Uh, this is making me nervous."

The Yamagami waved its front paws, and Minato said a silent prayer that it hadn't misjudged the situation this time.

Its tiny front paws gently touched the sword, and a bright light spread out from around it. It shone as bright as the midday sun and brought with it a warmth. Minato reflectively closed his eyes and turned away.

The light quickly dimmed, and by the time Minato opened his eyes, it had completely disappeared. The sword was gone. Taking a closer look, he saw that it seemed to have merged with the soil.

But what about the kami? Minato was about to ask, when the Yamagami turned to face him.

"You may proceed."

"…Oh, okay. Huh? Proceed with what?"

"You must hurry before this place disappears."

Minato suddenly realized what was happening. The next moment, the ground beneath his feet warped, and distortions appeared along the ceiling and walls.

"You were so unhurried, I forgot about that part!" Minato cried, stressing the final syllable.

He waved a hand and released a gust of wind. Innumerable small blades attacked the dirt wall in front of him from all directions. However, that special realm created by the kami was incredibly sturdy, and the blades didn't even scratch the surface.

Minato tried again and again, but his blades simply bounced off the wall and shattered. Refusing to give up, he continued firing off gusts of wind. They were jade, without a hint of blue, devoid of divine might.

"Do not rush. You are being far too reckless."

"I can't help it!"

The shrinking space. The overwhelming sense of pressure. Minato was panicked by these feelings he remembered. He increased the power of his wind, but the color of the blades didn't change.

Though the ground rumbled, the Yamagami simply waited calmly, watching Minato from behind.

"It was only the other day that you trained to imbue your wind with divine might. Have you already forgotten? Even though you felled your precious camphor tree?"

Sighs intermingled with the Yamagami's disappointed tone.

In that instant, Minato's thoughts slowed. He stopped the wind for a moment, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Even as the ground shook and the kami realm continued to shrink around him.

Normal wind wouldn't work. He needed to recall how it had felt that day, when he'd added divine might to his wind and cut down the camphor tree.

Minato's eyelids rose, revealing olive-green pupils. A serene, unwavering flame burned within them.

He resumed his flurry of wind blades. Slightly larger, they contained a faint blue that intensified as their numbers increased. Faint cuts started to appear in the dirt wall, and Minato flung his arms upward. The blades became bigger, the color more vivid, cleaving gashes into the floor and the walls.

A ray of light emerged.

With that as his target, Minato aimed a volley of blades at the wall, and the point of light widened. The beam of light illuminated the Yamagami, who narrowed its eyes.

He'd opened up a space just large enough for the two of them to pass through.

"…Hmm, that shall suffice. Come, now, let us go."

"…Okay."

Panting, Minato followed the Yamagami, crossing over into the real world.

○

At the same time, in a location close to Minato and the Yamagami, a group of people were performing their regular role in the Evil Spirit Festival.

That's right: It was the *onmyoji*.

Five members of the Harima clan emerged single file from the ruins of an apartment building. The beautiful young women looked horrendously exhausted. No amount of makeup could hide their gaunt complexions, and their hair and clothes were disheveled and torn. They stumbled forward on trembling legs.

"…When is this hell going to end? Is it just going to keep on forever? Will I never get to take another island vacation…?"

“It’ll stop at the end of spring, just like every year. After that, you can take all the trips you want.”

“I hate this, everywhere’s so filthy… Evil spirits appear because these places are tainted, so can’t we just destroy this whole building? If we do that, then I can go relax in a bath without having to worry about anything. Hey, does anyone have any dynamite on them?”

“Be serious. We’ll stop by an *onsen* on the way home today.”

“…I want…a hot meal.”

“Then of course, we’ll stop by and get something delicious and warm on the way home, too,” said Fujino, the youngest of them all, trying to cheer up her whining relatives.

The last to emerge from the building, and sole male, was Saiga.

Raijin had completely rejuvenated him, but he looked exhausted again. He wholeheartedly agreed with the suggestion to destroy the building. If he could, Saiga would happily press the switch for the dynamite himself.

They’d finished dispelling the evil spirits inside the building but still had the ones outside to go. And once they were done here, they still had to take care of the illegal dumping ground nearby. The exhausted family still had a long list of jobs to do.

