
Kusunoki's
Garden
of Gods
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Enju
Illustration by OX


“Huh?”
Something was there.
In the middle of the veranda, a white beast sat facing him.
Even though the beast was just sitting there, its aura was incredible.
Mysteriously, it inspired no fear in Minato at all.
“I have come to visit.”


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.
Saiga Harima
Age twenty-seven. A modern-day *onmyoji* who secretly fights against wicked beings—with his fists, belying his appearance. Earnest and long-suffering.
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.
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.
Seri
Torika
Utsugi


What to make of *this*?
When Minato pulled the curtains open,
he found that one corner of the garden
had become an open-air *onsen*.
"…It's a real *onsen*…
I can't believe this."
"Well? Care for a
morning bath?"
"Much appreciated.
Don't mind if I do."

Kusunoki's Garden of Gods

1

Enju

Illustration by **OX**

YEN ON

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Translation by Matt Treyvaud Cover art by ox

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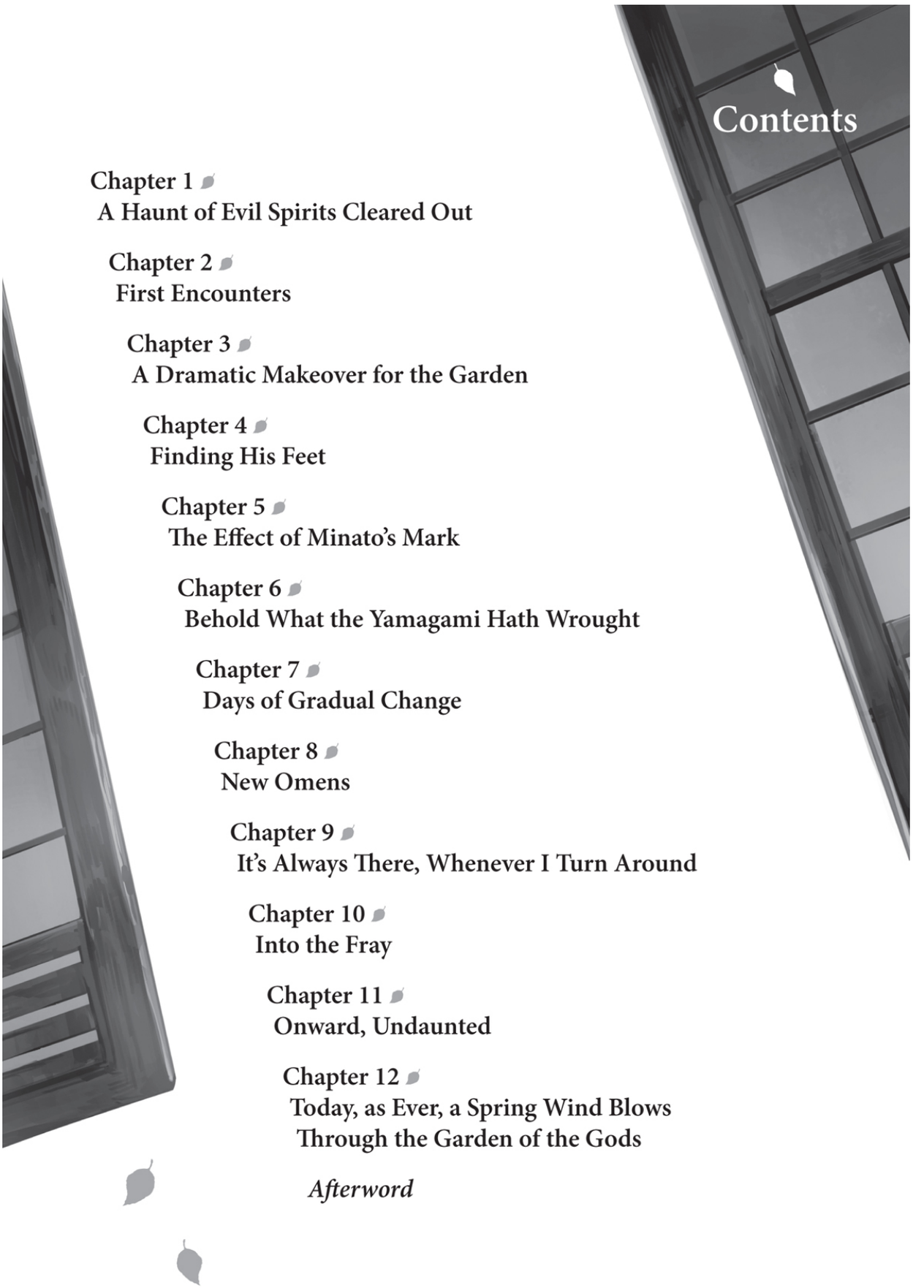
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Afterword

Chapter 1
A Haunt of Evil Spirits Cleared Out

His field of vision suddenly darkened.

Sensing something was amiss, the young man paused just inside the main gate of the house that would be his new place of work. The front door, a few steps ahead, was hard to make out in the hazy murk that covered it, despite the fact that the dark-brown wood of the door had been clearly visible through the gate a moment ago.

He stepped back so that he could see the building in its entirety. The single-story timber house had a uniformly black exterior, from roof tiles to wainscoting—and it was also completely enveloped in a black haze.

It was his first time coming here, and Minato Kusunoki blinked restlessly, doubting his vision and the inexplicable phenomenon. Yet even after he rubbed his eyes and looked again, the black haze still surrounded the house. Was it just because the sunlight was weak through the partially overcast sky, even though it was almost lunchtime?

Minato looked to his right. The lower slopes of a neighboring mountain began just outside the high wall surrounding the house and garden, and even that appeared gloomy. It was almost May, and the trees on the mountainside should have been vibrant with color.

“Is my eyesight failing…?”

When Minato looked down at the map he was holding, the ink had faded. He furrowed his brow slightly and tilted his head in confusion.

Minato had come to this traditional Japanese house, which stood empty and alone among the mountains here, after being hired as its custodian. Originally, it had been built by a distant relative Minato had never even met, who had since passed on, leaving the house to another member of his extended family. The new owner, having no interest in living there, had put it up for sale; however, every potential buyer who had come to inspect the property declined to make an offer. Two years later, the house was still empty.

The place did have a bit of history to it.

Its first owner had been the unmarried former president of a construction company, who had built the house as a place to live in after retirement, insisting on exacting specifications and only the finest materials, from timber to individual nails. However, they died not long after the house was complete, having lived in it for less than a month, and an empty house deteriorates with startling speed.

Given how much that first owner had evidently been looking forward to spending their remaining years in the house, it would have been unbearable to simply let it rot away. And so the current owner had asked one member after another of their extended family to look after it until the call had finally gone out to Minato.

Minato, then working at an *onsen* inn his family ran, was his parents' second-oldest son at twenty-four years old. He didn't even have a girlfriend, let alone a wife.

On the logic that Minato ought to experience living outside his family home at least once, he had been hired as custodian of the vacant house until a buyer could be found. He got along incredibly well with his parents and older brother, so he was sure he hadn't been kicked out as an annoyance.

Minato hesitated at the front door to the house, buffeted by the spring wind, his bulging duffel bag weighing heavily on one shoulder. He couldn't stand here forever.

"Well, let's see what it's like inside."

He took out the key and turned it in the lock, which opened smoothly. Minato grasped the doorknob in his hand still holding

the map, then instantly let out an “Ow!” and yanked his hand back, as if it had been repelled.

“What was that? Static electricity?”

Frowning, he shook his hand to let the pain pass.

Minato didn’t see any of it.

Not the sudden dispersal of the black miasma engulfing the house, which spread outward from the doorknob that the map had touched. Not the swarming mass of evil spirits overhead, so numerous that they covered the sky, purified and dispelled in a single blow.

Not having the special sight required to perceive any of this, Minato noticed none of it.

Minato crouched to pick up the map he had dropped. When he raised his head, he could see the doorknob clearly.

“Hmm? I can see fine.”

He looked straight ahead, then off to the side. The once-hazy house and trees on the mountain all stood out with crisp, clear outlines.

“…Did I imagine it…?”

Hesitating slightly, Minato touched the doorknob again, though this time nothing happened. Relieved, he opened the door, and the distinctive smell of a closed-off, disused house struck his nostrils. Yet even so, the woody aroma of new construction was stronger.

Minato switched on the breakers and made a quick tour of the house.

It had a bedroom, living room, dining room, and kitchen, all on a fairly spacious rectangular floor plan. The exterior looked exactly like a traditional Japanese house, while the interior had wooden flooring in the Western style. It was all electric, fully accessible, and equipped with every household appliance he would need, along with furniture that shared a unified, soothing color scheme. Minato had heard that the house was move-in ready, which definitely seemed to be the case.

The refrigerator in the kitchen was fairly large for a one-person house—almost as tall as Minato. He murmured softly to himself

as he stared at the top of the fridge.

"Everything in this place is almost brand-new."

As the refrigerator began to chill, he filled it with the food he'd brought with him. All the other appliances in the house were just as new. None of them seemed to have been used more than a few times.

"I'll gratefully use them."

For no particular reason, Minato pressed his palms together before the closed door of the refrigerator.

He turned to look around. Kitchen counter, dining table, cover on the three-seater sofa—there was dust on every surface in the house, and the air was musty, too. Evidently, the place hadn't been cleaned in some time.

Minato produced a notepad from his jacket pocket.

"First comes cleaning. Then the appliances…"

Minato wrote out a to-do list. Jotting down notes for himself was a habit of his, and he always carried a notepad and pen.

After he was finished writing, Minato put the notepad on the kitchen counter and stood before the huge south-facing glass door.

"Right—let's do this."

When he threw the heavy curtains open, the sprawling garden outside filled his view. He opened the insulated glass sliding door and stepped out onto the veranda. It was so large it almost counted as another room of the house, and it could also be accessed from the bedroom next to the living room. The eaves extended some way into the garden, helpfully blocking the sun's rays and making the veranda look like an extremely nice place to spend time.

The first owner had also been very particular about the yard and had apparently designed the property so that the Japanese-style garden could be admired from anywhere inside the house or out on the veranda.

In its current state, however, the open space was more like a yard gone to seed than anything one might call a "garden."

There was a scattering of weeds, a sorry handful of thin trees, and a large, empty, gourd-shaped basin in the ground outlined by rocks of varying sizes. Only the arched stone bridge across the basin and the stone lantern near the veranda gave it any sort of

character. Minato could only assume the property had been abandoned before the work on the garden was complete. The leaves and branches that covered the ground seemed to be gifts from the mountain that had come over the garden's high walls.

It was a sad sight indeed.

"Ahhh…"

A sigh of disappointment escaped Minato's lips. The fact that the house was so splendid and in such good condition that it could be mistaken for a newly built home only made the pitiful state of the yard stand out more. The garden at his family's *onsen* inn was always kept in beautiful shape by the gardener, and having grown up thinking that was normal made his disappointment greater.

Still, it was probably best to put the garden off until later and focus on the inside of the house first.

"Time to do some cleaning. I'd better get changed."

As if pushed by the wind buffeting him from behind, Minato went back inside the house.

○

Two full days of cleaning later, the work was done.

The inside of the house hadn't been too problematic, perhaps because it was so well sealed against drafts, but insects had taken over the majority of the exterior. After briskly ushering them off home to the mountain, Minato set about cleaning the windows; once he'd finished polishing them inside and out, the house had that just-built sparkle again.

Early the next morning, Minato rolled his neck as he meandered from the bedroom to the kitchen.

"Ahhh… I'm exhausted. You know, I never did find out why the house had that black haze around it. I've never seen anything like it before, either. I must've just imagined it… Hmm?"

A Post-it had fallen from the refrigerator door to the floor.

Minato had written a note of what was in the fridge and stuck it to the door, as he had a habit of doing. When he picked it up, he

saw that the ink had faded and even entirely worn away in parts.

"…Time for a new pen?"

He stuck the Post-it back on the fridge door. Then he took a bottle of water from the fridge, drank from it, and idly turned around. The Post-it he'd stuck on the bedroom door was lying on the floor as well.

Gulp. His swallow was surprisingly loud in the room.

Back home, a small whiteboard hung on every door, and it was his family's custom to use these whiteboards for notes and reminders. Plans for the following day, shopping lists, messages for family members—every time you opened or closed a door, you couldn't help but see what was written there, which helped prevent things from slipping your mind.

Minato pressed his finger to the sticky part of the Post-it on the floor and lifted it up.

"…The glue might be a little weak…maybe?"

It wasn't adhering properly. The Post-it must have fallen off when he'd opened and closed the door just now. Just like the one on the fridge, the writing had half disappeared.

The last place Minato had stuck a Post-it the previous day was the front door. The house had no corridor, so the entryway was just beyond a sliding door in the living room. When he checked, he found that this note had also come loose and was currently on the floor by his sneakers. He picked it up and looked at it, front and back.

The plans for today that he'd written on it were completely gone.

"This'll have to do for now."

Minato felt uneasy without notes to refer to. On a new Post-it, he wrote, *Shopping: Post-its, pens*, then stuck this on the inside of the front door and rubbed his finger back and forth over the adhesive end to make sure it stuck firmly. He thought with a hint of sentimentality that if he were back at home, the whiteboard here would have *Check window is locked, gas is off* written on it.

After a short while listlessly pressing his finger to the adhesive parts of the fallen Post-its, he recalled what the vanished writing had said.

"Oh yeah—the landscapers are coming today."

This was no time for woolgathering. He turned away from the front door.

The weather was beautiful, and a cloudless blue sky stretched overhead.

Deciding to air the place out before welcoming anyone to it, Minato threw all the windows in the house wide open. When he opened the sliding glass door facing the garden, he was assailed by a gust of wind. The empty bucket he'd put on the floor fell over with a clatter and rolled away, and the huge stack of printer paper on the table flew out the door, borne aloft by the wind. White pages covered his field of vision.

"Whoa!"

Without thinking, he covered his eyes with one arm. It didn't take much for paper to turn into a sharp weapon; this was a highly dangerous situation.

In that moment, the stack of paper, now a white band, streamed out past Minato. It soared into the sky and scattered in every direction, and as it did, the miasma that hung in a thin layer over the entire garden vanished in the blink of an eye. The efforts of the stack of printer paper had instantly changed the gloomy yard into a garden suffused with a gentle light.

But Minato didn't see the transformation happen.

Sensing that the printer paper had finished its wild dance and the rolling bucket had come to a stop, Minato lowered his arm. He was greeted by the depressing sight of a garden covered in sheets of white paper.

"Aw, man, now I have to pick them all up… What a hassle."

That's what I get for wanting to kill time writing, he thought, hanging his head. He stepped down from the veranda into the garden and began picking up the sheets of paper, one by one.

Most of the writing he'd done on the paper had disappeared.

○

Once the experienced landscapers were done, the garden looked like a different place entirely.

The fallen branches from the trees on the mountainside just beyond the wall were gone, as were the overgrown weeds, and

the token planting of shrubs had been neatly trimmed and looked much more appealing. None of this, however, could completely erase the lonesome feel of the garden.

Minato offered a cup of green tea to the jumpsuit-wearing landscaper sitting on the veranda. The young, well-built man thanked him cheerfully as he used the towel around his neck to mop up the sweat trickling down his chin.

“I tell you, that hardly took any time at all. We were done before I knew it.”

“Yes, you finished before the morning was out. Thank you.”

The work, expected to last a full day, had gone so smoothly that it was still before noon. The other landscapers had left just earlier in three mini pickup trucks, each piled high with a small mountain of leaves and branches.

“Those visitors from the mountain were a tenacious lot, but that was the only real challenge.”

“I couldn’t even see half of the wall before. The white finish really shines.”

The young landscaper chuckled and took a sip of his tea. Then he turned his gaze to the empty pond and narrowed his eyes.

“My dad was very disappointed that he had to leave things half-finished like this.”

The landscaper was the son of the man who had originally been hired to work on the garden. The sudden death of Minato’s relative was not the only reason the work was left unfinished—the landscaper’s father had passed away soon afterward as well.

Even Minato could see how tightly the landscaper held his glass. What sort of emotions were going through his mind, clinging on as he spoke those cold, quiet words?

However, he didn’t go into details about how his father had died. The young landscaper, who was the fifth head of his family business, let out a deep sigh, then good-naturedly asked Minato a question.

“What are you going to do about the garden? I’d be happy to pick up where my father left off. Should we start by planting some statement trees? Don’t you think it feels a little empty?”

“That’s true. The thing is, though, I’m only here temporarily.”

“…You don’t say?”

“Yeah. So I’m not sure if I should go around changing things too much.”

The landscaper’s head drooped in obvious disappointment, and he winced and clutched his shoulder. The pain looked quite bad.

“Did you hurt yourself working in the garden?”

“Nah, just some shoulder issues lately.”

The landscaper’s face looked worrisomely pale as he awkwardly rotated his shoulder. It was probably best to send him home as soon as possible.

“I’ll ask the owner about the garden. I’m not thrilled about leaving it in this state, either.”

“All right.”

Minato pulled a notepad from his jacket pocket and wrote himself a reminder to contact the house’s owner. A moment later, a strong wind rose behind him. The pages of the notepad fluttered, and the wind snatched away a loose page slipped in between the others half-filled with writing. The loose sheet hit the landscaper’s shoulder, and the two men exchanged a look of surprise.

“Sorry about that!”

“Huh? Oh… No, that’s fine. You know, all of a sudden, my shoulder feels…”

“Are you okay?”

The landscaper bent his arm and swung it around in circles, then rolled his head from side to side. His nimble gestures were accompanied by a dry cracking sound.

“…It’s so light. A second ago, it felt like lead, but…”

Even his color looked a lot healthier now. The man seemed to be struggling to believe it himself.

“Huh? The problem’s completely gone?”

“Yeah. It hurt even to raise my arm, but now…”

“Well, if the pain’s gone, that’s a good thing, right?” Minato said with a carefree smile.

“I mean, I suppose so…”

Agreeing with Minato despite his obvious bafflement, the landscaper took his leave, looking as if he’d been hornswoggled by a fox.

Minato walked the other man to the rear gate. He hadn’t seen a thing, but someone with the right ability would have witnessed

the sheet of notepad paper forcefully smack the landscaper on the shoulder, and the explosive dissolution of the evil spirit that had been clinging there since before his arrival to the house.

Freshly freed from this corruption, the landscaper stepped lightly out through the gate.



The stylish black house was surrounded by a white garden wall.

Gabled *sukiya* gates had been built at the front and rear of the residence. Minato hung a wooden doorplate on one of the gateposts at the main entryway and nodded in satisfaction.

“This should be fine while I’m here, right? Even if it is only temporary.”

At the age of twenty-four, Minato was living alone for the first time. He’d always wanted to be the lord of his own manor—and what a magnificent manor it was. Hanging a doorplate with his name on it outside a place of his own had been a minor dream for him, and he traced the black characters carved into the thick camphorwood plaque with his index finger. He’d made it himself, by hand.

“I think I did a pretty good job. Yeah.”

Minato was no calligrapher, but he had often been praised for the neatness and legibility of his handwriting.

Now he found himself singing his own praises as he looked at the satisfying, well-formed characters on the doorplate. The process had involved applying multiple layers of varnish to the wood plaque, allowing each one to dry before moving on to the next, then writing his name in ink with a brush, chiseling out the characters, lining the indentations with a layer of *tonoko* filling powder, and then painting the characters black. A few more coats of varnish, and the doorplate was finished. He’d put his heart and soul into the work and taken his time to get it right.

He’d been making the doorplates for his family home and the signs for his family’s *onsen* inn since he was young, and he’d made two doorplates of his own to bring with him to the house.