Because they were the only ones who could do them.

Or, at least, so they thought…

The miasma blanketing the ground cleared before their very eyes. A formless black being extended toward the sky, as if trying to flee. But it was too slow. A ball of concentrated light destroyed it, practically trampling it into the dust.

That utterly merciless light was a jade color that Saiga knew well.

Three of the siblings looked on in awe, their mouths agape. But they quickly shielded their eyes and turned away.

“That color just now, that was jade! Is the J-Jade One here?!”

“I-it’s so bright, I can’t even open my eyes! That ball of light must be from the Jade One, right?! M-my eyes, I can’t see!”

“It hurts! N-no, I…I can’t see him!”

A flurry of commotion erupted. The person the girls had dreamed of meeting had been so much brighter than they’d expected, the very incarnation of light.

Minato Kusunoki was simply walking down the road.

Yet the women, all of whom were able to see kami, saw an overwhelming amount of light from his notepad. At Minato's feet shone a golden light far brighter than the jade. With that, the women's fields of view were completely covered in two colors of light.

Saiga also saw that light, but not to the extent of the other members of his family.

"That's the Jade One over there… And I assume that's the Yamagami…," Fujino murmured, having suddenly pulled a pair of sunglasses from somewhere and put them on. Saiga admired how his younger sister was always prepared for every possibility.

Fujino had been blessed with extraordinary vision, so she always carried sunglasses with her.

Completely exhausted, Saiga watched Minato blankly.

Minato slouched as he ambled along, presumably because he was also tired. Pushing up his glasses on his nose, Saiga thought about just how rare a sight that was.

Minato looked around without any real enthusiasm. He noticed the group of people in black suits loitering around the entrance of a building. Saiga's head stuck out from the center of the group.

Looking closer, he saw that Saiga was surrounded by women. They were tall, even when standing next to Saiga, and every one of them was beautiful.

"Wow, they're all gorgeous. A few seem to be screaming and thrashing around, though. Does Saiga have a harem or something…?"

"They are his family."

"Now you mention it, they do all have that same aura about them… They must be working."

Minato looked around, but he couldn't see anyone else.

"Say, who do you think they meant when they said 'the Jade One'? They weren't talking about you; you're more like the White One or the Golden One."

"They were referring to you, of course."

"Me? Why am I jade?"

"…Must I really explain it to you?"

The Yamagami exasperatedly looked up at Minato's perplexed expression—but suddenly it realized. It had never told Minato the color of his elimination power.

The people around Minato could see it, of course, but no one had ever pointed it out to him. Either that, or they'd assumed that the Yamagami had already told him.

"A jade color surrounds your elimination power."

"Really? I wish I could see it. I really like jade as a color."

"Yours is a truly beautiful hue. I was duly impressed."

"Wow, that's high praise."

Even though he'd grown accustomed to the Yamagami's way of wording things, Minato almost let out a laugh, but he stopped himself. He didn't know if the Harima family could see the Yamagami, so they would probably find it suspicious if they saw him talking and laughing to himself. There was no better way to look like a weirdo.

Instead, he just nodded and walked away quickly.

○

The mountain that towered over the Kusunoki residence, the Yamagami's true form, had a smaller peak beside it. Climbers could reach the summit in under thirty minutes, and a shrine sat near the top. A row of red *torii* gates ran along the narrow, steep staircase leading up to the peak, a clear indicator of a shrine to the kami Inari.

As he stood there, Minato gazed up at the line of *torii* gates.

"So, this mountain is the home of the black fox that used our *onsen* the other day?"

"Indeed."

"It's pretty small and cute. For some reason, I guess I just assumed kami only inhabit large mountains."

"The size is irrelevant. We exist everywhere, and this one is—"

"Ah!"

Minato felt something pulling at him again.

He squinted. That was strange. He didn't see any distortions in front of him.

Regardless, he was tugged in the direction of the stairs. The force behind it felt different from the overpowering pull he'd

experienced before, yet it was still too strong for him to resist.

Minato was completely worn out.

He still wasn't used to releasing winds imbued with divine might, and using his power had drained all his energy. Climbing such a steep set of stairs in his current condition would be hell on his legs. But even if he did fire off a gust of wind, he didn't know where to aim it.