After hanging the doorplate that had come out best at the front, he headed to the rear gate. The overgrown weeds surrounding the wall had all been removed, making it easy to walk the narrow, level path. The wall around the yard was higher than Minato, completely blocking the view from outside.

"Why *did* I start making doorplates? Oh yeah—it was because of that guy who praised them so much when I was a kid."

Minato had made his first wooden sign as a homework assignment in fifth or sixth grade. It was far less impressive than the ones he made now—just the name of the *onsen* inn in misshapen characters chiseled into a plain piece of wood. When he'd given the sign to his father, his father had hung it on the gatepost outside the inn, which had made Minato happy (and a little embarrassed). Then one of the inn's guests—a man in the prime of his life wearing a kimono and a panama hat—had lavished it with praise.

"This is wonderful. Did you make it? You should never remove it. In fact, I strongly recommend making another for your house. Would you make one for me, too? I'd be happy to pay."

"That sure came as a surprise."

With a slight chuckle, Minato hung the second doorplate on a gatepost at the rear.

A high, clear sound rang out; however, Minato's ears couldn't hear it. It was the sound of a sacred barrier coming into being. Jade-green light radiated from every side of the square plot of land, banishing the wisps of miasma curling in the air above the house. In an instant, the pale shadows were no more, restoring vibrant colors to the house and mountainside.

A gentle breath of wind passed by. The trees covering the neighboring mountain rustled their leaves almost as if they were trembling with joy. As if they were singing.

"Yeah. This one's pretty good, too."

Minato, whose gaze had been fixed on the doorplate, didn't notice any of this. Even if he had been looking in the right direction, it was unlikely he would have seen a thing—he lacked the special kind of sight that could perceive evil spirits.

Taking the advice of that guest, Minato had indeed made a doorplate for the family home. When it split in two less than a

year later, he made another. He'd lost count of how many he'd made since. As for the guest, the man had been delighted by the doorplate he'd commissioned from Minato, and the money he'd offered by way of thanks had been easily enough for a person to stay in the inn's detached private suite for half a month. The whole family had been abuzz. But the man had never returned. Wherever he was now, Minato hoped he was doing well.

Lost in this reverie, Minato closed the gate. Passing through the pure air that filled the sanctified zone inside the barrier, he strolled casually back to the house.

Clack.

At the rear gate, where no one should have been at that moment, the nameplate swayed slightly.

○

A lush heap of weeds sat outside his front gate. Minato had ventured out to restock his food supply, and when he returned in the early afternoon, that was what he saw.

With shopping bags dangling from both hands, he looked around. No one was there—not a single person. All he saw was the taxi he'd just taken back home, receding at a relaxed pace down the dirt road. There was nothing around here but rice paddies and empty plots of land gone to seed. At the end of the dirt road, he saw the two-lane road the taxi was heading for; beyond that were more rice paddies and a handful of houses; and beyond that were the mountains. He couldn't see a single multistory building that might have blocked his field of vision.

The scene that spread out before him was unmistakably rural.

On the other side of the property, instead of a wide-open space, there was only the steeply rising mountain with trees that swayed in the wind as he watched.

He doubted any people lived on those deep-green slopes.

The nearest houses were still several paddies and roads away—too far to even be called neighbors—so it was unlikely anyone had come from there to dump weeds over here.

Minato took in the sweeping view for a while, letting these thoughts run across his mind, then turned back to the gate. He

crunched his way down the gravelly path and climbed the low stone stairs, where the grassy smell of freshly cut vegetation reached him.

The whole pile was the same unremarkable plant—one he often saw growing by the side of the road, with tiny leaves shaped like rounded human palms.

"…Surely this isn't someone trying to get at me?"

Would anyone go to so much trouble for such an eccentric form of harassment?

Minato was unfamiliar with the area, and he didn't know a single person who lived there yet. The only people he'd seen since arriving were the landscapers, so understandably he had no idea who might be involved. He could probably rule out anyone from the shopping street, since he'd just visited there for the first time. Country, city, or anywhere else, there were always oddballs ready to do things you didn't expect.

"We'll wait and see how things pan out."

Minato walked around the green mound and opened the lattice gate.

The vegetation piled in a heap was lawn pennywort. It was a medicinal plant: As the Japanese name *chidomegusa*, meaning "blood-stopping grass," suggested, the sap from its leaves could stem bleeding. But to Minato, who was unaware of this, it was just a weed.

A gust of wind blew, knocking the top few strands off the heap.

The next morning, Minato opened the front lattice gate a crack and peeked outside. The heap of pennywort had disappeared without a trace.

However…

As if to replace it, a new batch of vegetation, this time with flowers, was neatly laid out on the ground. It had ovoid leaves that sprouted in pairs from the same central point, and along the stem between these leaves grew pairs of tubular flowers. A sweet fragrance filled the air.

"You can suck the nectar out of these, if I remember right."

Minato had little interest in botany, but even he knew that much. He remembered his late grandfather telling him.

“I bought enough sweets yesterday, though. And I’m not interested in putting anything in my mouth after it’s been on the ground.”

Minato brusquely pulled his head back in and closed the gate. His reaction was inevitably unfavorable; notwithstanding his rural upbringing, he had never experienced the sweetness of Japanese honeysuckle.

On the quiet path, unseen by anyone, the row of medicinal plants disappeared in the blink of an eye. Not a single petal remained where it had been.

The morning after, Minato peeked out through the gaps in the lattice gate.

The ground was empty beneath the bright morning sun. Wondering if the mysterious string of events had come to an end, Minato pulled the gate open. When he poked his head all the way out and looked around, he saw something familiar under his doorplate.

“Hey, that’s mugwort!” he cried out delightedly.

The bundle of serrated mugwort leaves had been wrapped in an extra-large leaf and placed on a flat rock. Minato admired the sheer painstaking thoughtfulness of the arrangement.

Rattle. The gate flew wide-open.

The distinctive soothing fragrance of the mugwort brushed Minato’s nose as he approached, and a smile rose to his lips.

“I guess it’s okay if I have this?”

His unease was swept away at the thought of one of his favorite foods. The timing was truly perfect: Minato had just bought dumpling flour. Thoughts of mugwort dumplings already racing through his mind, he joyously hugged the bundle of mugwort in his arms and closed the gate again.

Clack, clack.

With no wind or visitors around, the bouncing doorplate clattered against the wall. Cheerfully, merrily, as if in response to Minato’s joy.

On his way to check the mailbox for morning deliveries, Minato opened the front door of the house. When he stepped outside, he noticed something placed at the edge of the porch. It was a rather

old and battered bamboo basket filled to overflowing with tiny red berries surrounded by shiso leaves.

"I've had these before—they're tart, if I remember. And delicious."

Using both hands to pick up the basket full of hirsute raspberries ripe enough to burst, Minato called out, "Much appreciated," bowed his head, then chuckled with glee.

There was a reason why Minato, despite being an adult, was happy to accept these suspicious-seeming gifts.

Back at his family's *onsen* inn, offerings left on the family altar and *kamidana* shrine disappeared as a matter of course. Snacks vanished from the kitchen table, too. Minato had encountered such mysteries many times since childhood and was entirely used to them.

Before his late grandfather died, he had offered Minato a word of advice:

"We have a doji *living with us here. It's not evil—if anything, it's good. So listen, Minato—even if snacks go missing, you mustn't be angry. If the* doji *wants a snack or two, be generous and let it have them."*

Minato's grandfather had been able to see beings that weren't human.

Minato himself had never seen things like that clearly. However, sometimes huge shadows flitted across the corner of his vision inside the house, or he saw a person far too small to be human turning a corner in the corridor. Inexplicable things had happened to him more than once or twice.

When he related this with excitement to his grandfather—

"Those are the doji*'s friends. Apparently, the only beings you can see are the good ones."*

His grandfather's deeply carved laugh lines grew even deeper as he spoke.

Mulling over the past with a peaceful expression, Minato placed the basket of hirsute raspberries by the sink in the kitchen. He glanced out the garden-side window. Under the blue sky, a huge

whitish shape flitted through a corner of the garden. Minato blinked, and the corners of his mouth curved upward.

It was a faintly glowing white being, just like the ones he'd seen at his family home.

Though low to the ground, it had seemed about as big as Minato, or perhaps a little bigger. Its form had seemed more animal than human.

There was a *kamidana* shrine in this house, too, but Minato had only cleaned it so far, without making any new offerings. He pulled his notepad from his pocket.

"I need to offer my thanks."

Instead of having snacks stolen from him, he was actually *receiving* gifts of things he liked. He had no idea what sort of being it was, but going by what his late grandfather had said, it must be good. Most importantly, Minato had never had an unpleasant experience with a mysterious phenomenon like this, so he wasn't worried one bit.

"The *doji* and its friends weren't fussy about what they ate or drank, but maybe I should play it safe and stick with sake. And something sweet…*wagashi*, I guess?"

The back door rattled unnaturally; it was a fierce, loud clatter, as if calling Minato to action. Evidently, someone was a big fan of traditional Japanese sweets.

Minato laughed as he wrote a short shopping list in his notepad.

"Let's see… There was something else, too. Oh, right—garbage bags!"

Minato had never interacted so directly with the beings at his family home. If he left a few snacks on the table on purpose, sometimes seasonal flowers would be placed by the window, presumably in thanks, but that was about as far as it went. Experiences like that were another reason why the presents of vegetation hadn't fazed him.

In any case, apparently this being was much more self-assertive.

Still smiling, Minato reached for his wallet on the counter.

Chapter 2
First Encounters

It happened in an instant.

The moment the *onryo*, swollen to many times a person's size, pounced on the young man strolling down the street, it was dispelled.

The malevolent spirit vanished like dew, disappearing without a trace. Not even the most experienced banisher or *onmyoji* could dispel a spirit so swiftly and thoroughly.

The young man in the black suit who had been chasing the *onryo*, hands joined together to form a mudra as he prepared to dispel it himself, froze on the spot.

What had just happened? Had what he just witnessed with his own eyes truly been real?

For a moment, his thinking couldn't catch up to reality. Eyes wide behind his glasses, all he could do was stare as the other man approached him, muttering irritably with notepad in hand.

The aging shopping area had long since lost its former vitality. It was in a back alley off the main road, and despite the clear blue midday sky overhead, it was filled with stale, murky air. Both sides of the deserted street were heaped with rubble and dust.

In a cracked wall facing the alley was a broken second-story window, where a stream of miasma was flowing out.

"This is bad! It's escaping!"

Yet just as this panicky voice inside the building raised the alarm, the window exploded outward. Shattered glass and bits of frame went flying, and a tarry, black blob oozed from the newly

created opening. Moving like a great serpent, the *onryo* slithered down the wall to ground level. After a brisk shake, it began to slime away down the glass-strewn street.

"I'm on it!"

As a sharp voice rang out from inside the building, the black blob made its way almost playfully toward the main road.

The black-suited *onmyoji*, who'd failed to deal with the *onryo* before it escaped from its lair in the abandoned store, burst out of the room. He raced down the narrow staircase, dodging the junk scattered across the noticeably peeling linoleum, and took the last four stairs in a single bound. Gripping the railing to use as a pivot, he let his momentum swing him around in an arc, sleeves fluttering in the wind. He hit the ground running, flew down the narrow corridor, and kicked open the back door. This was the finishing blow for one of the hinges, and the dilapidated door flew loose and smashed noisily to the ground.

By the time the *onmyoji* reached the street, the slithering *onryo* was far ahead of him.

All the storefronts in this area were empty, and no one was around. He thought, as he ran, that if he could deal with the spirit quickly enough, there would be no problem—but a moment later, things changed.

Someone was there.

A man who looked to be in his early twenties turned off the main road and walked down the side street toward the *onmyoji*. He had a shopping bag dangling from one arm and was looking down at something in his hand, heedless of his surroundings. The *onmyoji* watched in rising panic and disbelief as the evil spirit took aim at the young man.

In the blink of an eye the black blob swelled and rose above the man, then fell forward to engulf him from above. The *onmyoji*, who had by now stopped in his tracks, brought his hands together to perform the Nine Seals.

Without warning, the *onryo* burst and dissipated.

The malevolent presence was dispelled in an instant, taking the stagnant air in the alley with it. The *onmyoji* froze with the first syllable of the Nine Seals mantra, "*Rin*," still on his lips. His glasses fell from his face. Fresh air rushed into the alleyway,

without a hint of any evil beings nearby, despite the fact that the area had been crawling with lesser evil spirits drawn to the *onryo* that had mysteriously vanished.

What had just happened? An *onryo* that had proved a challenge even for three capable *onmyoji* working together had just been effortlessly dispelled. Was this a dream? An illusion?

"What the—?! It disappeared again!"

The loud voice of the young man leafing through his notepad brought the *onmyoji* back to his senses. By then, the pair were shoulder to shoulder. The other man was tall but skinny, and his casual clothes were exactly what you'd expect someone to wear if they were "just popping out to buy a few things." Bottles clinked against each other inside his shopping bag.

"Wh-what did?"

The question slipped out before the *onmyoji* realized he was asking it. The other man didn't seem to have noticed the *onryo* at all; even the most oblivious person would usually notice *something* when an *onryo*-class malevolent being was in play—a chill in the air, say. But this man was utterly unconcerned.

Was he just naturally oblivious? Or under some kind of protection?

The man looked up, noticing the *onmyoji* for the first time. He seemed completely unremarkable in every way, apart from being upset.

"The writing! From my notepad! And I just wrote that!"

"Writing…?" the *onmyoji* echoed, deep in thought.

The young man must have been annoyed, because he launched into a litany of complaints at his new acquaintance, without any of the reserve one might normally expect.

"I used a new pen and everything! Aw, man… Why does my writing keep disappearing? Those gel pens, though—they write so smoothly. If only they didn't run out of ink so fast. I still like 'em, though. Once you give one of these a try, you really can't go back."

"I see."

"Nghh… What was it I needed to buy again? It was…oh, you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do."

“One of those everyday essentials. Something you use on the same day every week…”

“Garbage bags?”

“That’s it!”

The man beamed, then grew serious again and glanced around.

“Say,” he said, lowering his voice. “I just moved into the area, and this is my first time in this neighborhood. It’s really empty, huh? All the stores are shuttered. But I don’t want to go all the way back to where I did my shopping earlier. Do you know anywhere nearby I could buy garbage bags?”

“…If you go back the way you came, there’s a newer shopping area beyond the main street…”

“You’re a lifesaver. Thanks, kind stranger!”

The man raised a hand and smiled cheerfully, then dashed off. Bottles clinked in his shopping bag as he went back down the street, turned the corner, and disappeared from view. He was certainly full of energy. *A few years younger than me, perhaps?* the *onmyoji* mused to himself as he gazed after the man.

“H-hey…Saiga. You…okay? Where’s…the *onryo*?”

The voice behind the *onmyoji* belonged to a colleague of his who’d finally caught up. The second *onmyoji*’s shoulders heaved as he struggled for breath. He leaned forward, hands on knees, barely able to talk at all. The lengthy process of cornering the *onryo* must have exhausted him. And not unreasonably—the two weren’t so different in age, yet the second *onmyoji* didn’t seem to have the same energy as the first, who was often called a “bottomless store of stamina.” Whether this was meant as praise or derision was unclear. The first *onmyoji*—Saiga—sighed lightly.

Now then—how do I explain this?

After a brief deliberation, Saiga came up with an answer. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

After the *onmyoji* were gone, little white beings began to squirm on the spot where the *onryo* had been dispelled. Slowly, ever so slowly, they began to move, inching forward in the direction Minato had been heading.

Not a single person was there to see it happen.

○

At long last, the sun was beginning to set. Beneath a line of birds silhouetted by the crimson sky as they flew home to roost, Minato also made his way home.

He had no way of knowing he'd been attacked in town by an *onryo*, or that he'd banished it without realizing. His earlier irritation had evaporated as well, replaced by an eagerness to see whether the sake and *wagashi* he had bought would be as well received as he hoped.

The question was, Should he offer them on the small shrine inside the house, or outside in the garden?

"I'll do it in the garden. By request."

With a faint smile, he opened the curtains a crack.

"Huh?"

Something was there.

In the middle of the veranda, a white beast sat facing him.

Still clutching the half-opened curtain, Minato stared in astonishment. He hadn't imagined it would reveal itself so boldly. This was his first time seeing a being that wasn't human.

Was it a dog? A wolf?

Its keen face came up to about his abdomen. The shaggy white fur that covered its imposing form flowed in the breeze as it gazed quietly back at Minato through the glass. Even at a glance, he could tell this was no ordinary beast. Its entire body was slightly translucent, revealing behind it the desolate yard dyed red by the evening sunlight. Translucent or not, even though the beast was just sitting there, its aura was incredible. Mysteriously, it inspired no fear in Minato at all.

Minato summoned up his courage, opened the glass door, and stepped quietly out onto the veranda. The beast was now just two meters away, and a gust of wind passed between them.

Showing no inclination to run away, the beautiful pure-white beast sat calmly. Tense with nerves, Minato could see his own reflection in its golden eyes, which narrowed as it watched him.

"I have come to visit."

The beast's low, deep voice sank into the pit of Minato's stomach, and he shivered, every hair on his body standing on

end. This was, of course, also the first time he had heard the voice of something other than a human.

The beast eating was a magnificent sight.

The bridge of its muzzle furrowed deeply as it sank its teeth into its prey. Its sharp fangs went through the meat like paper, tearing off smaller strips to be noisily devoured one by one. The beast's golden eyes narrowed into happy arcs, and its tail wagged ceaselessly from side to side. It had no complaints whatsoever, judging from the gusto with which it ate.

"So, is the taste to your liking?"

"…Aye."

The great wolf swallowed the last bite of its meal before replying. Sitting on the edge of the veranda and feeling the breeze stirred up by the beast's restless tail, Minato took a bite of fried chicken as well.

The great wolf had said it was the kami of the mountain beside the property.

"So you're the kami next door? In that case, can I call you Yamagami?" asked Minato, half-jokingly.

"Aye. As you will," came its blithe response.

And so, the beast came to be known as the Yamagami. For a kami, it was surprisingly down-to-earth.

Minato and the Yamagami were relaxing on the veranda together, taking their supper under the starry sky. The shafts of light spilling out of the living room softly illuminated them as they sat beside one another chatting.

"That was somewhat fattier than I prefer, yet tasty nonetheless."

"Care for some sake as a palate cleanser?"

"I fear my powers have yet to return in full. Thank you, but make it water."

"Oh, that's right. You mentioned something about your powers being weak."

Minato poured some mineral water into a glass bowl. Apparently, the Yamagami's translucency was due to weakened divine power.

“For that reason, I am currently unable to banish irksome beings.”

Lapping at the water, the Yamagami ruefully explained its predicament. Minato watched, drinking some carbonated juice himself. He wasn’t a drinking man.

“This is delectable. It could stand alongside the pure spring water of my home,” growled the Yamagami as it continued to drink. “You came to my rescue. For that, you have my thanks.”

“…I’m not quite sure I follow.”

The great wolf raised its face from the now-empty bowl and licked the last drops from around its mouth with a long tongue. It gazed at Minato intently with eyes that seemed to peer all the way to the bottom of his soul, which made him feel restless.

In time, the Yamagami spoke again, in a gentler tone.

“To not know, to not notice, might be what is best for you, though I cannot say.”

“Gosh.”

“But your power is a rare one. And were you to recognize and train it, I am sure it would grow stronger yet.”

“Uh-huh…?”

Minato kept his answers noncommittal, not quite understanding what the Yamagami was talking about. He poured some more juice into his glass and asked a question that came to him on the spur of the moment.

“You mean I’m doing something without realizing it?”

“Aye. Banishing evil beings.”

“I am?”

This unexpected news was hard for Minato to believe.

“Seriously…? Oh, do you want some more water?”

“I do.”

Minato opened a new bottle. He poured a healthy splash of sparkling water into the Yamagami’s bowl, where it fizzed with tiny bubbles that burst as they reached the surface.

The great wolf gazed wordlessly at this, then glanced at Minato with a question in its eyes. Minato returned with his best customer-service smile. It was a smile he’d cultivated over years of dealing with guests, and supremely unreassuring.

After the briefest of hesitations, the great wolf cautiously extended its long tongue to the fizzing water. A moment after it

made contact—

"…!"

—a jolt started at the great wolf's ears, ran across its head to its back, and continued all the way to the tip of its tail, making its fur stand on end. Minato's smile widened.

"It's carbonated water."

"It stings the tongue…! Hrrm, this is quite something."

The Yamagami's tail pounded noisily on the deck of the veranda. Having had his fun, Minato furrowed his brow and folded his arms to get his brain working.

"I'm *banishing* them? …How? Force of will? And I'm doing it without noticing?"

"Hyouh han'hiting."

"What was that?"

"Ny thongue, ny thongue," the Yamagami said, enjoying the tingling sensation—but this did make it harder to understand what it was actually saying. Minato took another sip from his glass.

After finishing its drink, the great wolf returned to an upright position, planting itself firmly on the veranda. Sitting there, quiet and still, it appeared far more majestic than it previously had. Did its fur glimmer as it rippled in the breeze, or was that an illusion? Was Minato only imagining that its form was more distinct than when he had first seen it?

Intimidated, Minato knelt on his cushion, worrying that a more informal pose might be impolite. He sat up straight and faced the great wolf directly. Framed by the dark mountain that was its physical manifestation, the beast that was also a kami made a pronouncement with divine authority.

"Your handwriting banishes them."

The resonant voice reached every corner of the yard. It was like an oracle from the heavens, making the very atmosphere ring. This unexpected revelation reverberated deeply and powerfully within Minato's soul. Such were the words of the magnificent kami; what room was there left for doubt? Caught up in the moment, Minato very nearly prostrated himself before the Yamagami—but then it gave a belch and a burp, and all thoughts of dignity fled beyond the night sky.

So much for all that.





Now only a giant beast, the Yamagami let its gaze fall on the plastic bottle.

“I would drink more of this ‘carbonated water.’”

“You got it.” Minato grinned ruefully, back in his usual slump, then realized something. “So that’s why my writing disappears!”

“Indeed.”

“Wow! It feels good to solve that mystery.”

Minato picked up the bottle of carbonated water. The Yamagami’s tail wagged vigorously back and forth.

“Hmm? So…the things I write are going to keep disappearing?”

He sloshed water into the bowl, filling it halfway.

“Indeed. Hold, hold! That is enough,” the Yamagami said, covering the bowl with its front paws.

“Sure thing. Aw, man… What a hassle. So even using oil-based ink won’t help?”

“I doubt it would change much,” the Yamagami replied disinterestedly, before plunging its muzzle into the carbonated water.

Somewhere along the line, Minato had started speaking more casually, but the Yamagami didn’t mind.

“So I can dispel evil spirits just by writing… I had no idea.”

“When they touch paper on which you have written, malevolent beings are effortlessly wiped out. Many such beings took advantage of my weakened state to make this place their lair, and it was a fine thing to see them all swept away in the blink of an eye. No trace of them remains.”

The mountain kami snickered in a way that suggested an ill-natured side to its personality—or would that be kaminality? Eyes like crescent moons turned toward the rear gate.

“That doorplate is better still.”

“It looks like the original characters I wrote vanished… Is it because I spent so much time carving it?”

“It is imbued with even greater purifying power.”

“Huh. Oh, of course… Now that you mention it, there was a man a long time ago who raved about a sign I made kind of like that one.”

“A man with eyes to see, no doubt.”

“Could be,” Minato agreed, recalling one of the mysterious phenomena from his past. “So why do my doorplates all split in

half within a year?”

“Perhaps they run out of power.”

“…Oh. Okay…”

Minato closed his eyes and spoke softly. Countless doorplates had broken on him in the past. Some hadn’t even lasted a month. When he told the Yamagami that his family ran an *onsen* inn, the kami explained that places frequented by many kinds of people were also more likely to become gathering places for maleficent beings. Furthermore, it added, an *onsen* was a place where people cleansed not only the dirt from their bodies, but also any impurities.

Minato became a little worried about his family back home, but he had left them some spare doorplates, so they should be okay for a while.

The wind was chilly that May night. Minato was dressed warmly, but the cold still made him shiver whenever the wind blew. Noticing this, the Yamagami suggested they call it a night, thus bringing to a close their first meal together.

○

After that, Minato began dining with the Yamagami almost every day.

The great wolf and kami of the mountain was usually in the yard. Minato often saw it stretched out on the veranda, lightly dozing. Notwithstanding occasional absences, it was less a neighbor than a roommate.

A waxing crescent moon hung in the sky. After eating dinner on the veranda together as usual, Minato and the Yamagami had moved on to dessert. Minato watched the great wolf beside him glimmer brightly in the light from the living room as it devoured the *nerikiri*—small balls made from sweetened white bean paste, yam, and glutinous rice flour.

Minato studied the Yamagami closely, then tilted its head.

“You know, Yamagami, you really do look more solid lately.”

“Aye. And I have you to thank for that.”

The Yamagami puffed out its chest proudly, its body now completely free of any transparent patches. At first its transparency had fluctuated over time. If this change was due to Minato, he had no idea how he might have caused it.

“Because you’re eating so well?”

There was no answer. The kami had a powerful sweet tooth, and it was currently busy savoring the *nerikiri*. It brought them to its mouth one by one, each looking especially tiny in contrast with the great wolf’s huge shaggy form, and devoured them with relish. Its face was the picture of happiness. Just watching made Minato smile warmly inside. Its divine majesty, however, was gone as usual, somewhere beyond the sky.

For years, Minato had wanted a pet; however, his family had always been too busy, so his wish had never come true. He had never imagined that moving here would bring him a near-animal supernatural companion, and secretly, he was delighted.

After savoring its treat to the fullest, the Yamagami turned its gaze to Minato.

“That was but a trifling matter. You showed me respect.”

Deep gratitude permeated the Yamagami’s quiet tone, and Minato froze in the process of transferring his share of *nerikiri* to the kami’s plate. At the sight of this extra dessert, the Yamagami let its tail wag back and forth, and golden light emanated even more brightly from its pure-white body. It blazed brighter than the electric lighting behind them.

“That’s all it took?”

“That is all. Such things set the bounds of my power.”

“You could have told me earlier.”

“Aye. But I did not wish to be presumptuous.”

“*That’s* where you draw the line?”

After all the eating and sleeping the Yamagami did on the veranda, it was a bit late to talk about it being *presumptuous*. Yes, Minato received frequent gifts of the mountain’s seasonal treasures from the Yamagami, but most of them ended up in the kami’s stomach anyway. To demand that Minato set all that aside and show it respect would have been a bit much, apparently. Sometimes these kami were hard to figure out.

Though the Yamagami may be completely lacking in restraint, Minato greatly appreciated having a companion around to chat

and have meals with. He had spent his childhood in the kind of neighborhood where everyone was in constant contact and life was lived surrounded by others. Spirited gatherings were the norm for him, so eating alone in a big, empty house had been dispiriting.

Having heard what he'd just heard, he knew what he had to do.

Minato ceremoniously folded his knees beneath him and cleared his throat. Facing the Yamagami, he put his hands together.

"Master Yamagami, thank you for always dining with me. I appreciate it immensely."

"Hmm. There is no need to speak so formally. All is well."

"It just occurred to me that I haven't been using formal language with you lately…"

"Do not fret over the words you use. What matters is how you feel. Courtly rhetoric, formal etiquette—without a reverent heart, these mean nothing. My power does not arise from such things."

"Huh. But it does from this?"

"Aye. Can you not tell?"

The great wolf shone even brighter, and Minato could even see the edge of a halo forming around it.

Now *this* was a kami's true majesty.

Minato made a noise of appreciation and clapped his hands as he squinted into the glare. "You look exactly like I'd expect a kami to!"

"How else would I look? I am the kami of the mountain."

Glowing like a light, the Yamagami puffed out its chest and threw its head back proudly. It was a smug pose, but it suited the kami marvelously. Minato found it both fascinating and amusing that the Yamagami glowed more brightly every time he prayed to it, so he began to pray even harder, with all the reverence he could muster.

And as a result:

"Uh… Sorry. You're a little *too* bright. Could you dial it back a bit?"

Minato's eyes hurt; the Yamagami had become a light source that outshone the sun. As for Minato, he felt a strange weariness in his body afterward, and he ended up going to bed early.

Chapter 3
A Dramatic Makeover for the Garden

What on earth was going on?

When Minato pulled the curtain open, he saw an exquisite Japanese garden outside.

“Wha—…? Huh…?”

His sleepy eyes sprang open as he was rudely awakened. The first thing that leaped out at him was the pond; the concrete-lined basin that had sat in the garden until yesterday was now filled to the brim with water. Its glassy surface mirrored the lush green trees, covering about a third of the garden’s total area. And the pond wasn’t the only change: grass grew in patches around the garden, and deciduous trees had even been planted along the wall.

At the peak of the arched stone bridge across the water, which reflected the brilliant morning sun, stood the Yamagami. Surrounded by all that green, the white wolf looked magnificent.

Minato opened the glass door and stepped down from the veranda into the outdoor shoes he kept there. Birdsong filled the clear morning air as he followed the flagstone path to where the Yamagami stood.

The kami greeted him with a proud smirk. “Is it to your liking?”

“I didn’t know you could do this kind of thing.”

“I am the Yamagami.”

The Yamagami puffed its chest so far out that it looked in danger of falling over backward. Minato stood beside the kami and leaned over the edge of the bridge to peer into the water. Beneath the reflection of his face on the surface, he saw white

gravel covering the bottom of the pond. The water was about a meter deep but looked much shallower. There was no sign of anything alive in it.

So the Yamagami had not only filled the pond with water, but also planted trees and put down gravel? Awesome indeed was the power of the kami. The house's owner had said Minato could do as he pleased with the yard, so that was no problem, and besides, who would complain about being presented with such a fine garden?

A wind rose, emanating from the smug Yamagami's form. The water's surface rippled as it passed, dispelling its mirrorlike sheen. Minato sighed in admiration as he watched.

"Amazing."

"Aye, I know."

"The water's so clear."

"I drew it from the mountain."

"Unbelievable."

Minato gave the Yamagami a sideways glance.

"So…using too much power made you shrink?"

"…Indeed."

The Yamagami was currently only as big as a medium-sized dog, its face level with Minato's knees. Being looked up to was a novel experience for Minato, but he couldn't help crouching slightly all the same. The Yamagami might not stand on ceremony, but it was still a kami; looking down on it felt taboo. Even when Minato crouched, of course, his head was still higher than the Yamagami's, but he couldn't do much about that.

Minato studied the wolf beside him, which had lost none of its divine aura.

"I've got to say, you do look cute like that."

"Fear not. I shall be back to normal in no time."

"Oh. You will?"

"With some help from you."

"Me?!"

Minato's cheerful laughter echoed across the reborn yard. A flock of startled sparrows took flight from the grass.

○

Minato was returning from a shopping trip when he saw a round seed on a green leaf placed beneath the doorplate at the rear gate. It was the first such mysterious event in some time—since the Yamagami had stopped leaving medicinal herbs for him, in fact.

He suddenly remembered the unusually large number of crabs, turtles, and other shelled creatures he'd seen traversing the narrow ridges between rice paddies only moments ago. They had lined the sides of the path looking up at him, and Minato had gotten the impression they wanted to say something—but was that just his imagination?

Mulling this over, he picked up the black seed. It was about as big as his thumbnail.

"So this isn't from you, Yamagami…?"

"Not I."

"Thought so."

The Yamagami, which was poking its nose through the gap between the gatepost and the lattice gate, was back to its normal size. The great wolf came and went from the property as it pleased. Given how long it had been since wild wolves had existed, this seemed like a bad idea, even if there were no neighbors around to notice. Yet when Minato suggested as much to the Yamagami, the wolf explained that only Minato could see it, so there was no cause for concern.

"Then who *is* this from?"

"Fear not—it means no harm. Though it does wish to impose on your hospitality."

"In the garden?"

"It wishes to live in the pond."

"Huh. And you don't mind?"

"Such permissions are not mine to grant. This place belongs to you."

"Actually, I'm only borrowing it. And the garden feels mostly yours anyway, to be honest."

They were so close to the mountain here that the property had to belong to the Yamagami. People might build houses on land and claim they owned it, but that was little more than empty boasting. Why should the logic of mortals persuade a kami?

Wasn't that why the kami had remade the garden to its liking? Didn't it stay out of the house only as a gesture of consideration? Minato had certainly assumed so.

"Well, I don't mind."

"Did you hear that?"

Minato followed the Yamagami's gaze. Diagonally behind him was a small white being as ephemeral as a heat haze. It crawled along the ground, just barely visible.

"Is that a turtle?"

"Aye."

The turtle's shell was less than ten centimeters across, and it stretched out its neck as it looked up at Minato.

"It says you were its rescuer."

"Huh? I don't remember that at all! It must have the wrong person!"

What happened to the man who rescued a turtle in that famous folktale? The story had drifted into the back of Minato's mind unbidden, and he steeled himself.

"Verily, you know not what you do," the Yamagami said, and its shaggy bulk shook with joyous laughter.

The turtle jumped into the pond with a splash, and its four limbs moved in time as it swam blissfully through the clear water. It seemed to like its new home.

According to the turtle, Minato had freed it when he'd dispelled the *onryo* in town the other day, back when his shopping list had disappeared. He thought back and remembered being so frustrated that he'd complained to a passing stranger, which made him so embarrassed that he had the urge to bang his head against the garden's stone lantern.

Watching the turtle float in the pond with its head above the surface helped Minato calm down before long. He lowered his legs, which he'd been resting on a rock, then took a look around the garden.

"Where should I plant that seed?"

"It will be very large when grown."

"You decide, then, Yamagami."

Without hesitation, the white wolf led Minato to a point almost at the center of the garden.

“Here.”

The Yamagami tapped its paw on a wide patch of empty soil that almost seemed to have been set aside for this very purpose. It used its forepaws to dig a hole, then filled it back in once Minato had dropped the seed inside.

“By the way, what kind of seed was that?”

“The time to worry about that was before planting it.”

“Sorry.”

“It will grow into a tree. Look forward to learning what kind of tree after it grows.”

“I will.”

As Minato used a watering can to sprinkle the patch with moisture, he heard a cheerful splash from the now-sacred pond behind him.

Normally, the Yamagami preferred sweets to sake. One night after dinner, however, it made a rare request for sake instead, so Minato brought out a large bottle from inside the house. The instant he emerged, there was a disturbance in the air, and he felt eyes boring into him from the direction of the sacred pond.

The Yamagami laughed merrily and bit into his *amazake manju*—buns made from sweet sake and rice flour, filled with red bean paste. Minato turned his face to the dimly glowing sacred pond.

“Care for a drink?”

The turtle leaped out of the water in the blink of an eye and crawled toward him. Its pace was not turtle-like in the least; it could easily have raced a hare and kept the lead the whole time. The turtle’s head popped up from below the veranda, its eyes gleaming.

The turtle had grown more substantial by the day, ever since it had first arrived at the Kusunoki residence, and by now Minato could see it clearly. It had a pearly glow with a goldish tint, and its distinctive shell was peaked like a tiny mountain. It looked unlike any ordinary turtle.

When the turtle climbed onto the veranda, Minato noticed that it wasn’t even damp. Things like that always came as a powerful reminder that he was dealing with kami. Minato poured some sake into a shallow dish for the turtle, which immediately pounced on it and began drinking with wild abandon.

Apparently, it liked a drink or two and must have declined previous dinner invitations due to the lack of sake being served.

“I’ll make sure to have some handy in the future.”

The light radiating from the turtle was full of joy.



The turtle was fully substantial once more, and the rainy season was almost upon them. Minato was out in the garden sweeping up the leaves that had fallen on the path.

“You know, the temperature never changes in this garden. And the air feels strangely crisp…”

Above all, there wasn’t a single unpleasant insect.

The rustle of leaves and the scratch of broom on flagstone echoed in the quiet yard. Outside, the temperature and humidity were rising by the day, yet here in the garden of the Kusunoki residence, it was as pleasant as ever. The difference in the air was especially palpable when returning from some errand in the outside world.





The moment you stepped through the front gate, the atmosphere changed. You were enveloped in air that was warm and gentle, with an uncorrupted purity that made you stand up straighter.

No comment came from the great wolf dozing on the veranda or the turtle basking on a rock. They simply passed the time in their own leisurely way. One kami had become two, and yet the garden remained as tranquil and peaceful as ever.

Such was the Kusunoki residence, where a man now stood outside the front gate.

He was tall, dressed in a black suit that had seen better days, and the pale face with which he looked up at the house had noticeable bags under the eyes. It would indeed be a great stretch to describe his appearance as healthy. Evidently unable to overcome his astonishment, he muttered to himself.

"…This place…is the domain of the kami…?"

The words left his lips in a quivering voice as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

○

With the lush, green Japanese garden in front of them, Minato sat beside his dispirited guest on the edge of the veranda. The man seemed only a few years older than he was. He had good posture, but his suit was slightly worn. He was handsome but had an unhealthy-looking complexion and some apparent sleep deprivation. The overall effect was that of a salaryman driven to exhaustion from overwork. He'd changed so dramatically since their first meeting that Minato couldn't help but glance sideways at him every now and then. Minato himself was the picture of health.

The Yamagami was stretched out on the veranda behind this odd couple, watching them with amusement.

When the doorbell had rung and Minato went to see who it was, the figure standing at the gate had almost seemed like a revenant specter. After a brief spell of heart palpitations, Minato finally identified his visitor as the man he'd met in town the other

day. He had immediately apologized to the man, who was clearly his senior, for acting so familiarly during their last encounter, but the other man had waved it off, thus completing the standard apology-and-greeting scenario. Minato ushered him in through the gate, and the man froze at the sight of the magnificent garden. Minato couldn't figure out why he'd been so taken aback, but he eventually managed to persuade the man to sit at the edge of the veranda, which was where they found themselves at present.

A round wooden tray sat between the men on the veranda bearing two glasses beaded with condensation. An ice cube shifted inside one with a clear *clink*.

The man had introduced himself as Saiga Harima.

After gazing out at the garden for quite some time, Saiga took a deep breath and turned to face Minato. A hint of his former vitality seemed to have returned to him.

That's only to be expected, though, right? No one can stay gloomy forever in the face of our beautiful garden, Minato thought with satisfaction. Nevertheless, not being sure what the other man might say, he braced himself for the worst.

"I'm an *onmyoji*, you see," Saiga began.

A direct sort of fellow, then. Minato had wondered what revelation that serious face might presage, and here was the answer: Saiga was an *onmyoji*—a spirit-banishing medium straight out of fantasy books.

Kami of the mountain at their back, mystical turtle in the pond before them, not to mention the various nonhuman beings at Minato's family home—Minato had been in contact with mysterious beings since childhood, and Saiga's confession was not enough to faze him.

Expression unchanged, Minato used his eyes to urge Saiga to continue.

"It was your power that dispelled that *onryo* the other day, wasn't it?"

"…It seems so."

Minato hadn't been aware of this, or even seen it happen, so none of it seemed quite real to him, but there was no point in

denying it. This man *could* see such things—why else would he have come all the way to Minato's house?

Minato was acting as if the whole thing had nothing to do with him. Seeing this, Saiga pursed his lips, making an all but indescribable expression, as if accepting something he had desperately wished not to be so. This was followed by a bitter grimace.