He was only one step away from the stairs.

"Do not act so brazenly before me."

The Yamagami leaped nimbly, crossing in front of Minato.

That was all it took for the force pulling on Minato to vanish completely.

Free at last, Minato held his ground.

"That was a close one."

He steadied himself and looked down at the Yamagami. The wolf growled in disgust, glaring at the top of the stairs.

"Huh, you don't see that every day."

A white fox quietly floated at the top of the stairs.

It was humungous. As big as the Yamagami's former size, it emitted a faint golden light. Multiple tails fanned out behind it, waving in the air. Minato counted them, awestruck.

"…N-nine tails… Isn't that a *yokai*…?"

Made famous from stories, Minato knew all about the nine-tailed fox with its white face and golden fur. This was the first time Minato had seen a *yokai* in real life. He actually found it to look quite divine, and then his eyes met the fox's. It smiled, its slanted eyes curving slightly, then disappeared.

"It is a kami."

"Oh, really? So, that was the kami of this mountain?"

"…Hmm, you are not wrong," the Yamagami said, but it didn't elaborate.

"You're neighbors. Do you not get along?"

"We are neither friends nor enemies."

The Yamagami suddenly turned and walked away. Minato followed. Apparently, it didn't want to talk about it. Kami have existed for an incalculable amount of time. Minato had no idea what had happened, and he didn't intend to pry any further.

"It invited you."

“Why? I’ve never come here before, and I’d never met it before now.”

“Yet it knows you. Kami understand all that their kin see and do. Perhaps it simply wished to cast its eyes on you itself, or perhaps it hoped to obtain some *inari sushi*.”

“…I see… That was pretty forceful, though. I would have gone if it had just asked.”

“There is no guarantee you would have ever returned.”

“Then, I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid I’ll have to pass,” Minato said loudly, turning and addressing the mountain.

Not being able to go home would be horrible, of course, but he could think of worse things. The golden peach he’d received from the black fox came to mind. Raijin had stopped by earlier and eaten the fruit gifted to Minato.

“*Whenever I eat anything that grants eternal youth, I can just feel my skin getting younger!*” Raijin had announced with great delight.

Hearing that it did indeed have some sort of incredible effect, Minato was relieved that he’d disposed of it by having Raijin eat it.

A wise man never courts danger.

He would be best doing everything he could to avoid any kami realm that produced fruit capable of bringing about such undesirable results.

“Yamagami, thank you for helping me back there.”

Minato spoke with the deepest gratitude he could muster.

The Yamagami walked forward, and with each step it took, it grew larger.

Within a few steps, it was as tall as Minato’s thighs, completely returned to its original size. Its body longer than Minato was tall, it walked with its regular stride.

Minato nodded.

“You know, this really is your best size.”

“Indeed.”

The Yamagami walked gracefully, its fluffy tail contentedly swishing from side to side in time with its steps.

Chapter 12
Good Night, and Welcome Home

The blooming cherry blossoms in the garden of the gods did not diminish. A perpetual ring of flower-laden trees bordered the grounds.

The Yamagami sat calmly in its regular position on the veranda, a place the petals mysteriously avoided.

That great mountain, the great wolf, moved. It raised a front paw, revealing a white sphere underneath. The giant paw had covered it completely, but an intense light encased its smooth surface.

This was the object the Yamagami had been toying with whenever it had a spare moment.

Sipping tea at the low table, Minato watched it all unfold. A good night's sleep had helped him recover from his exhaustion of the previous day. Today, he resumed his regular caretaking duties and was currently enjoying a break following lunch.

"So that's going to become another one of your kin? There's going to be a new member of the family."

"…Well, that is one way to phrase it."

The Yamagami seemed unusually tentative.

"I am unsure about this one. Whether it shall become a part of the family or not."

"But it's a part of you, just like Utsugi and the others, right?"

"Nay, I intend to place this inside it," it said offhandedly, scratching its neck with a hind paw. When it did, a small lump toppled onto the cushion and emitted a terribly dim glow, as if it was on the verge of extinguishing. Compared to the intense light coming off the sphere next to it, this one shone quite weakly.

“…Wait a second, is that the kami from the sword?”

“Indeed.”