"There are so many troublesome *onryo* of late that we *onmyoji* lack the numbers to deal with them. Partly, of course, because so few people have the necessary powers to dispel them."

"I see."

"You didn't seem to see the *onryo* that day, but you dispelled it without a trace. Do you have any idea why this might be?"

"My handwriting does it, apparently."

"Would you consider selling me those talismans?"

"Talismans?" Minato parroted back, momentarily stupefied.

He heard a stifled chuckle behind him.

"*Talisman*—an apt phrase indeed. This man wishes to buy papers you have written on," came the kindly explanation from the Yamagami.

The word *talisman* hardly ever came up in Minato's everyday conversations, so he'd had a hard time recognizing it at first.

To Minato, the Yamagami was as visible and audible as always, but that didn't seem to be the case for Saiga. The *onmyoji* did seem to be aware that *something* was behind him, but that was all. Realizing that the Yamagami truly was invisible to anyone but him, Minato felt his faith in the kami grow.

Saiga pulled a hefty billfold from his jacket pocket.

"I'll pay any price you name."

"For my shopping list?"

"Sh-shopping list?!"

The truth was out now. Saiga's face froze.

The prospect of a new income stream momentarily buoyed Minato's spirits, but he soon came down to earth when he realized how slim those profits were likely to be. He would be selling nothing but words scrawled on notepad paper; the ink costs were negligible, and given the low production costs and minimal effort required, he could hardly demand exorbitant prices from the *onmyoji*. His conscience pricked at him.

“I doubt they’d even be worth a yen per page…”

“Shopping…lists…?”

Saiga’s thoughts seemed to be somewhere else entirely. He put his hand to his brow and leaned forward, muttering to himself deliriously.

“This can’t be real… How…?”

Minato had no idea how a person became an *onmyoji*, but he assumed there was training involved—something that took real effort. No doubt an *onmyoji* who had put in that kind of effort would have certain feelings about Minato’s ability to dispel evil spirits simply by writing a few words on a sheet of paper, without any training at all. Minato couldn’t do much about that. But given that Saiga had come to him for help, the least he could do was offer his assistance.

“Wait a minute. If my power depends on how I feel, then maybe I could put more effort into the writing to make these talismans stronger…and worth more?”

If someone was willing to pay, though, you took their money—that was an area where Minato wasn’t willing to compromise.

“All you need to do is write with intention,” interrupted the cheerful voice of the Yamagami.

Minato suddenly realized something: Now that he went out only to go shopping and had the Yamagami to chat with at home, he no longer passed the time writing.

“All right, then! Let’s see if I still have what it takes,” Minato said energetically, and Saiga finally reached for his glass.

Minato produced a notepad from his pocket and began to write. He didn’t write with his usual scrawl but carefully put his heart into each and every character.

“*Kokuto manju*, *kuri manju*, *imagawa-yaki*, *kusa dango*, *sakura mochi*.”

The Yamagami rattled off a list of its favorite sweets.

“Smooth red bean paste…”

When Saiga realized what Minato was muttering and writing, he sprayed tea toward the garden. Minato looked up, startled.

“Are you okay?”

Saiga nodded wordlessly, covering his mouth with a handkerchief.

The more Minato wrote, the more strongly the notepad radiated with a jade-colored light. They were just words—a scrap of paper bearing a list of Japanese sweets, written by an ordinary person with no special study or training whatsoever. Yet there it was, glowing.

Not even a master *onmyoji* straining to imbue the text or diagrams they wrote with mystical power could create items of such potency.

A dry laugh escaped Saiga from behind his handkerchief.

“Leave it there,” came the voice of the Yamagami.

“Oh—right. Huh… That’s strange…”

The same moment the kami told him to stop, a powerful wave of drowsiness swept over Minato and his hand fell still. It was the strange feeling of exhaustion he’d experienced after offering prayers to the Yamagami some days earlier.

He had managed to write only five pages, yet his whole body felt leaden and dull, and he doubted he could write any more. Sheepishly, he scratched the back of his neck.

“…I’m afraid this is it.”

“That is more than enough.”


kokuto manju
kuri manju
imagawa-yaki
kusa dango
ra mochi



Minato tore the sheets from the notepad as carefully as he could. Saiga accepted them reverently in both hands, and he tucked them into his billfold as if handling precious gems. Minato squirmed at the sight. As far as he could see, they were only sheets of notepad paper.

In exchange for the sheets of paper, Saiga offered a slim stack of ten-thousand-yen bills. There had to be at least ten of them in the sheaf he held out to Minato, whose eyes flew open at this unexpected generosity.

"No freaking way."

Minato's true nature had revealed itself before he could stop it. His polite tone always tended to drop away when he was flustered, startled, or angry. Just seconds ago, he'd had to stop his eyelids from drooping, yet that drowsiness had disappeared in an instant. He hadn't expected Saiga to place such value on a few sheets of cheap notepad paper with writing on them—even if that writing was neat and carefully done. He stared at Saiga. The *onmyoji* looked back without a hint of mockery on his face.

He thrust the sheaf of bills toward Minato again, urging him to accept them, but Minato held up both hands and shook his head violently. It was a full-body refusal.

"No. No way. I can't accept that—it's way too much. You saw me! All I did was write a few things down. And this is a super-cheap notepad, too; I got three of them for a hundred yen. I was getting a little carried away thinking *maybe* you'd pay three hundred yen or so per page!"

"This is what they're worth. Actually, no—they're worth more than this. I apologize, but I wasn't expecting the talismans to be so powerful. I don't have any more cash on me, but I'll come back another day, and—"

"What are you talking about?!"

"In any case, please accept this for the time being."

Saiga held the money out toward Minato again, stubbornly insistent.

This was one pushy *onmyoji*.

"Take it."

"No way."

"Just take it."

"I can't!"

After the struggle had continued long enough, Minato heard a deep sigh from behind him.

“Take the money. This man will not back down.”

Hearing this advice from the Yamagami, Minato finally agreed to let the *onmyoji* pay him, though with one final protestation.

“This is enough. I don’t need any more than this. If you bring more money, I won’t accept it.”

Though he wasn’t finished quite yet…

“I still feel guilty. Hold on a moment, please.”

“…As you wish.”

Minato stepped into the house and came back with a pen.

“Hold out your hand,” he said, and Saiga did so without complaint.

“Apparently, the type of pen doesn’t make a difference, but still…”

The oil-based pen squeaked as Minato drew a design on the back of Saiga’s hand.

“*Onmyoji* and pentagrams go together, right? I put some serious effort into that one. What do you think?”

The back of Saiga’s hand now bore a five-pointed star—the bellflower crest of legendary *onmyoji* Abe no Seimei. The oil-based ink was made to last. Unseen by Minato, the design was imbued with powerful spirit-dispelling power that gave off a jade-green light.

Saiga’s mouth hung open in shock, but Minato only smiled in satisfaction. “Damn,” he said, lazily rubbing his eyes with the hand that still held the pen. “Now I’m *really* sleepy.”

The *onmyoji* left with a slightly dazed air, and Minato fell asleep on the veranda.

When he opened his eyes, the turtle was peering into his face from directly beside him.

“Whoa!”

Minato recoiled on instinct. Evening was near, and the sky was several tones darker. He must have been asleep for quite a while.

When Minato sat up, the turtle looked at him with expectant eyes. The hour was getting late—was it time for evening sake? Or was there something else it wanted to say? The turtle had yet to

make a single sound—neither words nor animal cries came from its mouth. When the Yamagami did not speak for it, it answered questions by gesturing with its head.

"What's up?"

The turtle stretched its head toward the garden. Minato looked in that direction and saw a slim lone tree he didn't recognize.

"Is that from the seed we planted?"

Minato descended from the veranda and followed the path toward the young tree. Where yesterday there hadn't even been a sprout, today a sapling stood almost to Minato's eye level. It had a bushy crown of young, fresh green leaves—but that was worrying, too.

"Look how big it is already… Must be the power of the kami. I mean, yeah, it's amazing, but what about nutrients? Is it getting enough to grow this fast?"

At his feet, the turtle gave the tree trunk an encouraging pat.

A new companion had joined their garden: the sacred camphor tree.

"First things first—let's get this tree some water!" Minato said, and he and the turtle busily set about tending to the tree.

The Yamagami, just woken from its slumber on the veranda, yawned widely as it watched.

○

After days of rain, the weather was finally clearing.

The rain clouds that had occupied the sky for the entire rainy season had vanished at last, letting the long-waiting sunshine back in. Minato stepped onto the veranda to hang out the morning's washing.

The snap of a wet towel rang out across the garden.

"It really is nice hanging the washing outside," Minato said. "Not that I don't appreciate having a dryer."

A gust of wind filled the sheet draped over the bamboo pole beside him, making it swell. Minato was a little concerned about how weak the sunlight was, but he still preferred to dry his washing outside in the wind and sun as often as possible. And yet, happy as he was for this brief respite from the dreary rain, his face was not as cloudless as the sky overhead.

He whacked a towel despondently, beating out the wrinkles.

"I wonder what happened to the Yamagami."

The Yamagami had stopped visiting just as the rainy season began.

There had been no warning; the great wolf had simply vanished, despite the companionable dinner they had shared the very night before its disappearance. Minato had agonized considerably over what misstep he might have made, but after failing to think of anything, he had decided it was best to stop worrying about it.

The turtle had remained by his side, which was some comfort. It was always delighted whenever he scrubbed its mountain-shaped shell with a brush to show his appreciation. However, despite these idyllic moments between man and turtle, the sudden disappearance of the great wolf's imposing presence left Minato feeling lonely and concerned. He sent a prayer mountainward for the Yamagami's safety every day.

"…I hope it's doing well, at least …"

Splish—the sound of something hitting the surface of the pond. Minato turned to see a large white figure wander silently in through the rear gate. The absolute certainty of its tread, the gleam of its fur—seeing its form utterly unchanged, Minato cried out.

"Yamagami! It's been a while. I'm glad to see you looking—Huh?!"

The Yamagami had children with it.

Minato's mouth hung open in astonishment, and a shirt fell from his hand.

The great wolf approached the stunned man, followed by three white beasts. Their faint glow made it clear they were no ordinary animals, but the same kind of being as the Yamagami.

Minato was utterly discombobulated at this unexpected sight.

"Wha…? Huh?! Did you give birth? Is that why you couldn't visit? Were you a female kami all along?! But you talk like an old man…"

"Don't say 'old man'! That's rude!"

"You could at least say 'elderly man'!"

"Yeah, don't call it an old geezer!"

“I didn’t actually say… Wait, you’re not wolves. Are you weasels?”

The trio reared up on their hind legs and raised a chorus of objections in their youthful, high-pitched voices. They had long, lean bodies covered in white fur, with short legs and stubby tails. Each of their tails had a different color at the tip—red, blue, and yellow. They were small compared with the Yamagami, but still a decent size in their own right, about as big as fully grown cats. Their clear way of speaking and nimble movements suggested they weren’t newborns.

They followed the Yamagami up onto the veranda. The great wolf went straight to its usual spot at the center and stretched out wearily. Its movements were more languorous than before, and it seemed quite exhausted.

With a deep sigh, the Yamagami swept its bushy tail back and forth.

“They are martens. They are my kin.”

“‘Kin’…as in kids? You mean you gave birth to them? Or did someone else do that part?”

“Well…I did birth them, in a way. I have the power to create echoes of myself that one might call children. Though it does take some time.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad it went well. And it’s nice to meet you three. Want some sweets?”

The three martens, seated in a row beside the Yamagami, quizzically tilted their heads all at the same angle. It was an adorable sight, and Minato felt himself smile. *They may not be wolves, but these martens have an appeal all their own.*

“Oh, right—you’ve probably never had any before. Yamagami, is it okay if I give them sweets?”

“Aye, that is fine. And some for me, of course.”

“You got it.”

Not knowing when the Yamagami might visit, Minato had no fresh sweets on hand; all he had were some longer-lasting baked goods. After hanging out the rest of his laundry at top speed, he brought out a castella cake cut into slices. The Yamagami said nothing but seemed slightly dissatisfied. Minato offered it an apologetic look, and the Yamagami replied with a magnanimous nod, as if to say that it was of little importance.

Once the great wolf began eating, the three martens exchanged glances, then began sniffing every square inch of the castella cake they held in their front paws. Finally, they took their first hesitant bite together. Their black eyes opened wide. Glittering stars seemed to surround them. Clearly, they found the taste to their liking. As expected, the Yamagami's kin were also partial to sweets, and the three of them took to the castella with gusto.

"There's plenty to go around, so… Actually, will we have enough…?"

The martens finished their cake in seconds. Three pairs of eyes turned hopefully to Minato, making him break out in a cold sweat. He gave each of them another slice, deciding to bring out the cookies if the cake ran out.

"Now, *that* looks tasty."

"Ooh, can we have some, too?"

Two voices descended from diagonally above him, and Minato looked up to see a pair of tiny *oni* poking their heads out from under the eaves, looking at him upside down. Each had a single horn growing in the middle of their forehead. One had vivid red skin, and the other, blue. They were definitely not human.

Startled, Minato glanced at the Yamagami, but the great wolf didn't get involved; eyes closed, it was focused on savoring its sweets. Over at the pond, the turtle was busy basking on a rock, evidently making the most of the first sun they had seen in a while. The lack of interest that either showed in the two *oni* was all the assurance Minato needed that they weren't evil.





The *oni*, who were clearly enjoying watching a flustered Minato swivel his head this way and that, flipped off the eaves and hung cross-legged in the air. They looked almost like human children around the age of three and were presumably a matching pair, considering they were almost identical. They were naked to the waist, where they wore only a loincloth each, which Minato found slightly concerning. Despite their appearance, however, they had the cool, collected voices of adult men.

The red *oni* grinned guilelessly.

"Can we have some, too, pleeease?"

"Go ahead."

"Coming through!"

The blue *oni* laughed brightly, and the two of them silently descended to the veranda. The assembled guests all sat in a circle. The Yamagami's kin, still devouring their cake, studied the new arrivals with fascination.

Minato gave each of the *oni* a slice of castella and a cup of hot green tea, then poured some tea for the martens, too. The Yamagami's kin picked up their glasses and chugged the tea greedily, then gave a contented sigh. They certainly showed little restraint; in that respect, they were just like their parent, who was enjoying the sweets with a satisfied look on its face. The *oni* also raised the castella to their mouths happily.

The great wolf, taking up a sizable arc of the circle, shot a glance at the two of them.

"Fujin, Raijin. It has been some time."

"No kidding! Looks like you've managed to stick it out, though."

"You got so weak there, we thought you were a goner."

"Drivel and lies. It would take more than that to end me."

"I didn't realize you knew each other. By Fujin and Raijin, do you mean the famous gods of wind and lightning?" Minato blurted.

The red *oni*—Raijin—responded with a wink.

Next to him, the blue *oni*—Fujin—chuckled gleefully.

"Famous, huh?"

When Fujin pointed an index finger at the laundry swaying in the breeze, wind burst from his fingertip. A warm whirlwind raced straight to the laundry and engulfed it. A few seconds later…

“All dry.”

“Whoa!”

Minato cried out with astonishment. A beaming Fujin held out an empty plate, and Minato loaded it up with castella. Yet more evidence that kami didn’t know the word *restraint*.

Fujin stabbed the castella with a fork.

“We heard things had gotten more livable around here, so we figured it was about time we dropped by.”

“Who told you this?”

“Don’t glare like that! And keep that scary divine aura to yourself, thanks. I heard it on the wind, to answer your question. That’s my whole thing, remember?”

Fujin airily waved off the hostility steaming from the Yamagami.

“It’s gotten a *lot* cozier, that’s for sure!”

Suppressing a giggle, Raijin shot a meaningful sidelong glance at Minato, who smiled politely and handed butter cookies to the three martens. They turned the cookies this way and that, examining them from every angle before taking their first bite together. When they did, their fur stood on end and their tails swelled to twice their usual size.

Even as Minato once again mused to himself how different they were from the wolf, the martens lost control, unable and unwilling to stop. This reaction was even starker than when he’d given them the castella. Judging by the dreamlike bliss on their faces as they stuffed them with cookies, the Yamagami’s kin preferred Western-style sweets.

The Yamagami, on the other hand, hated any sweets that absorbed the moisture inside its mouth. Minato still ruefully remembered an early incident when the great wolf had gotten one such snack stuck in its throat, causing a major uproar.

At some point in the proceedings, the turtle had clambered up onto the veranda as well. It seldom asked for sake during the day, but perhaps it had gotten swept up in the festive atmosphere.

When Minato brought out a large bottle of sake from a famous brewery, the two *oni* changed their attitudes completely. Two sets of eyes bored into it, and Minato held up the bottle.

“Care for a drop?”

“Yes pleeease.”

“Thank you.”

It was a little hard for Minato to wrap his head around the sight of two toddlers snatching up sake cups with practiced ease. But they were kami. He had to tell himself that everything would be fine as he filled the turtle’s shallow bowl as well.

Everyone ate and drank without reserve, and the sake and sweets disappeared at a brisk pace. The garden rang with unceasing cheerful laughter as the lively gathering wound on.

At the height of the festivities, Fujin and Raijin waved goodbye as they soared into the evening sky.

“We’ll be baaack!”

“Thanks for having us! That was delicious!”

Minato and the Yamagami bid them farewell, waving from the ground.

“Glad you enjoyed it!”

“Indeed. Until next time.”

Suddenly stopping in midair, Fujin pointed a finger at Minato, who was immediately enveloped in a cocoon of warm air. His hair and the hem of his jacket fluttered briefly, leaving Minato unsure how to react. Fujin grinned and waved again.

“I lent you a bit of my power, as a thank-you! So long!”

“Good luck learning to use it!”

Leaving this minor gift behind, the tipsy Fujin and Raijin flew off beyond the mountain.

The Yamagami stared at Minato. Minato stared back.

“Power?” he asked.

“The power of the wind.”

“What do I do with it?”

“Picture it in your mind. *See* the wind come forth.”

Minato tried imagining a gust of wind emanating from him toward a withered leaf at his feet.

Nothing happened.

After a brief hesitation, Minato remembered the gesture Fujin had used. He tried again, pointing a finger at the leaf and imagining a whirlwind emerging from his fingertip. A mild breeze came from his hand, pushing the leaf a few centimeters forward before it hit a rock.

“Whoa!”

It was the faintest puff of wind possible, but Minato pumped a fist as his face lit up.

“That’s amazing! I really made the wind blow!”

“Aye. But you have far to go yet.”

“I wonder if I could use this power to deal with all those fallen leaves…”

“P-perhaps…”

Minato had gained a new supernatural power, and the first thing that had come to mind was sweeping up leaves.

The Yamagami watched idly as Minato rejoiced in his newfound powers, nudging leaves this way and that. The camphor tree, now as tall as Minato, frolicked in the breeze and watched them both. As for the martens and the turtle, they were flat out on the veranda, stomachs bulging, happily asleep.

Chapter 4
Finding His Feet

Minato sat in the dining room slumped over the open household accounts book, head in his hands. The dejected curve of his back revealed the depths of his anguish.

"The finances…"

The house's accounts were in dire shape. He was facing the proverbial wheel of fire. Every aspect of the situation was grim.

Minato had grown up in an *onsen* town nestled among the mountains of another prefecture. It was a very close-knit neighborhood; it had been common to find neighbors making themselves at home in your house, and Minato himself had often joined other families for dinner. All the children in each age group were raised together, which made them extremely close.

After growing up in a place with such strong local ties, Minato found it painful to live in an unfamiliar area like this with no neighborly interactions whatsoever. But stepping into the garden always brought him relief.

When he did, he usually found a great wolf stationed on the veranda, solid and unmoving. It made sense—the wolf's true form was the mountain, after all, and it gave him an incredible sense of security. Minato also enjoyed having a turtle that seemed sure to offer good fortune whiling away its time in the sacred pond. Just gazing at it seemed to soothe his soul.

Above all, the Yamagami and its kin were companions he could converse with. Minato was genuinely happy to have them around.

But nothing came free.

Knowing no self-restraint, the kami devoured their favorite sweets greedily—and those favorites tended to be on the pricier side. They never complained if Minato served something cheaper, but the difference in their excitement levels and appetites was unmistakable.

Minato felt he could hardly be blamed for splurging on the fancy stuff out of a desire to make his guests happy. Nevertheless, his wages as caretaker were meager, and given the situation of his income at that moment, he felt highly uneasy about digging into his savings.

The problem looked intractable, and it worried him to no end. Minato groaned, tapping the accounts book with a pen.

"I could go back home for a while, earn some money…? No, that's too far. Maybe find a job nearby…? But I don't have any qualifications. Aw, man… What am I going to do?"

Minato tossed his pen down onto the book. Resting his forehead on the back of his folded hands, he breathed out all the air from his lungs in one deep sigh.

The Yamagami, stretched out on the veranda as usual, twitched its ears. It slowly opened its eyes, revealing a golden light that shone like the first rays of sunrise peeking between mountains. They glowed even brighter, and every blink from the great wolf looked like gold dust dancing in the air.

Having reclaimed its powers, the kami of the mountain had no difficulty hearing even a whisper from inside a perfectly soundproofed room.

Its gaze wandered to the pond. Sunlight reflected diffusely from the pearly shell atop the great rock protruding from the water. As the Yamagami watched, a head and four limbs poked out energetically.

The turtle's name was Reiki.

Its true identity was one of the Four Spirits, also known as the auspicious beasts, said to bring good fortune.

Reiki rose slowly to its feet. It planted its four legs firmly on the rock and stretched its head far, far out toward the blue sky.

Then it opened its mouth wide.

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Jingle jangle! Above the hubbub of the packed shopping strip, a clear bell sounded.

“Congratulations! You win the top prize!”

The shop assistant held up a raffle ticket. FIRST PRIZE, it read, in blazing gold letters. Explosive excitement filled the air, and Minato, who’d just drawn the lot and handed it over, stared slack-jawed.

“Nice work, sonny!”

A middle-aged man standing behind Minato slapped him cheerfully on the back, snapping him out of his daze.

“Huh? Oh… Right. Thanks…?” Minato replied, looking over his shoulder, still dumbfounded.

The man cackled with glee and pounded his back even harder. It hurt, but it also brought home the reality of what had just happened:

He’d won first prize in the shopping-strip raffle.

Minato had only ever won participation prizes before at best—pocket-sized packets of tissues and the like. He couldn’t believe his luck! He had quite a stock of raffle tickets due to his frequent purchases of sake and sweets, and this was only his first.

With no idea what first prize actually was, he accepted the envelope handed to him. An employee in a headband and a *happi* coat explained its contents to him with a smile.

“A hundred thousand yen worth of shopping vouchers.”

“O-one hundred *thousand* yen?!”

Minato’s words came out in a stutter, and his eyes flew open. This place certainly was generous with its money. Still, the vouchers were more than welcome. He had been considering going down a rank with his sake and sweets, guilty as it would make him feel.

Grinning broadly, Minato turned around with a spring in is step.

Bang! As the cracker burst, a cloud of confetti descended from above. Startled, Minato paused in the liquor store’s entrance.

“Congratulations! Today is the three hundred thirty-third anniversary of the Tanba Liquor Store’s founding, and you are our three hundred thirty-third customer!”

All this happened the moment he stepped inside. The people who filled the cramped store smiled and applauded, making him squirm. An employee stepped forward from beside the door.

“Thank you for being a regular customer of the Tanba Liquor Store. This way, please.”

“Uh, sure…”

The employee smiled at Minato, who didn’t quite grasp the situation, and prompted him to stand in front of a round table beside the cash register. The tabletop was completely covered with bottles of sake.

“A minor token of our appreciation. We hope you will enjoy it.”

“Huh? These are all for me?”

“Yes. Thirty-three bottles in all.”

Still dazed, Minato noticed that some of them were bottles from well-known breweries that Minato’s sake-loving father had often lamented being unable to obtain. He could never have carried all of them home, but the store, it turned out, was happy to deliver. Swept up by the smoothly efficient employees, Minato had filled out his address on the delivery form before he knew it.

○

Dinner was on the veranda, as always.

The Yamagami sat at the low table across from Minato. Beside the great wolf, Reiki plunged its face into a deep bowl filled with sake. Minato happily reported his good fortune to the table.

“…Anyway, apparently it was *really* my lucky day today. I brought one of the bottles back with me to tide us over till the others get here. How is it, Turtle?”

The turtle turned toward Minato and used its forehead to push the dish toward him. Not a drop was left, and it looked completely satisfied with the quality of the sake.

“The rest should arrive tomorrow. Look forward to that!”

Minato poured a generous second bowlful of sake for Reiki, which was wagging its little tail, and then did the same for the Yamagami.

“Good news, indeed,” the Yamagami said.

“Yeah. I got those sweets you’re eating from a special sale featuring regional confections from all over the country. Those are my hometown’s specialty.”

“Mm. I will grant that this white bean paste has its charms, too. The moist texture is delicious.”

“I’m glad you like it. I got some for the martens, too, so don’t forget to take it home for them.”

The Yamagami’s kin visited only occasionally, and today was not one of those occasions. Knowing they loved Western-style sweets, Minato had of course bought some for them, too.

“Your—”

“Oh!”

Just as the Yamagami began to speak, Minato’s phone, sitting on the table, announced an incoming call. The Yamagami’s eyes urged Minato to pick it up. When he did, he saw the word HOME on the screen and shot the Yamagami an apologetic look as he put the phone to his ear.

“Hello? Oh, Mom? Yeah, I’m fine. How about you?”

The two sides of the call updated each other on recent developments. Nothing much seemed to have changed at home. The barrage of questions from his anxious mother was relentless.

“Yep. Of course I’m taking care of myself. No, I’m not sleeping with my belly out! I’m not a kid anymore, Mom. Also, when I asked Raijin about that, I got a real earful: ‘Oh, *please*! Do you *really* think I’d steal someone’s belly button?’ so— Uh…wait, forget I said that. So, why are you calling? …Huh?! …Um, okay. Thanks.”

The conversation over, Minato, sitting cross-legged, slowly lowered his arm holding the phone down to his knee. He gazed blankly at the dark screen.

“What is it?” asked the Yamagami, swishing its tail and tilting its head.

“I won one hundred thousand yen in a contest I entered before I left. Mom’s going to transfer it to my bank account.”

“How fortuitous.”

“There’s no way this lucky streak can be real! I mean, it *is* real, but—you know what I mean.”

“I see no cause to fret. Think of it as a reward for doing good as a matter of course—good words, good deeds.”

“Well…maybe…?” Minato put a hand to his chin and muttered to himself in confusion. “I don’t think I’m doing anything that special… But at least this way I’ll have plenty of food and drink for the kami.” The thought brought him some relief.

Minato put his phone back on the table and picked up his glass.

“But I am going to look for a job.”

“Is that so?”

Cheerfully watching the inebriated turtle, the Yamagami lapped at its sake.

The following day, Saiga the *onmyoji* visited again, this time bearing sweets as a house gift. His visit was to ask Minato to make more talismans.

“I hope you’ll agree to help me.”

Sitting across the low table from Minato, Saiga bowed deeply. Unlike last time, his black suit looked to be an expensive brand and was without a wrinkle, his complexion was healthy, and his hair neatly brushed. There wasn’t a hint of exhaustion about him; he looked eminently professional. Of course, that was how Minato generally reacted to people with glasses and elegantly worn, well-tailored suits.

Devotion to duty was one thing, but the last time he’d come, Minato had worried that Saiga might be working too much and endangering his health. Fortunately, that didn’t seem to be the case.

All that aside, this represented an opportunity Minato hadn’t dreamed of. This request from Saiga would let him put the powers he apparently had to use—what choice was there but to say yes?

“I accept the commission.”

A smiling Minato also accepted the box of sweets Saiga offered with both hands. The Yamagami had stationed itself beside the table, and its intense gaze tracked the box closely. It was the fiery gaze of a hunter that would never, *ever* lose its target, and Minato thought the box might end up with a hole in it.

There was no need to deduce the contents of the box from its refined sakura-pink wrapping paper; it was clear from the Yamagami's reaction that there was high-grade *wagashi* inside. When Saiga raised his head, he furtively but confidently said, "I believe you like *wagashi*." Perhaps because Minato had written nothing but *wagashi* names on the notepad sheets last time, it seemed Saiga thought he was an inveterate *wagashi*-holic.

Well—the Yamagami was, at least.

Minato glanced at the great wolf, which currently had a bead of drool trickling from its jaws, and said, "Sure, in a way."

The truth was that Minato preferred spicy snacks; sweet treats weren't really his thing. But his new client seemed likely to bring more gifts in the future, and some minor fibbing for the Yamagami's sake could surely be forgiven.

Minato smiled that polite smile of his, the one renowned for its apparent insincerity.

Saiga left as soon as he had what he came for: sheets of notepad paper with lists of *wagashi* written on them in big, blocky characters.

At the urging of the gleeful Yamagami, Minato set about opening the box of sweets, and a whiff of sakura brushed his nose. Inside the box were gleaming rows of *sakura mochi*—pink cakes made of glutinous rice, filled with red bean paste, and wrapped in two sakura leaves. When the Yamagami saw this, its drool became a waterfall pooling between its two front paws.

Minato plated the mochi with all possible speed and set them on the table with a "Sorry to keep you waiting" directed at the Yamagami.

It began to eat the sweets one by one, unhurriedly, carefully engulfing each mochi within its mouth, then chewing it over and over again. The Yamagami's expression took on a look of delirious ecstasy, and it let out a murmur of delight.

"This sa…sakura smell that pierces the nose is a…a wonder beyond compare. The grains of rice are just soft enough, with just the right amount of salt. Truly the work of a master. And, of course, that rich, smooth red bean paste that melts on the tongue…"

The great wolf set out on a journey to parts beyond. Minato sat across from it, crunching crisply on rice crackers from a bag labeled ECONOMY SIZE—SUPER SPICY SENBEI.

"These hit the spot."

Minato was a man of inexpensive tastes. Just as his words implied, he was utterly satisfied.

"They're so spicy! I'm really heating up." Minato pulled off the thin jacket he wore over his T-shirt and gazed at the Yamagami's face, which bore a complex expression.

"Taste is a personal matter. If those please you, I have no quarrel with that."

"I'm not really a fan of sweets, you see. Don't worry about me."

The Yamagami seemed concerned about Minato's staunch refusal to take any of the *sakura mochi*. They had this conversation every time, in fact, whatever the sweets on offer were, and it was always equally fruitless.

"I'm just glad I found some work."

In fact, work had found *him*, summoned by a certain auspicious beast. Minato, knowing nothing of this, smiled cheerfully and downed his ginger ale. The Yamagami let its exasperation show in a deep sigh, hiding nothing this time.

"You ought to use some of the money for yourself."

"There's nothing in particular I want, though. I'm good."

"Such unselfishness defies common sense."

"I wouldn't say that. Oh! Now that I think of it, there was something I wanted."

"Is that so?"

"I'll go buy it tomorrow."

What could Minato want?

The great wolf rolled the final *sakura mochi* around on its tongue, prolonging the pleasure as long as it could. Reiki licked at a tiny dish of salt.

The following day, Minato let out a cry of amazement in the garden.

"I had no idea a new one would feel so different!"

He was overjoyed by how his new bamboo broom felt in his hands. The kami sat before their own expensive offerings, gazing

at the youth in the threadbare tracksuit and sandals, their feelings many and complex.

○

Minato vigorously ripped the tape off the cardboard box on the living room floor. The Yamagami, stretched out on the veranda, watched through the glass door.

“What is that?”

“I got my folks to send it to me from home.”

From inside the parcel, Minato first took out a box of sweets from his hometown and set it on the table. The eyes of the great wolf became crescents of joy as it sniffed.

“Smooth bean paste, then.”

“You have an excellent nose.”

The great wolf sat up straight and turned to face the inside of the house. As it watched, garments came out of the box one by one. Minato had asked his mother to send him some winter clothes ahead of the coming change in seasons. The last thing he took out was a shoebox, which he opened to reveal a pair of hiking boots. He picked one up and turned it this way and that.

“A little battered, but they should still be fine.”

He was fond of these boots, which he had chosen a few years ago after much deliberation. There was a fairly large tear on one heel, but the soles weren’t too worn, and the boots were still firm and supportive.

Noticing the Yamagami’s mystified expression, Minato smiled.

“They’re for hiking in the mountains. I haven’t been getting enough exercise lately, and your home is so close by…”

“My mountain is not one to be climbed for sport.”

“I know, I know. I’ll make sure to prepare properly.”

“Partway up the slope there stands a small *hokora* shrine. Doubtless you could reach it without too much trouble.”

“Huh, really? In that case, I’ll climb up to it tomorrow.”

“Once, long ago, a ceaseless stream of mortals visited that shrine, yet now none come at all. It has fallen into utter disrepair, I fear.”

Hearing this, Minato froze.

“…Oh.”

However the Yamagami didn’t seem bothered, and it continued to cast repeated glances at the box of sweets. “I will have my kin guide you,” it said, but its eyes made an eloquent appeal. Its top priority at that moment, evidently, was those local sweets from Minato’s hometown. Minato tidied away the empty cardboard box as quickly as he could.



It was early summer, and the whole mountain was a vivid shade of green.

Sunlight spilled through tree branches, and the smoothly flowing valley stream glimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. The sound of the running water made an ear-soothing babble, and the moist soil and trees gave off a distinctive yet comforting aroma. Minato filled his lungs with fresh mountain air. Up ahead, mossy stepping stones were regularly spaced across a glittering stream.

Minato grabbed his cap by the brim and adjusted it on his head. When he cautiously set his foot down on the first stepping stone, fish floating in the water nearby swam away upstream.

“Remember to watch your step.”

“I will.”

The warning had come from one of the Yamagami’s marten kin, which had already crossed the stream and was now standing on his hind legs watching from the far shore. This was Seri, the oldest and most responsible of the three.

The kind and caring middle marten, Torika, hopped across the stones after Minato.

“It’s just on the other side of this stream.”

“Okay.”

As for Utsugi, the youngest and most carefree of the martens, he was riding on Minato’s backpack, facing where they’d come from.

“Yummy!”

“Make sure you chew before you swallow, or you might choke.”

Minato didn't want a repeat of the time the Yamagami had thrashed around with something caught in its throat.

Seri narrowed his eyes and folded his forepaws irritably.

"When you eat your snack is up to you, but do you have to eat it *there*?"

"Utsugi, get down and walk for yourself. You're a burden on Minato."

"It's all right. The weight's not so bad."

Minato defended the youngest marten against his older siblings' criticism.

"You're too soft on him."

As Seri let out a resigned sigh, Minato hopped from the final stone to the far shore with a "Hup!"

Minato and the three martens were headed for the *hokora* halfway up the mountain that the Yamagami had mentioned. The martens had come for Minato early in the morning and led him up a trail that could barely even be called one.

They were beasts, after all; they thought nothing of traversing routes that humans would never choose. They led him through thickets of densely growing knee-high grass, and along sharp precipices that would do more than injure someone unlucky enough to fall. Minato had to stay alert as he walked.

The mountain, the Yamagami's true form, was well over a thousand meters high. Minato had not expected to hum his way up a gentle hiking trail, but he'd never expected anything this challenging. This went well beyond what he had imagined.

Internally, he praised himself for having his hiking boots sent from home. Compared with sneakers, proper boots made hiking much less tiring on the feet, and these boots had hard soles with good ankle support. Minato vowed to give these trusty companions of his proper maintenance as soon as he got home.

He parted the leafy branches that blocked his way and pushed between them, and his aged, noticeably scarred hiking boots gripped the ground and carried him forward.

Finally, at the far end of the tunnel of greenery, Minato glimpsed a path that looked more walkable. It had to be the

mountain trail used by the visitors of ages past, and he stepped out of the dense woods with relief.

Yet when he turned to look at Seri, who was already pressing on, he saw that the path up the slope, narrow enough to begin with, was strewn with huge rocks.

Minato's face froze. He looked up and saw a sheer cliff above the path. Indentations pockmarked the cliff where hunks of rock had fallen loose, and based on the color, this seemed to have happened some time ago. The weather had been fine for the past few days, though, so there shouldn't be any follow-up bombardment. Probably.

In any case, Minato could hardly give up now. He leaned into the slope and began climbing the path, turning sideways to edge around the rocks.

"These sure do get in the way, huh?" Utsugi called down to Minato, sounding relaxed, still standing on his backpack.

"Uh…yeah."

Minato wheezed and panted as he climbed. Losing his balance slightly, he took great strides across the rocks, and just as he wondered to himself whether they'd ever actually reach their destination, the path ahead opened up into a clearing.

"This way!"

Minato looked in the direction the voice had come from and saw the tiny *hokora* shrine beside the trail. Seri and Torika stood on either side of it, slapping it with their forepaws. Utsugi leaped off Minato's backpack and ran ahead to join his siblings.

Minato approached the *hokora*, climbing the two stone steps leading up to it. It was built of stone, covered in moss, and as high as his chest. A tree had fallen onto it, and the surrounding area was overgrown with weeds. It had been almost entirely incorporated into the mountain, just barely distinguishable as a shrine at all, exactly as you might expect given a lack of human attention.

The deep sigh that came from Minato's slumped form was not solely from exhaustion, though it seemed that only humans got sentimental over such melancholy sights.

"You don't need to tidy it up, you know. The Yamagami won't mind either way."

“That’s right. You show your reverence for the Yamagami directly, so there’s no point.”

“You’re leaving sweets here? We’re going to eat them anyway, so can’t you just hand them straight to us?”

Utsugi looked up at him, holding out his forepaws, and a dry chuckle escaped Minato’s lips. Seeing that the *hokora* was even more dilapidated than he had expected brought home how long it had been since its last visitor. Not years, or even decades—in all probability, the shrine had been abandoned for much, much longer than that.

When Minato ducked under the fallen tree to look inside the shrine, he saw three round stones the size of fists. One of them had cracked cleanly in two.

Humans had put these things here, and humans had arbitrarily decided to offer them worship as the kami’s true form.

Even if this was idolatry, it was clear that people had come here and directed their faith toward the Yamagami. It was precisely because there was a *hokora* to serve as a clear focus of devotion that so many people had paused here for a moment, put their hands together, and closed their eyes to make an offering of prayer.

If faith from people was the source of the Yamagami’s power, then this shrine had ensured the kami’s continued existence to the present day. Yet it was now nothing but a mossy pile of crumbling stone.

How would the ancients have felt if they had known that, with the passage of time, the treasured things they worshipped as kami would end up like this? The desire to keep things neat and tidy was nothing but human self-satisfaction.

But that was fine, because Minato was human, too.

He let out a shallow sigh.

“After we finish cleaning this thing, let’s eat our lunch and snacks.”

The mercenary yet well-meaning martens voiced an “O-kay” in chorus behind Minato as he let his backpack slip from his shoulder.

The *hokora* looked completely different after a good scrub. The party finished their long-awaited meal, including dessert, and

headed back down the mountain.

Minato walked between the martens along the same game trails they had used for the climb earlier. He kept his arms out on either side of him, going from tree trunk to tree trunk as he descended the slope. The short break they'd taken for lunch had helped put the spring back in his step.

Utsugi, slipping effortlessly through the trees beside Minato, innocently asked, "So, can you control the wind yet? *Vwoo, zwirrrl*—like Fujin!"