“You brought it home with you? Where did you put it? Actually, you’re fluffy enough, I bet you could hold all sorts of things in there.”

“Aye, provided they do not fall out.”

“Well, I guess you have nowhere else to carry it, with that body…”

Minato didn’t know what he’d have done if the Yamagami had asked him to carry it.

Shf… The Yamagami held a front paw out toward the lump, and it rolled away. When he tried again, it rolled away to the side.

“It doesn’t seem to like you…”

“Hmph, it is quite the stubborn one. I am offering to place it in this sphere and make it my kin.”

“Do you think maybe…it doesn’t want to be one of your kin?”

“If so, it would not have already stayed with me for so long.”

“Then maybe it doesn’t want to go inside the sphere?”

“It will dissipate if I do nothing.”

The glowing lump began to shake slightly. It was scared. It seemed to be saying that it didn’t want to disappear.

A short while later, it approached the white sphere. It would go near it, then back away, as if it was conflicted about what to do. Minato watched without comment, the Yamagami yawned, and they waited while sipping tea.

It eventually rolled into the sphere without much resistance. The faint glow was absorbed and seemed to melt and fuse with it.

The white light intensified.

“Whoa, that’s bright.”

“Close your eyes.”

“It’s a little late to say that!”

The flash of light faded, and Minato lowered his arm.

On the cushion, the white sphere gave off a dull glow. It showed no sign of movement whatsoever.

“…It’s not moving… Is it okay?”

“Hmm, this is not a portion of my spirit, so it acts on its own. Typically, the change would be instantaneous…”

“…If it went into that sphere by itself, then it’s not rejecting you. Do you think it wants to rest?”

The Yamagami looked down at the sphere. After a brief moment, its eyes narrowed.

“Very well. Do as you please.”

The great wolf met Minato’s inquisitive gaze.

“As you noted, it would prefer to rest.”

“Well, it can rest here. Let’s see, where should it…? I know, one of the stone lanterns is empty.”

A second lantern sat opposite the one inhabited by the ho’o.

“Hmm, you are quite willful. Aye, it seems that shall suffice.”

“What did it say?”

“It said that it is acceptable for it to be placed at the edge of the garden.”

“It seems as modest as Dragon.”

“Kyaaaa!” the kirin screeched from somewhere in the garden, as if to comment on how incredibly mistaken Minato was.

○

In the center of the garden, Minato sprinkled water on the ground as part of his daily chores.

The flat ground he watered held nothing.

Several days had passed since he’d replanted the camphor seed. It normally wouldn’t sprout so quickly, but this was a kami realm. He’d learned that things don’t grow as they usually would in the outside world.

Previously, it had taken a few weeks after planting for it to grow into a sapling. This time, though, he wanted to observe each stage of its growth.

Splish. The last droplet fell to the ground. The earth soaked up water with incredible speed, so much so that the surface was already dry. And this was his third round of watering.

“One more drink?”

“…It is awfully thirsty today.”

The camphor tree had once been able to convey something like that to Minato by swaying its branches, but now the Yamagami, sitting opposite Minato, conveyed the tree’s thoughts.

Minato dipped the watering can into the pond. Oryu slid noiselessly up to him, only the tops of its eyes breaking the surface of the water. It seemed like it wanted to say something.

Is it saying it wants to help? That it can make the tree grow faster?

“I don’t want it to grow too fast. I’d like it to go slower this time.”

Oryu closed its eyes in understanding.

The watering can brimming with divine water, Minato wet the ground again.

“Hey, you’re drinking it up slower now. Have you had enough?”

“Aye, that shall suffice,” the wolf said, right as Minato had poured the last of the water.

The Yamagami looked at Minato.

“Do not blink.”

“What?”

“I am informing you that you should keep watching.”

“You should’ve said that to begin with. Wait, do you mean…?”

Minato bent over, watching intently, and saw the ground rise ever so slightly. He could see a bud through a gap in the dirt. He watched for a while longer, but it neither grew nor moved.

“It is being cautious.”

“…Because of me? Because I said I want it to grow slowly? I’m sorry, if you want to grow, then go ahead…!”

A thin vine smoothly emerged. The tip slowly split, blooming into a small, extremely delicate green leaf. It was almost impossible to imagine that this had once been that huge tree.