"A little. It's super handy for drying my hair."

"Drying your *hair*?"

"Probably wouldn't work in the winter cold, though," Minato admitted cheerfully, tugging on a forelock. His hair was starting to get long, and the exasperated martens lamented the waste of his power.

The slope became relatively shallow, and the four of them began swishing through knee-high grass. Minato put his cap back on.

"I mean, what other use do I have for it?"

"What about leaf sweeping?"

"Fine control is super hard. Too hard for me, that's for sure."

Ever since scattering a pile of painstakingly gathered leaves all over the garden, Minato had mostly used his wind powers as a substitute hair dryer. They were impressive powers to have, but he hadn't fully mastered them, and he still spent time every day practicing to make the wind rise and fall in strength.

They chatted idly all the way to the mountain stream. However, just as they reached the water, the leaves and boughs overhead shook as the birds took wing and flew away, calling sharply as they went.

Almost as if it was a warning.

Minato and the three martens paused at the river's edge, and Minato saw the look in their eyes change. Their gazes grew sharp and ferocious, and rage radiated from their entire bodies.

Minato barely had time to be startled at this dramatic shift in the usually cheerful trio before they ran off as one toward the upper reaches of the river. Leaping over and darting among the scattered rocks, they raced in a broad curve around the largest

rock to what lay beyond it. In the blink of an eye, they were out sight. Minato hurried after them.

Minato came panting around the bend, steadying himself with one hand on a rock, and spied a hazy black clump atop a boulder jutting into a tiered waterfall.

The scene was illuminated by a beam of sunlight that fell in through a hole punched cleanly into the canopy overhead. The pure sunlight felt painfully unsuited to the black clump. To judge from the leaves scattered on the rock, the clump had fallen through from above. It was surrounded by a sooty-looking haze, just like the house had been when Minato had first arrived.

"M-Minato!"

Seri's voice was halting and thin. Minato turned and saw the three martens a short distance from the rock, doubled over and covering their mouths with their paws. Bound to protect the mountain, the three of them had sensed an emergency and run to investigate, but it seemed this defilement was beyond their power to deal with.

"We can't get…a-any closer!"

"The corruption… Urgh… Too strong…"

"Ewww… Id'z grozzzzz…"

They dry heaved, clearly in considerable pain.

"Are you okay?! Back away. I can get closer to it, I think."

"…Yes. You have your notepad, right?"

"Yeah."

Minato had brought his notepad with him, of course, and he produced it from his vest pocket. Since learning about his power, he had made a point of carrying it with him and ensuring that half its pages were full of writing at any given time.

To be honest, though, he still didn't quite believe that the characters he wrote had the power to dispel evil spirits.

Torika cast Minato a teary-eyed glance.

"Be…careful."

"Got it."

With a nod, Minato slowly approached the boulder.

The Yamagami's kin could see all of it.

The corrupted, dark clump exuded a miasma that filled the area like fog, but every step Minato took dispersed a little of it, as if he were rending open a path through a sea of black.

"So, even corruption that severe is invisible to him? Owww… My eyes hurt…"

"Seems so. The way he acts so casually is— Ngya! My nose!"

"He might be better off not seeing it. It's filthy and—urk—grozzzzz!"

The martens were sacred beings, highly sensitive to corruption. The fact that they were virtual newborns and had yet to develop a resistance to it also made a big difference.

Eventually, the nauseating miasma that stung their eyes and noses began to thin out. They took deep breaths. Now that they could finally stand up straight, they watched with bated breath as Minato stepped onto the boulder.

Minato looked down at his feet.

He thought he saw a grimy lump, about big enough to put his arms around.

When he glanced at the martens five meters away, he saw them reared up on their hind legs, watching him anxiously.

They must be feeling better, he thought with relief, and he cast his gaze back down toward his feet. Once more, all he could see was a vague black blur, and he felt no particular physical effects. To be honest, it was hard to understand why this should have affected the Yamagami's kin so strongly.

Minato was not blessed with the gift of spirit sight.

Only when corruption reached *onryo*-class levels did it become faintly visible to him. The fact that he could see this thing before him meant it had fallen fairly deep into the pit of depravity.

On the other hand, Minato's personal resistance to corruption like this was outstanding; as long as he didn't touch it, it didn't harm him at all. He gazed curiously at the clump for a while. Sometimes it seemed almost imperceptibly to thin out, only to grow denser again soon after. It expanded, then contracted. Or at least that was how Minato saw it.

"…Huh. So this is it?"

He didn't feel any deep emotion. Detecting movement in his peripheral vision, he raised his head and saw the three martens gesturing furiously.

What are you staring at us for?! Hurry up and dispel it! Their urgent expressions said it all as they stamped their rear legs and waved their forepaws in the air.

They look like they're dancing, Minato thought, and he just barely held back an inappropriate grin. Pulling himself together, he looked down at his hands. When he opened the notepad, he saw that the writing on the pages had begun to fade.

"This might work…I guess? Will it?"

He was incredibly interested in this power he had. After all, a practicing *onmyoji* had paid serious money for these notepad pages.

"I'd better not touch whatever this is directly."

Remembering the pain he'd felt being repelled when he first arrived at the house, Minato tore a sheet of paper from the notepad and dropped it directly over the black clump. The paper drifted downward, and by the time it was about hip height, the writing on it had disappeared without a trace.

"It's completely blank. But that black haze doesn't seem to have changed at all…"

Minato tilted his head to one side, not seeing any change.

As for the Yamagami's kin…

"Whoa! That blew almost all of it away."

"Almost nothing's left! That's amazing."

"Just like the Yamagami said!"

They had clearly seen more than half the cluster of evil spirits disperse, and the martens cheered with excitement. Yet some stubborn spirits were still clinging on. As they squirmed, the trembling martens drew close together, fur standing on end.

"Might as well go all in."

Minato ripped the pages filled with writing out of his notepad, tore them into strips, and sprinkled them over the black mass like rain. The letters disappeared as the strips fell, leaving them blank by the time they reached the top of the boulder. Only the very last strip landed on the rock with writing still on it.

It looked like he'd dispelled the evil spirit; he could finally see for himself that the hazy mass had disappeared. It was the first time he had watched his own power at work.

Minato exhaled thoughtfully. "That was kind of beautiful."

As the black haze faded, a faintly blurred white being had been revealed.

"…Is that a deer? No…"

The being looked like a deer but wasn't. Its body was covered in scales, with long hair along its back and the tail of an ox. Two horns sprouted from a dragon's head. Its eyes were closed, and its overall impression was faintly ephemeral.

"It doesn't seem to be injured…"

As Minato examined the being from various angles, the martens approached and hopped up onto the boulder. The miasma had dispersed without a trace, and the air was once more filled with the pure spirit of the Yamagami.

Amid the roar of the nearby waterfall, the four of them formed a circle peering down at the white being. As they watched, it gained color and became more solid.

"Looks like it's going to be okay. It should come to its senses soon," Seri said with certainty.

Finally, it opened its eyes, and Minato and the martens saw their faces reflected there. The being sluggishly raised its head, blinking repeatedly. They widened the circle to give it some space.

It rose to its feet, standing confidently on four legs. It was elegant and refined in form, radiating a delicate, creamy pearlescence. Its long whiskers swayed in the breeze.

"Are you—?"

Without warning, without even allowing Minato to finish his sentence, it leaped off the boulder. It flew through the hole in the canopy above their heads and soared into the sky beyond. All this happened in an instant, like a rocket launching.

Open-mouthed with astonishment, the four hiking companions stared at the circle of sky overhead. Minato pushed the brim of his cap back and squinted. By now, all he could see was a white dot.

"Now, that's fast! Look how far away it is. Well, as long as it's feeling better."

“It could at least have said thank you.”

“Agreed. No manners at all. And it’s been around long enough to know better.”

“Bye-bye!”

Minato laughed lightheartedly, the two older martens irritably folded their arms, and Utsugi waved with both paws. As each of the four reacted in their own way, a smattering of leaves that had come loose from the branches above fluttered down toward them.

Chapter 5
The Effect of Minato's Mark

Ting.

A light, clear tone came from the wind chime under the eaves. The world outside was sweltering, but the veranda of the Kusunoki residence was bathed in springlike sunlight, and a pleasant breeze was always blowing. As Minato sat at the low table writing on his notepad, he looked completely at ease, showing no sign even that he noticed the heat.

There was not a single unpleasant insect in the garden, which was most agreeable. The only time Minato had been troubled by bugs was immediately after his arrival. This should have been impossible; land this close to the mountain ought to have forced coexistence with the insect kingdom upon Minato, whether he liked it or not.

That it didn't was, of course, due to the divine power of the Yamagami.

The inside of the house, on the other hand, was like a sauna. The garden was undoubtedly a much nicer place to be, which was why Minato spent most of his time there. Above all, this kept his electric bill down, and when night fell, he often ended up sleeping out on the veranda.

Occupying the center of the veranda as usual, the great wolf opened its jaws in a huge yawn. It glanced at Minato's profile as he busied himself writing at the low table.

"You are quite the hard worker."

"I have my moments."

At first, Minato had been able to complete only a handful of pages while concentrating fully before drowsiness and lethargy overcame him. Now, however, he had gotten the knack of things and had doubled the number of pages he could write each session.

"While I was practicing making the wind stronger and weaker, I also started to understand how to focus my spirit-banishing powers. This is actually a lot of fun now."

"No learning is in vain, whatever form it may take."

"Right? My control of that wind power is still pretty shaky, though."

Minato chuckled ruefully, but the dispelling power flowing from the tip of his constantly moving pen was clearly visible to the Yamagami—narrow, long, and without a scrap of wasted energy, like a tough jade-colored thread. Kneeling on the cushion, back straight, mind serene, calmly writing in his notepad, Minato was an impressive sight, with the air of an ascetic monk about him.

There was even a kind of sacredness to the air—even if what Minato was writing was a list of *wagashi* inspired by appetites of the flesh.

The most important factor behind why Minato's powers had become so stable so quickly was his close and constant proximity to the Yamagami.

In the past, the spirit-banishing potential of his writing had varied greatly, with vast amounts of power gone to waste. It seemed the power imbued in Minato's writing was dependent on his state of mind, which was, in turn, quite variable. The doorplates had been imbued with powerful emotions because he'd wanted to do a good job on these important items that would be hung outside the house, and this made them significantly more potent than his usual writing.

Minato could dimly see evil spirits at extreme, *onryo* levels of corruption, but he was unable to see the color, or sense the potency, of his own remarkable power. Sight accounted for eighty percent of what humans took in with their five senses, so to control a special ability without being able to rely on the most important of those senses was a monumental challenge.

Evidently, his wind power, with its readily visible and easily changeable effects, had been a useful starting point.

Power borrowed from Raijin could not have been handled so playfully—a misstep with lightning could be fatal. Minato could have practiced raising winds of fearsome strength as well, but he currently used it only to dry his hair. *Peace* was the watchword.

Fujin had always been a crafty one. What had he known? How far ahead had he seen?

With a sudden sigh, the great wolf, no innocent itself, rested its chin on its forepaws and closed its eyes.

Ting. The wind chime, hung out to at least create a summery mood, rang in the breeze. Vermillion goldfish painted on its round glass ball whirled cheerfully.

Over at the pond, where the sacred waters were perfectly cool, ripples fanned out behind the pleasantly swimming Reiki.

This calm, leisurely atmosphere continued for quite some time.

“There! That’s enough for today.”

Minato flipped his notepad closed and looked at the back of his hand, which rested on top.

“Is it really okay to write talismans on notepad paper?” It was a bit too late to worry about that now, but Minato was apprehensive about it anyway.

The Yamagami, stretched out on the veranda in a pose of utter relaxation, cast a glance at Minato.

“What problems do you foresee?”

“You don’t think the paper’s too thin?”

“The thickness of the paper is irrelevant. I will allow, though, that the writing tool does seem to matter.”

Extensive testing had allowed Minato to conclude that pencils—including mechanical pencils—were difficult to imbue with power, and the things he wrote with them had very little spirit-banishing power. If this hadn’t been the case, the writing might have disappeared from the worksheets and homework he had turned in back at school. If anything, it was a relief to hear that pencils didn’t conduct the power.

“Have I not told you many times that what matters is your state of mind?”

“Yeah, but still… I’m being paid good money for these things, and he uses them for work, too.”

The Yamagami rolled onto its back with a grunt, then glanced sideways at Minato, motioning for him to continue.

“I don’t know how *onmyoji* banish evil spirits, but they probably throw these talismans at them, or maybe slap them on directly, right?”

A waved foreleg urged Minato to get to his point, and he shook the notepad in the air.

“Is this flimsy notepad paper really good for something like that?”

“Throwing it, I agree, would not be easy…”

“Right? Come to think of it, when I used this notepad myself the other day, I didn’t think throwing the paper would work, so I tore it up and sprinkled the strips on the spirit from above. Mr. Harima seems grateful just to have my writing at all—what if he’s actually unhappy with the paper quality but doesn’t want to complain?”

“I think that unlikely. The man seems quite sure of himself.”

“You think? He does act like he’s from a good family, and he carries himself well. Plus, he’s *always* wearing a pricey-looking suit and tucking those cheap notepad pages carefully away inside that designer leather…wallet…”

Minato stopped fanning himself with the notepad and suddenly raised his head.

“That’s it! Business cards! I can write on business cards!”

“Indeed. I see no reason why you should not.”

“Right? They should be easier to throw. That’ll give me the excuse I need to switch to better paper. A business card–tossing *onmyoji*? Now that’s hilar—I mean, cool, right? Probably? I’ll go buy some blank cards tomorrow.”

As Minato got to his feet with a grin, the Yamagami, now lying prone again, glanced at the garden wall.

“Too late, I fear.”

The doorbell in the entranceway chimed lightly. The house received few visitors. Ten-to-one odds said it was the deep-pocketed *onmyoji*.

“…He’s earlier than I expected. He was here only a week ago.”

Frowning with concern, Minato slipped his feet into the garden sandals.

The house gift was wrapped in luxurious washi paper, as pleasing to the touch as it was to the eye, and tied with golden thread. The Yamagami leaned over the gleaming box on the table, staring down at it with near-scorching intensity. The kami's pupils were fully dilated.

Minato knelt formally at the table, fists quivering on his knees.

The great wolf took a deep breath, nostrils filling with the scent that came faintly from the package. It detected the fragrance of adzuki red beans, and a shooting star raced across its golden eyes. No matter how tightly sealed a package might be, the beast's superior sense of smell had no difficulty picking out the aroma of its favorite foods—and this was the smell of high-grade adzuki, not the cheap stuff. Of that there was no mistake. A whiff of matcha was also in the mix.

Given the time of year, this was probably *mizu yokan*.

With a deep nod, the kami spoke profoundly and made a solemn pronouncement.

"He has outdone himself. We must also do likewise."

Minato's arm began to quiver as he held out the notepad talismans to Saiga. The Yamagami saw the muscles in Minato's cheek and neck tense as he gritted his teeth, holding back the laughter that threatened to erupt from within.

Minato believed that Saiga still had no idea that the kami of the mountain was sitting at the table with them as if it were the most natural thing in the world. That was why he had done his best to remain impassive and straight-faced when the Yamagami began eagerly muttering to itself.

The Yamagami glanced at Saiga. As soon as the earnest *onmyoji* accepted the notepad pages with his two reverent hands, his shoulders visibly relaxed. The tension in the air around him also eased.

Saiga knew.

He might not be able to see the Yamagami clearly, but he could sense the kami as an otherworldly presence carefully observing

him from close by. Had his offering this time been well received? Had he avoided displeasing the kami?

Saiga was constantly on high alert, striving not to miss a single subtlety of the kami; it made him so anxious that the Yamagami felt sorry for him. Sensing that the great wolf was pleased with his gift had finally allowed him to relax.

The Yamagami's tail swept back and forth happily.

"I will not *bite* the man. I am the kami of the mountain."

"…! I-it's nice and cool today, isn't it?"

"…I suppose so."

Outside, the heat was fierce. High temperatures also meant high humidity, and a midsummer day like today was so sweltering that it felt like all the moisture in your body might evaporate. The discomfort index was maxed out. But Minato, who had almost burst out laughing at the Yamagami's grandiose pronouncement, had no way of knowing this without leaving the garden. Saiga, who had been dripping with sweat on his way to the house as he walked through the heat haze rising from the asphalt, furtively mopped the perspiration from his brow with his handkerchief.

The *onmyoji* had politely responded to Minato's comment about the weather, but he had long since realized that this was the domain of a kami, separate from the mundane world. *To visit such a place of his own accord, over and over—this Saiga Harima is truly a daring man*, the Yamagami thought, a rumble in its throat.

As the Yamagami had regained its former powers, the garden of the Kusunoki residence had gradually been severed from the rest of the world. Where it had once matched the local climate, now it was completely different. This was fine by Minato, who could hang his washing out to dry whenever he pleased; however, the complete lack of rain meant the plants had to be watered by hand, and Minato filled a watering can at the sacred pond to do this every day.

Ting. The breeze slipping through the tranquil spring garden rang the wind chime playfully as it went.

"I won't keep you any longer, then."

“Oh—Mr. Harima.”

Saiga, already half standing, sat back down again. Minato produced an oil-based pen from his pocket and held out his palm.

“Your hand, please.”

“…What?”

“Not to worry. You always bring a house gift—think of this as a freebie in return.”

Minato was about to write on Saiga’s hand when the *onmyoji* cried out with alarming urgency: “Wait!” His stubborn, uncompromising will was coming to the fore.

The Yamagami exhaled through its nose in amusement. Minato was pierced by Saiga’s gaze, which was no less intense through his glasses, and shrank back under the pressure.

“I’d like a grid, if possible.”

“…You didn’t like the pentagram?”

“It’s not—well—”

Minato waited patiently as Saiga hesitated. For some reason, the *onmyoji* began to give off an air of desperation. He looked down at the notepad on the table and spoke in a voice that seemed to lack any spirit.

“The pentagram—the bellflower crest of Abe no Seimei… It’s not the crest my family uses.”

“That’s a family crest? Sorry, I had no idea. I can see why you wouldn’t want another family’s crest on your hand. So, how many lines in this grid?”

“Five horizontal, four vertical.”

Minato nodded, and the air around him changed.

The light had all but gone from Saiga’s eyes, but he raised his lowered eyelids. He saw a figure so unlike his happy-go-lucky host of a few moments ago that he might almost have mistaken him for a completely different person. This new man had the crisp, confident air of someone who had polished their abilities to the utmost.

Saiga watched with bated breath. One line. Two. Each new line in the grid was imbued with incredibly strong spirit-banishing power as it was drawn on his hand. A few lines in, Saiga’s fingers began to tremble slightly, yet Minato quietly continued to draw, unbothered.

The Yamagami's ears twitched cheerfully at the sight. Reiki, basking atop the rock in the pond, cracked one eye open to peer at the veranda. The camphor tree, frolicking in the wind, rustled its branches as if in delight.

"There. All done."

Saiga had been swept away by this overwhelming aura of purity and selflessness, but Minato's cheerful voice brought him back to his senses. The *onmyoji* blinked.

"What do you think?" asked Minato.

The carefully drawn grid of straight lines on the back of Saiga's hand shone with jade-green light. The dispelling powers of the dazzlingly bright grid were clearly stronger than the bellflower crest from last time. Saiga swallowed, too awed to speak.

Minato, who was glad the grid had turned out well, did not look tired in the least. Stunned over the absence of drowsiness he had observed on previous visits, Saiga managed a stammered "Th-thank you."

As Minato put the cap back on his pen, he muttered, "Oh, that's right," and turned his gaze back on Saiga.

"I'm thinking I might write on blank business cards next time. Would that work better? If you prefer notepad paper, I can always—"

"Cards. Business cards, please. I beg of you, by all means, please use business cards."

"O-okay, then."

The *onmyoji* had replied rapidly and eagerly, then doubled down. He even seemed to be leaning forward a little. Apparently, Minato's suspicion that those flimsy sheets of notepad paper might be hard to use had been correct.

Minato, leaning back slightly, glanced nonchalantly in the Yamagami's direction. The kami slapped the veranda with its tail, covering its face with its paws and shaking in silent laughter.

○

The moment the front gate of the Kusunoki residence closed, the air of divine authority vanished.

The cicadas' loud chorus immediately rained down on Saiga's head, and he was enveloped in a muggy heat. His body temperature soared. Sweat burst from his pores. It should have felt unpleasant, but right now it was just the opposite.

Saiga turned to face the gate and offered a deep, formal bow. He then produced a pair of leather gloves from his jacket pocket and pulled them on, covering up the jade-green light from the grid. High temperatures or not, this was an unavoidable necessity. He sighed deeply and turned on his heels.

The gravel crunched under the soles of his shoes as he walked away from the Kusunoki residence, and he pulled out his phone and put it to his ear.

"It's me. Yes, I'm on my way now."

Having conveyed the necessary information, he ended the call. His motions returning the phone to his jacket pocket were sloppy, and it was not entirely the fault of the tiresome sweat that now trickled down his entire body.

He slowly made his way across a raised path between rice paddies, his tread heavy and his usually arrow-straight posture at an awful lean.

○

An evil spirit with a vaguely human form leaped headfirst from a corner of the ceiling. Its outstretched arms ended in sharp points that were aimed directly at Saiga's heart.

A moment before the spirit made contact, Saiga swung his own arm and punched through the spirit's malformed head with a tightly clenched fist in a black leather glove. The spirit disintegrated without even a final shriek, fragments scattering in every direction. It was immediately followed by another spirit, this one in the form of a wild beast, which leaped at Saiga from another corner of the room. The *onmyoji* kicked the second spirit in the side of the head, sending it flying straight into the wall, where it dissolved into dust and disappeared.

In a matter of minutes, every low-grade evil spirit lurking in the abandoned school's first-floor classroom had been banished.

Coolly unruffled, Saiga adjusted the collar of his suit, then turned and strode toward the door.

“Yikes.”

As Saiga walked down the long corridor without a backward glance at the classroom or its jumbled rows of desks and chairs, a man in a panama hat followed, one step behind and slightly to the side of him.

The second *onmyoji*, who had been left with nothing to do but watch as Saiga dealt with a roomful of evil spirits by himself, was named Katsuragi. He was a decade or two older than Saiga and had the same employer: the Bureau of Onmyo, a branch of the national government that dispatched *onmyoji* to banish infestations of evil spirits all across Japan.

Today’s assignment was a three-story abandoned school, and they had just cleared out the ground floor.

Abandoned schools and hospitals were particularly prone to infestation by evil spirits. When a place had been visited by many people, particularly for long periods, it was easier for evil spirits to take up residence there. Envy, resentment, regret, lingering attachments—residues of negative emotions clung to such buildings, and the souls of people who had died in the grip of similar emotions gathered to feed on them.

These souls then fought, growing stronger as they devoured each other, until the strongest became *onryo*. In time, these *onryo* became strong enough to interfere with and even pose a spiritual threat to the living.

The two men walked down the corridor, which felt inappropriately bright in the merciless summer sun that came through the school’s cracked windows.

Katsuragi fanned his face with a handful of paper talismans, but the negligible breeze this produced did little to cool him in the stuffy, closed-up school.

“What a scorcher. Might be time for me to take a tip from my old man and switch to Japanese clothes.”

Saiga cast a sidelong glance at Katsuragi, who wore a light summer jacket.

“How is your father?”

“Fine. Came home yesterday, then left again the same day.”

Katsuragi’s father, who had no interest in working for the Bureau of Onmyo, roamed the country as an independent

banisher of considerable skill. He was a sharply dressed man who wore a kimono-and-panama outfit all year round.

Katsuragi, who had already adopted his father's preferred hat, looked at Saiga side-on. The younger man was barely even sweating.

"Aren't you hot? You're even wearing gloves."

"Of course I'm hot."

"Well, you don't look it. Anyway, that martial approach to banishing spirits—like I said, *yikes*. Your old Uncle Katsuragi could never."

"Shouldn't every *onmyoji* banish spirits in whatever style suits them best?"

"Sure, but still. It's been a while since we were on the same assignment, so I didn't realize you'd changed your style. You didn't always do things this way, right? Didn't you use the Nine Seals?"

"Punching is faster."

Katsuragi, who was at the age where his sagging belly was starting to worry him, made a sour face.

"Funny. You don't look the might-makes-right type."

"Don't I?"

"Of course not. You look for all the world— Uh-oh!"

A malevolent spirit had dropped from the ceiling. Katsuragi dodged, clutching his hat with one hand and throwing a talisman with the other. The spirit immediately began to crumble, fragments coming loose from its body in a widening area centered around the strip of paper. The two *onmyoji* didn't even break their stride, although they did turn back to make sure the talisman had worked as intended before turning the corner toward the central staircase.

"Like I was saying—you look like the cerebral type. The kind of guy who was born to sit at a desk."

"Do you think so?"

Saiga, who didn't think so at all, stomped on an evil spirit lying in wait at the landing. The talisman hidden in the sole of his shoe made the spirit swell and burst at the sides.

"Yech," said Katsuragi, grimacing at the sight from behind his fan of talismans.

Saiga nonchalantly pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and stepped onto the flight of stairs.

“Are you sure it isn’t just the glasses that make you think that?”

“Nah, it’s much more than the glasses, Young Master Harima.”

“Please stop calling me that. I’m twenty-seven years old.”

Reaching the second floor, the two of them looked left, then right. Doors were evenly spaced along the corridor that stretched out in both directions, and every single one of them was open. Saiga spent a moment in concentration, trying to sense the presence of spirits, but there didn’t seem to be any malevolent beings on the second floor.

Katsuragi, whose eyes were also closed so he could concentrate on his hearing, nodded.

“Second floor seems good. Yeah, sorry about the ‘Young Master’ thing. It’s a hard habit to break.”

Katsuragi was a friend of his father, and as such, Saiga had known the older man since he was a boy. The appellation “Young Master Harima” dated all the way back to then. Katsuragi chuckled without a hint of malice; Saiga understood that the man did not mean to tease or mock him, but he still didn’t like being treated as a perpetual child.

Breathing a shallow sigh and shooing away his mild irritation, Saiga looked up the stairwell. It was windowless and gloomy, and tendrils of miasma rolled lazily down from above. He heard faint voices and thumps, confirming that another *onmyoji* colleague was currently exorcising the spirits that lurked there.

Katsuragi followed Saiga’s lead, peering up the stairwell. His face clouded over.

“What do you think? Does he need help? You know he won’t thank us for it. Probably just snap at us instead.”

“…We can’t *not* go. This is our job.”

But even Saiga couldn’t keep the bitterness from his voice, or the distaste from his face. Open reluctance radiated from every inch of his body. Katsuragi frowned and clapped him on the shoulder, which was higher than his own.

“He’s much too hard on you. It’s pure envy, of course. Just our luck that no one else was available this time. Anyway, yeah, let’s give it our best shot, I guess. Dinner’s on Uncle Katsuragi.”

“Sushi, please.”

“Still not so big on the whole self-restraint thing, huh? What would that respectable family of yours think? But fine.”

“Your family is no less respectable than mine, I’d say.”

Saiga and Katsuragi were both from families that had worked for the Bureau of Onmyo for generations—the elite of the elite.

Inborn aptitude was key to becoming an *onmyoji*. The blood in Saiga’s veins came from a long, uninterrupted line of sorcerers, but through unstinting effort and an unwillingness to rely solely on this innate talent, Saiga had become one of the most successful *onmyoji* in the bureau.

His colleague currently on the third floor, however—Ichijo—relied on pure natural talent. Ichijo had been able to banish spirits from a tender age, with no effort required, so he had neglected any real training, cultivating only his own ego. The two of them had joined the bureau at the same age, which meant people tended to compare them, but their standing and the difference in their abilities had only diverged further as the years went by.

This meant that relations between the two had worsened year by year. Ichijo never missed an opportunity to exercise his hostility toward Saiga, who in turn found the whole thing too tiresome for words. Ichijo was obsessed with competition—who had banished more evil spirits, who had taken down the stronger foe—and let the results control his emotions. Like a child.

Saiga had the sympathy of their colleagues, who knew that the trouble was entirely due to Ichijo, and every effort was made to avoid assigning both of them to the same job. However, staffing issues had made a clash unavoidable this time, and Ichijo had been spoiling for a fight ever since the two of them had caught sight of each other at the abandoned school. Once the team determined that the strongest evil spirits lurked on the third floor, Ichijo had haughtily ordered Saiga, who was actually his superior, to “deal with the little ones on the lower floors” and headed straight for the third floor himself, dragging with him a female colleague he’d known since childhood. Saiga hadn’t even had time to reply.

Saiga had long since given up on the idea of improving his relationship with Ichijo. All he asked was that Ichijo did the work expected of an *onmyoji*. That was plenty; giving up on anything more was the only option.

Saiga looked down in irritation and noticed a thin layer of dust on his leather shoes. He frowned. There was grime and grit everywhere he looked, and the air was so stagnant that he would have preferred not to breathe it in at all. It was imperative that he clear out the infestation and leave the building with all possible haste.

He turned back to the staircase, ready to join his juvenile colleague on the third floor.

"He never grows up but still looks older every year…"

"Ow! Friendly fire! I'm hit!"

Katsuragi pressed both hands to his left breast with an exaggerated grimace. Saiga gave a wry smile and continued up the staircase with heavy steps. Then, suddenly—

"Gyaaargh!"

—a voice familiar to him, yet one he didn't really want to hear, let out an ear-piercing scream. Saiga turned his head to look back at Katsuragi, and a woman's voice shrieked "Ichijo!" from above.

Katsuragi stepped onto the stairs, jacket flapping behind him.

"He sure can bellow, though—it sure doesn't make you want to run to his aid."

"Neither does anything else about him."

"I hear that."

Walking at a supremely calm, even leisurely pace, the two of them climbed the stairs.

They did make a token gesture toward speed as they crossed the glass-strewn corridor and stepped into the classroom. Beyond the empty window frame that overlooked the inner courtyard, they glimpsed clear blue sky, but the room itself was dim and filled with miasma.

At the center of the sprawl of scattered desks and overturned chairs was a humanoid evil spirit that had one long arm wrapped around Ichijo. They could see it was holding Ichijo up, though it was impossible to say if it was actually holding him in the air.

Seeing his colleague on tiptoes, pale and breaking out in a cold sweat, Saiga even felt a flash of pity for him.

The evil spirit—an *onryo*—turned toward Saiga and Katsuragi. When it noticed the two *onmyoji* in combat stances, it brandished Ichijo at them gleefully as its narrow crescent moon of a mouth opened.

It was mocking them. It had made a plaything of a human, and now it was delighted to mock his companions.

In response to this cheerful exuberance, miasma billowed from every inch of the *onryo*'s body. As Saiga and Katsuragi watched, frozen, it snaked a long black coil around Ichijo's neck and shook him. Ichijo's trembling feet hit the ground one after another—left, right, left, in a parody of a dance. Ichijo struggled desperately to escape this forced performance, but without success. One of his shoes looked about to fall off. The only sound was the uneven tap of his feet, one after another. With his mouth covered, Ichijo didn't even seem to be able to speak.

They were facing something more dangerous than anticipated. Saiga had assumed it would be a mid-grade evil spirit at best, the kind that even Ichijo could banish without difficulty, and that Ichijo was to blame for underestimating it. He clenched his fists, the leather gloves creaking.

Amid the rising tension, the *onryo* swelled. A muddy miasma sprayed explosively from its body, oozing across the ceiling and floor. The slender woman crouched by the door scrambled back into the corridor, terrified of the approaching miasma, and as Ichijo watched, the terror in his eyes became tinged with rage.

As the dense miasma rose, the room dimmed even further. Katsuragi groaned in pain, covering both his ears. He relied chiefly on his sense of hearing to detect evil spirits. He had once told Saiga that when a spirit was too powerful, it felt as if his eardrums would burst and he got a skull-splitting headache.

Even Saiga, who had some resistance to such things, almost retched. Covering his nose and mouth with one hand, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out one of the notepad-paper talismans.

The room instantly brightened. Katsuragi, by then bent double, opened his eyes. Ichijo, standing on one foot, stared as well in obvious confusion.

The outline of the *onryo* trembled violently in a show of terror.

Saiga pulled off one of his leather gloves, revealing a jade glow —the light from the intense spirit-dispelling power radiating from his hand. Ichijo was tossed aside, and the *onryo* instantly because a formless mass leaping for the window.

It could not be allowed to escape.

Saiga sprinted forward. Hurdling overturned desks and chairs, he reached the window in just a few steps. The *onryo* had already slithered halfway out, but when Saiga sank his glowing green fist into its flowing mass, it dissolved into mist. It took only a moment for it to be completely dispelled. The curtains, half off their rails, billowed as a muggy breeze came in through the window, and Saiga regained his senses, the cacophony of the cicadas reaching his ears once more.

Letting the direct sunlight hit his upper body, Saiga looked at the back of his hand. The design had faded to about half its original brightness, but there was still plenty of power remaining. He pulled a special glove over his glowing hand, covering up the light. Katsuragi was standing and staring, while Ichijo did the same from his seat on the ground.

Gripping his wrist over the glove, Saiga clenched and opened his right fist. Satisfied with the response from his fingers, he turned to the other two.





“Mission complete. Let’s keep moving.”

“W-w-wait a second! Hold on! Your old Uncle Katsuragi needs a catch-up here! Like…what’s that thing on the back of your hand? I mean, I know it’s your family crest, but apart from that. Also, that first thing you did was way too effective! What was that?!”

Saiga had not stopped walking while Katsuragi babbled. He was already at the entrance to the classroom when the older man almost jumped on him to stop him from leaving. Feeling a gaze on his back strong enough to stab right through him, Saiga answered in a flat voice, “It was…a thoughtful gift from an acquaintance.”

“Huh…? What?!”

“I’m looking forward to dinner.”

“…R-right, sure.”

Saiga had insinuated that the explanation would come, and Katsuragi was perceptive enough to notice this and let the matter drop.

The case in Saiga’s pocket was to seal away the spirit-dispelling powers imbued in the notepad pages.

If he took them into an infestation without such a case, they would dispel evil spirits indiscriminately, possibly exhausting their power and leaving him high and dry when things got hairy.

The previous crest on his hand had dispelled one weak low-grade evil spirit after another until it unceremoniously disappeared. Helpful as this was in its own way, it was a waste of the crest’s powers. So when Minato had unexpectedly offered to draw another design on his hand yesterday, the special gloves Saiga had ordered with the case had come in handy. Yet gloves alone could not seal Minato’s powers away—a fact that he had turned to his advantage by adopting a strategy of touching spirits directly.

Saiga rubbed the back of his hand as he passed through the door.

Minato Kusunoki’s talismans had immense power. Now that he knew this, Saiga was no longer inclined to pay high prices for items of lesser potency. Instead, he exclusively purchased the

notepad talismans, which were used solely by members of the Harima clan.

Saiga was not without professional pride. He had no intention of depending on Minato's talismans alone, but there were limits to his own spiritual power. The past few months had seen a noticeable increase in incidents involving evil spirits, and relying on the notepad talismans had become unavoidable. That very day, in fact, he still had another assignment at a separate location that he needed to attend to.

Saiga noticed Ichijo glaring at him but intentionally said nothing to him. If the man had the energy to glare, there was no cause for alarm. Even if Saiga had offered a sympathetic word, he would have received only abuse in return. There was no point subjecting himself to that.

Seimei's bellflower was Ichijo's family crest, so he had been constantly worried about whether Ichijo had seen it on the back of his hand during their last mission together. Letting the other man see his hand this time around had also been a mistake, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

After Saiga and Katsuragi left the classroom, their footsteps receded down the corridor. With every squeak of the soles of their shoes, Ichijo gritted his teeth harder. He pounded the floor with a fist clenched so tightly that tendons were visible beneath the skin, and a dry sound reverberated meaninglessly through the trashed classroom.

In a corner of the school courtyard, a white blob squirmed in a patch of weeds, having landed there after falling from a third-floor window. Before long, beams of pearlescent blue light rose from it, and eventually the blob began to radiate a pearly brilliance as it rose toward a huge cumulonimbus cloud overhead.

○

Splosh. In the garden of the Kusunoki residence, the turtle plunged into the sacred pond.

Its splendid dive from an elevated point on the rock sent up a tall column of water, catching Minato's sandals with the spray as he walked nearby.

"Huh, he doesn't normally jump from that high up. Must be in a good mood."

Minato smiled as he leaned over the pond. The turtle was paddling through the clear water with unusual speed. Radiating an iridescent yellow light, it swam back and forth, around and around, making the aquatic plants flutter from the waves.

At first the sacred pond had contained nothing but gravel, but Minato had realized just yesterday that a carpet of aquatic flora had begun to flourish there. At this point, though, such things weren't enough to surprise him. There was no sign of any other living creature, and in all honesty, the large pond felt a little lonely with no residents other than a single turtle ten centimeters in diameter. Minato felt that a few fish wouldn't hurt. But still…

"Well, as long as Turtle's comfortable. That's the most important thing."

He had no intention of adding other animals based on his own ideas of what would be best.

The wind chime sounded faintly in the breeze, and Minato looked up at the sky. The blazing sun was at its zenith. A cumulonimbus cloud asserted its presence, outline crisp against the blue sky. It was unmistakably the middle of summer.

And yet… Minato looked from one end of the garden to the other.

The deciduous trees with their lush green leaves still appeared vibrant, and the gentle breeze was constant. The pleasant temperature, neither too hot nor too cold, was the very embodiment of spring. When Minato dipped his hand into the sacred pond, it was the perfect coolness, and that temperature never seemed to change. Minato stirred the water with his hand and saw his reflection ripple above the aquatic plants.

The garden had obviously been separated from the mundane world. It was a different kind of space entirely—a special place, without any of the creatures from the world he used to know. Except, that is, for Minato himself.

Yet for some strange reason, Minato didn't feel apprehensive about this at all.

"Probably because it's so comfortable."

Humming, Minato pulled his hand from the pond and filled up the watering can in the sacred water.

○

Katsuragi's go-to sushi place was as busy as always.

Saiga and Katsuragi were in a quiet private room in a separate building, away from the bustle of the main area. The room was spacious, with tatami flooring, a low table in the center, and an ink-wash scroll painting hanging in the tokonoma alcove. Beyond the sliding shoji screens was a modest rock-and-sand garden. A stone lantern stood amid patterns in the sand evoking the flow of water, casting a faint light that threw the rocks thoughtfully placed around it into relief.

The two colleagues from the Bureau of Onmyo, sitting across the table from each other, had finished their meal and were now relaxing. Katsuragi sat cross-legged, holding a beer mug in one hand as he reached for the edamame with the other.

"I see. So those notepad talismans are the reason you've been looking healthier lately."

"I suppose so."

Saiga, having just finished explaining about the notepad paper and the crest on his hand, took a soothing swig of whiskey. He set the empty glass on the table, causing the ice inside to swirl and clink. An intimidating number of empty sake bottles stood on the table—Saiga had drunk most of their contents himself, but his facial expression remained utterly unchanged.