But it shook, as though saying it was doing well.

“Hey there. And welcome back.”

The sakura swayed as one, as if celebrating the camphor tree’s return, and a sea of cherry blossom petals fluttered around the contentedly smiling Minato and the yawning Yamagami.

Minato stood back up again. A falling cherry blossom danced down onto his palm. The moment it touched his skin, it disappeared like snow, leaving only the smell of sakura behind.

“Cherry blossom season will be over soon.”

“Indeed, the season has already moved on. Let us make this the final day.”

“Yeah.”

Minato looked around the yard. A pristine Japanese garden filled with the elegant colors of cherry blossoms stretched out before him. He took in the unbelievable sight, not knowing if he would see this next year. He wanted to burn it into his memory.

“Do you not wish to have a picnic under the cherry blossoms or some such festivity?”

“I feel like I’ve already enjoyed it thoroughly.”

“Do humans not sit beneath cherry trees, drink sake, and become boisterous?”

“Well, yes. But it doesn’t have to be underneath a cherry tree, and we’ve been eating all our meals in front of this luxurious garden, so there’s no need to do something special now. Plus, I don’t drink.”

Minato was thankful that none of the kami here had tried pushing alcohol on him. He said that he didn’t drink, and everyone accepted that without question.

“We don’t have to drink, but how about we eat some *dango*?” he asked.

The Yamagami began to wag its tail, as if it had been waiting for those words. On the opposite bank of the river of cherry blossom trees, Reiki squeezed its eyes shut atop the large rock, while Oryu retreated to the bottom of the pond.

Minato chuckled at seeing the obvious disappointment of those two lushes.

“Turtle, Dragon, you two can drink,” he said, and they immediately ran toward the veranda.

Clack, clack.

It was the doorplate at the rear gate. The martens were here. Recently, they had begun making the doorplate sound in place of a door knocker.

“Minato! We have wild raspberries! Let’s eat them!”

Utsugi didn’t even wait for an answer. He just walked in with a bamboo basket balanced expertly atop his shoulders, overflowing with the same plump red berries they had feasted upon the year before.

“Thanks. Seri, Torika, come in.”

Unlike their carefree youngest sibling, Seri and Torika waited to be invited in. They bowed to Minato, politely thanking him for

welcoming them into his home, then rushed into the garden after Utsugi.

"Why are they so different? You said you made them all the same."

"It is a mystery to me as well."

The martens didn't drink, either.

Having set the bamboo basket on the veranda, Utsugi reached out to grab a wild raspberry, but Torika smacked his front paw away. The basket was overflowing with the same red berries that the Yamagami had left by Minato's front door the previous year. Yet now, that kami sat by Minato's side.

Ah, I remember the Yamagami just walked right into the house.

"Maybe Utsugi's like you, while Seri and Torika are different."

"What makes you think that?"

"Last year, you just walked onto the property and set down a bamboo basket."

"Yet I rang the doorplate beforehand, remember? After which, you were delighted and opened the door, hence indicating that I could enter."

"That's absurd. But it's like you to say something like that, Yamagami."

The Yamagami smiled easily.

"Such actions invite in nonhuman beings. You would do well to be aware of that."

"…I'll be careful from now on."

It was a good thing the Yamagami had ended up being benevolent. That said, Minato had said he didn't like things being placed directly on the ground, and the next items had been put in a basket and placed carefully on top of a rock. There was no chance such a considerate being was bad.

That was why he'd accepted the gift. Even Minato wouldn't invite just anything into the house.

"It's a little early, but do you want to eat lunch as well?"

"If it's lunchtime, then we should eat this," Fujin suddenly called out beside them.

Next to the surprised Minato, the Yamagami didn't even twitch its claw as it looked up into the air. Raijin and Fujin floated above them, carrying squid, red snapper, and other seafood. Seeing

those human-shaped figures hovering in the sky was always a sight to behold.

"You know, you could do this, too, if you tried," Raijin told Minato.

"I'll think about it."

He'd pass. Not only was Minato afraid of falling, he'd also call undue attention to himself.

Raijin and Fujin drifted down to stand on the veranda.

The kirin returned right as Minato was following the Yamagami back to the veranda. It flew in from beyond the horizon, passing through clouds and gradually approaching like a windstorm. It alighted first on the roof before jumping down to land in the garden, finally home after being away for several days. Based on the exotic fruit floating behind it, it had gone somewhere overseas.

"Welcome home, Kirin."

It sauntered toward them and offered the fruit, each golden-brown piece about the size of a large grape. The white, squishy flesh was also similar to a grape's, but the middle contained a large seed. They were longans, meaning "dragon eye" in Cantonese, and indeed, they did resemble the eyes of a dragon.

"Thank you."

Once again, it had brought a rare delicacy that was hard to get in Japan.

Minato was genuinely delighted, and out of his sight, the kirin smirked at Oryu on the veranda. Oryu spread its wings, whiskers standing on end.

"*The kirin does have a dragon's head…*," Reiki said tiresomely, and the Yamagami family couldn't help but agree.

The stone lantern opened, and the ho'o peeked its head out. The lantern opposite it was no longer there, having been moved to a corner of the garden, the doors to the flame housing shut tight. Inside, the newest member of the Yamagami family slept. It had yet to emerge. Time passed differently for kami and humans, meaning it could wake up at any moment or stay asleep for who knows how long. Even the Yamagami wasn't sure.

Minato climbed up onto the veranda. He hoped that he would meet it while he was still living here.

Sparrows chirped from somewhere on the mountain, the cherry blossom petals fluttered one last time, and vivid colors painted Kusunoki’s garden of gods.

Please enjoy a little story as the afterword.

Secret Technique!
Yamagami-Style Doorplate Splitting

Crack! A deafening snap echoed through the forest.

In a place deep in the mountain, a little above the halfway point, a tiny wolf sat atop a large rock surrounded by trees that touched the sky—the Yamagami family's home. Scraps of broken wood littered the ground around those tiny front paws, the source of the cracking sound. The Yamagami had been splitting square pieces of wood that resembled doorplates.

Wrinkles creased its nose. It was trying to carve a perfectly straight line down the center of the wood. It didn't want to split it in half, merely crack it down the middle, but it had failed more times than it could count. It needed to do better, or it wouldn't be able to reproduce the effect Minato was hoping for.

With a brief sigh, the Yamagami waved a front paw, sending wood chips flying. Standing at the ready next to it, Seri slipped a new piece of wood in front of the Yamagami. Next to Seri sat a pile of ready-made pieces. They had plenty of spares.

So it would try again. Ready, go! *Crack!* Failure. This crack ran diagonally.

"Grrr…"

Crack. Another failure. This one had too many cracks in the wood and ultimately split in two. That wasn't it. Not it at all.

“I shall not fret. With whose permission will this crack?!”

It was an unreasonable thing to say. Piece after piece was placed before it, like bowls in a *wanko* soba–eating challenge, and it broke each one. Some split diagonally, some ended covered in cracks, and Seri piled all of them up neatly at its side.

The Yamagami frustratedly brushed aside one that was almost perfect. As it sighed deeply, Seri placed a new piece of wood before the wolf.

This was the last one. There were no more. It stared silently at the piece of wood.

“—Hmm, only one option remains.”

It raised a front paw high. A single claw extended, and the tip morphed into what looked like the blade of a box cutter. The edge glistened in the sunlight filtering through the treetops. The Yamagami gently traced a line on the wood with its claw.

With that one downward stroke, a line emerged. Not too shallow, not too deep, an exceptional piece of craftsmanship carved by the blade.

“I expected nothing less from you, Yamagami. It is superb,” Seri said, with a round of muffled applause. Accompanying the Yamagami for such a long time without complaint was surely a shining example of kinship.

Thus, when Minato returned from the rear gate to the veranda, he carried in his hands the doorplate the Yamagami informed him had run out of elimination power—the fruits of the Yamagami’s efforts.

“Yamagami, the way you cracked this doorplate is superb. The line runs perfectly down the middle. It’s dead center.”

“I am the Yamagami. It was a mere trifle,” it said nonchalantly, looking smugly up at the ceiling. Yet it had failed well over one hundred times.

The Yamagami could be quite vain at times.

○

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who read this second volume and to all those involved in publishing this

work.

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