Saiga dispelled twice as many spirits as anyone else, and recently there had been many *onryo* that no one else could deal with, leaving him overworked. This was the first dinner in a long time where he'd felt free to let his guard down—and Katsuragi was paying, too. Drinking like a fish was partly a way for Saiga to blow off steam.

Katsuragi picked up a sheet of notepad paper from the table and gazed at it closely.

"Impressive stuff. Even if it is just a list of sweets."

“It’s an uncommon power, isn’t it? Lately, it seems to have grown even stronger.”

“Huh. But the guy’s got an ancient kami backing him, right? That is *scary* stuff. No matter how potent these talismans are, you wouldn’t catch me venturing into the domain of a kami to get them.”

Katsuragi’s slumped shoulders shivered, then he idly turned the talisman over and realized the name of a store was written in smaller letters on the back. He raised his eyebrows and nodded a few times.

“Bizen-an does make good *daifuku*. The bean paste’s not too sweet, and the mochi’s nice and chewy. The only problem is how hard they are to get ahold of. The store only makes a few per day, and they sell out within hours.”

“I see. I’d better go early in the day, then. It’s a great help that he writes the store names as well.”

“Pretty brazen, I’d say.”

Katsuragi cackled, but for Saiga, who was pouring a generous quantity of amber liquid into his glass, it was no laughing matter. He didn’t care what was written on the talismans as long as they worked. For Saiga, the guileless sincerity of these words was a huge help. If he brought something from one of the stores indicated as a house gift, then there was almost no danger of him displeasing the kami.

The moment he passed through the front gate of the Kusunoki residence, a heavy pressure bore down on his whole body.

The attention of the ancient and mighty kami was now directed his way. He could barely breathe, and even walking was an effort. Wind imbued with divine authority was a second blow—he felt as if he might drop to his knees and fall prostrate to the ground if he didn’t focus.

But when he’d offered his house gift, the situation always changed at once, and he was unceremoniously freed from the sense of teetering on the edge of disaster.

In actuality, the Yamagami did not intend to threaten Saiga. What the *onmyoji* felt was simply the weight of the Yamagami’s

expectations and anticipation: *What are today's sweets? The bean paste is smooth, I hope?*

"Aren't these notepad pages hard to use, though?" Katsuragi asked. "You have to throw them sometimes, right?"

"Yes, that was a problem. It's been resolved, though. Starting next time, he says he'll write them on blank business cards instead."

"Throwing business cards… Are you going to get yourself a leotard and team up with those sisters of yours?"

"…Why would I do that?"

"You…don't get the reference? That makes me feel old…"

Seeing the younger *onmyoji*'s bafflement, Katsuragi dabbed sadly at his eyes, bemoaning the fate of old Uncle Katsuragi. More than the leotard, the issue was teaming up with his aggressive, uninhibited sisters, one older, one younger, both of whom were also *onmyoji*. Even one was a handful; just imagining having to work with both at once made Saiga's stomach ache.

Chapter 6
Behold What the Yamagami Hath Wrought

Flip, flip. The Yamagami, stretched out in its usual spot on the veranda, leafed through a magazine using its dexterous forepaws.

With its languorous downcast eyes and lethargic movements, Minato wondered whether the Yamagami was actually reading the text. Given the unchanging pace with which it turned the pages, the content didn't seem to hold the kami's interest.

With that sound in the background, Minato was at the low table, putting his heart into every line as he wrote on blank business cards. A pleasant breeze blew through the gap between man and kami. However, the unhurried peace of the garden was about to come to an abrupt end.

The rustling of paper halted. In its place came a low, rumbling growl that gradually became a groan, growing louder and louder.

There was trouble in the air.

Nevertheless, Minato's expression remained constant; he had some idea of what it was. He picked up a pure-white business card from the stack and placed it before him. Preparation complete, he waited for the right moment.

"Grr… I have erred indeed. What heedlessness, to fail to foresee such a thing!"

The air crackled with this deafening self-criticism. Moments ago, the Yamagami had been the picture of laziness, yet now it bared its fangs and fixed the magazine with a blazing glare that seemed likely to pierce right through it.

Eardrums somewhat worse for wear, Minato began twirling the pen around his fingers. Index to middle, middle to ring, round

and round and round.

“Intelligence gathering is the cornerstone of battle,” the Yamagami said ruefully. The great wolf heaved an extra-large sigh of indignation and slowly shook its head. “…New sweets for autumn, indeed!”

The local magazine was open to a two-page map of *wagashi* stores in the area, dotted with photographs of colorful confections. This was a supersized issue of the magazine with a special multipage feature in which local *wagashi* stores announced their new creations for the coming season.

“Sweet potato, chestnut…persimmon… All excellent…,” the kami muttered, its voice sounding intoxicated. Its gaze crawled across the page, not allowing a single word to escape, as if licking it clean.

Minato, meanwhile, was still twirling his pen as he waited for his cue. He let the pen circle not only his fingers but his wrist as well, then knocked it back and sent it into the air, where he caught it after a single revolution in his opposite hand. He continued twirling it in his left hand, whirling it nimbly around his fingers. Becoming a kind of miniature baton, the pen changed direction constantly, crossing over the backs of his fingers, his palm, and the back of his hand.

Completely failing to notice this marvelous display, the Yamagami trembled.

“And what is this?! D-dried persimmons stuffed with candied chestnuts and sweet potatoes? Sh-should something so sinful even be allowed to exist…? Even gluttony must have its limits… How it calls to me—one for whom smooth bean paste has no peer! Yet how am I to resist? The joy of seasonal offerings is being able to taste produce at its ripest! Indeed—what choice do I have?”





Thus reassuring itself, the Yamagami nodded repeatedly. At which point the pen's revolutions also came to a stop.

Minato shot a sidelong glance at the magazine, which was held firmly in place by two great forepaws. The kami's black nose was pointing at the centerpiece of the spread: a dried persimmon. The persimmon was cut in half, revealing a bright-orange center oozing with yellow *kuri kinton*—a mixture of candied chestnuts and mashed sweet potatoes.

That one, huh?

Minato put his elbows on the table and leaned forward slightly. He took note of the name of the product and the store that sold it, then gave a small nod. Straightening up again, he took his pen in hand and carefully wrote out those details.

In this way, every time the Yamagami singled out a type of *wagashi* for special praise in a voice that seemed too loud for self-directed mutterings, Minato wrote the name of the confection on the front of a talisman and the name of the store on the back. This was done completely out of a sense of goodwill: If Saiga was going to bring house gifts, then they might as well be what the Yamagami wanted.

The Yamagami seldom noticed Minato listening to its ruminations like this. As a result, the kami's opinion of Saiga was high and rising, because the thoughtful *onmyoji* brought exactly what the Yamagami had been craving every time he visited.

Lowering its gaze, the Yamagami continued this heartfelt commentary on the contents of the magazine. After reading every square inch of the current spread, the kami heaved a satisfied sigh and turned the page—only to encounter something that made its eyes fly open again.

"Wh-what?! Echigoya, for shame! Your new creation uses not smooth bean paste, but chunky?! How could you be so foolish?! That smooth bean paste is what sets your work apart! I cannot believe it… Has that decrepit old fool finally turned senile?"

The Yamagami's monologues could be quite sharp-tongued, but none of it surprised Minato anymore.

As he finished writing *wagashi* names on one side of a card and flipped it over, though, Minato did marvel at how much the kami

knew about Echigoya.

The Yamagami's rage continued for some time before suddenly falling silent. The faint sound of the wind chime summoned up the past; the kami squinted into the distance, then began to speak more mildly, its voice calm again.

"…Many and varied are the sweets on which I have dined, but never have I met one that can rival your *amazake manju*. That unchanging taste—the taste on which I first sharpened my own sweet tooth—O twelfth master of Echigoya, for stubbornly, faithfully, and sincerely upholding that taste, I thank you."

Deep gratitude filled the kami's voice. It cast its eyes down briefly.

"May fortune be upon you."

Golden light radiated from the Yamagami's body. At the tip of its nose, narrow beams of light converged, spiraled, and condensed into a globe. Soon they had become a beautiful white orb, about the size of Minato's fist, that rotated in midair, scattering a golden glow.

The kami of the mountain rose to its feet.

It stood before the orb on four sturdy legs, ablaze with divine majesty. A gale rose from the great wolf, widening in a fan-shaped stream. The glass door rattled as if it would shatter. The sacred camphor rustled. The trees on the towering mountain that was the kami's true form swayed to one side, and leaves and branches were swept into the sky. The wind chime under the eaves rang loudly, furiously. The kami's radiant white fur ruffled in the wind, and its eyes shone more golden than ever.

And then, in a low voice that could be felt all the way in the bottom of the stomach, the kami made a solemn pronouncement:

"Hear me, O twelfth master. This is my gift to you. Accept it in good faith. You have, no doubt, felt an ailment within of late. Do not let it concern you. At this very moment do I release you from such concerns. 'Might it be time I retired?' Nay, O twelfth master. An artisan's calling is for life. Your heir is not yet fully trained. He is a mere stripling, not yet able to satisfy my tastes."

The kami shook its head slowly and raised one forepaw.

"Reclaim the vigorous body you once had, make your *manju* with smooth bean paste until the end of your days, and strive to train your successor."

Having entrusted these incredibly self-interested blessings to the orb, the kami gave it a powerful smack.

The wind howled as the orb flew rapidly toward the garden wall opposite the mountain. It slipped through the wall in an instant, leaving only a golden trail in the air for the wind to whisk away.

The orb was headed toward Echigoya, purveyor to the Yamagami.

The gale-force winds fell silent at once. The flailing trees and jangling wind chime grew still, and the garden recovered its former calm. Minato, who had been desperately holding his pen and stack of business cards down with both hands so they would not blow away, breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed forward onto the table.

The great wolf sat back down with ceremony and a grunt, its sacred work accomplished. It had kept one hind paw on the magazine and now pulled the publication back toward itself to pore over it once more. Soon, the muttering resumed.

Minato picked up a new business card. He wrote on the card in a flowing hand, all the while marveling at the way kami did as they pleased, their whims beyond mortal comprehension. The text, of course, read:

RED-AND-WHITE AMAZAKE MANJU FROM ECHIGOYA

He always included two or three cards with a store written on them. His goal was to make it easier for the busy *onmyoji*, who was constantly traveling from place to place across the country, to choose his purchases.

But what he'd end up choosing, only Saiga knew.

○

Minato accepted the simply wrapped box that Saiga offered: red-and-white *amazake manju* from Echigoya. The lingering warmth revealed that the contents had just come from the steamer, and the aromas of sweet sake and smooth bean paste tickled the tip of his nose.

Unsurprisingly, the tail of the great wolf also at the table wagged back and forth with rapid speed, moving so quickly that

even the shape of it all but disappeared. They had received the Echigoya *manju* before even handing over the card bearing its name—a stroke of good fortune indeed.

Minato saw the tension leave Saiga's body. He felt bad about how extraordinarily on edge the *onmyoji* always looked at first. Relaxed as the presence beside them might be, it was nevertheless a great and powerful kami, making Saiga's reaction inevitable in a way.

Minato had noticed that Saiga could sense the Yamagami's presence, even if he could not see the wolf directly. Yet he made a point of not speaking to the *onmyoji* about it—partly because Saiga was so stiff and formal, but also because he tended to leave as soon as their business was concluded.

In exchange for the house gift, Minato handed over a bundle of cards. Saiga thanked him with a slight—and uncharacteristic—smile, but as he paged through the cards, he began to look puzzled.

"Some of these appear to be written with different pens."

"Oh, yeah, right. See, it turns out that some pens make it easier to infuse the writing with my power, and others make it harder. Pencils, mechanical pencils, and crayons don't work at all. So I was testing out a few different types of pens to see if any work better than what I've been using. I don't think there'll be any problems, though."

The cards were Yamagami approved, so their efficacy was assured. Minato had found that a softer ink was more receptive to the flow of energy, which was a useful discovery. He practiced and experimented daily; since Saiga paid so generously for the talismans, Minato was determined to make them as effective as possible. He had plans to try using a brush pen next time.

Saiga nodded, satisfied by the explanation. "True," he said, and he put the brightly colored cards into a slim case perfectly sized for them. He had once told Minato that the case was made to seal away the writing's spirit-dispelling power until it was needed, and that if he carried the cards loose, they would automatically dispel any minor evil spirits he chanced upon, which could leave him empty-handed when he ran into serious trouble. This had been an eye-opening discussion for Minato, who hadn't realized this was a concern.

Saiga normally took his leave as soon as the exchange was done, but today he remained in his seat. He seemed to want to say something. As he hesitated, Minato asked, “Is anything wrong?”

Finally, after much internal debate, Saiga began to speak.

“I was just wondering… Has anything strange or odd happened to you recently? …Any visits from an aggressive man, or peculiar kinds of beings?”

“Hmm? No, nothing in particular.”

Minato tilted his head. His answer had been truthful. Yes, there was a huge, restless wolf beside him and three of its kin peeking down from the eaves. And yes, Reiki, Fujin, and Raijin were cheerfully carousing on the roof, where they had temporarily relocated once Saiga arrived. Yet none of this was remarkable for the Kusunoki residence, which was the picture of peace.

Saiga, whose expression remained utterly serious despite his host’s confusion, glanced in the direction of the Yamagami before returning his eyes to Minato.

“A certain abrasive colleague of mine—a man who loathes the very sight of me—happened to see and take an interest in your talismans. I apologize for that. He’s the kind of person who would, and did, send *shikigami* to spy on me. Spirit familiars like that I can eliminate as needed, but when he started using human spies, I had fewer options. In any case, please keep an eye out.”

“…I will.”

Minato was greatly intrigued by the word *shikigami*—which he understood to be a sort of helper summoned by an *onmyoji*—but accepted Saiga’s warning without objection. The Yamagami, immovable as the mountain, shifted its gaze to Saiga, whose hands grew tense on the table.

“Be not afraid,” the kami said. “Humans have always been foolish creatures. This I know well. Some yapping pup is no threat to me.”

The words were a great reassurance, but they were robbed of all majesty by the drool covering the Yamagami’s chops.

○

Leaning into the wind as he trudged down a raised walkway between rice paddies, Ichijo saw an empty can lying on the side of the path. With a savage kick, he sent the can flying, along with a decent clump of soil that clung to it.

Sweat poured down his face, which was twisted into an irritated pout. He made no attempt to hide his foul mood at that detestably brilliant colleague of his and the countless glances he'd been given by people around him, each one filled with meaning. He was even angry at the sun overhead, which still blazed healthily despite the middle of summer having come and gone. And yet taking his anger out on an empty can did nothing to resolve it. He clicked his tongue sharply and, when he caught up with the can a few meters ahead, stomped on it as hard as he could, over and over.

Ichijo's colleague and childhood friend behind him watched dispassionately as he repeatedly engaged in this act of immaturity. Knowing it was simply how Ichijo was, she waited for him to finish, stifling a sigh at the back of her throat.

Finally, the sound of stomping subsided. Ichijo looked up from the can, which was now firmly embedded in the earth, and glared at the path ahead.

There, with a deep-green mountain rising behind it, stood a single residence built in the modern Japanese style.

It blended into the mountain scenery completely naturally, as if in symbiosis with it. That was the house where the two of them were headed.

Ichijo *tsk*ed irritably.

"Why do *I* have to come all the way out to the sticks for this?"

His face was suddenly under attack from a swarm of tiger mosquitoes.

"Ugh! Don't go for me—go for her!" he said, waving the mosquitoes toward the woman. He was a ridiculous sight, spouting nonsense and flapping his hands around comically in a disheveled summer suit. The woman frowned slightly and balled her hands tightly into fists.

The woman's name was Horikawa, and she was from a branch line of the Ichijo family.

Unable to defy Ichijo, a scion of the main line, she was forced to accompany him at his pleasure—a true master-servant relationship. This hell had been ongoing ever since Horikawa had first met him as a child. Ichijo's abuse never quite became physical, but bitter sneers were the default for this petty tyrant at whose mercy she spent her days. And he had become even more petty and tyrannical since that incident the other day, when she had abandoned him to the clutches of the *onryo*.

"Ugh, one got in my damn *mouth*!"

Ichijo spat repeatedly into the road, and Horikawa laughed internally at the pathetic sight. She watched him wipe his mouth with his sleeve, thinking it a tragedy that he should be so boorish despite coming from such a fine family. When she reluctantly held out a handkerchief, he glanced at it, then sneered, "Don't bother." Horikawa tucked it back into her pocket, relieved that the handkerchief would not be thrown away. Letting her sigh mingle with the summer breeze so that it would not be detected, she endured the same irritation as always.

"Don't just stand there, you clod. Let's go."

Ichijo jerked his chin at the house, then turned his back to her and started walking without waiting for a reply. A beat later, Horikawa forced her reluctant feet into motion.

The two of them walked to the end of the gravel road and stood before the front gate. It had been built in the old-fashioned *sukiya* style—something of a rarity these days, yet it was relatively new.

Beyond the white garden walls around the property, they saw a single-story timber house with an elegant black exterior. As if to protect this house, the walls were surrounded by a ring of huge trees. Their leaves and branches spread out in all directions, and one of the patches of shade they created lay across the front gate. However, while the canopy blocked the sun's unforgiving rays, the sound of cicadas was unceasing.

It's just like a shrine, Horikawa thought.

"Putting me through all this trouble…," complained the man in front of her.

The talismans Saiga had used during their mission the other day had dispelled the *onryo* with remarkable speed and strength, and having seen that awesome power, Ichijo had become

determined to learn its source. He had tried sending *shikigami* to watch Saiga's movements, but they were immediately detected and reduced to ash. After a few such failures, he engaged the services of a private detective agency, and yesterday they had identified the house where the creator of the talismans lived. Ichijo had set out to visit right away.

The carved letters on the doorplate of the gatepost read KUSUNOKI. This was the place.

Ichijo straightened his lapels, cleared his throat, pressed the intercom button, and waited.

No answer. He pressed again twice. Still no answer. Three more times. Nothing.

There was absolutely no reply from the house. The front door, visible through the gate's lattice, showed no sign of opening.

Horikawa would have tried a little more patience, but she kept her lips firmly sealed. Who knew how any advice would be rewarded? The best course of action was to avoid saying or doing anything Ichijo hadn't specifically asked of her.

However…

Neither Horikawa's spirit sight nor her spiritual power was particularly impressive, yet even she sensed how *different* this house was. The alarm bells in her head warned her that it was not the kind of place a person should approach recklessly, and that it was *definitely* not the sort of place a person should enter with their shoes on.

Why didn't Ichijo realize this? How could he be so insolent? It was beyond her understanding. Horikawa had broken out in a cold, clammy sweat some time ago; she would flee this place immediately if she could.

Regardless, she overcame her natural inclination to shrink away from the house and held her ground by strength of will. She thought back to the rebukes and threats that had been leveled at her other day: *"Run away like that again, and your whole family will regret it."*

As Horikawa blanched, Ichijo finished jabbing the button an absurd number of times and let out a disgusted complaint.

"Oh, come on! Don't tell me he's not in!"

His investigations had found that Minato Kusunoki lived alone, that he seldom left the house, and that even when he did, it was only to buy everyday necessities. Realizing his assumption that Minato would be at home might have been incorrect, the tyrant howled.

"Don't give me that after I came all this way to your backwater village! Do you realize who I am?! Get the hell out here, now!"

Ichijo raised one leg and swung it forward. But just as the well-worn leather shoe was about to reach the latticework gate—

Ting.

A high, pure tone. Horikawa had stepped forward to stop Ichijo's violent outburst, but the sound of the wind chime reached her ears alone.

○

Thrown off-balance by his leg swinging through empty air, Ichijo fell over spectacularly.

The side of his face, his shoulder, and his hip all hit the damp soil. It was unbearably clumsy. Spurred by embarrassment, Ichijo instantly sat up and got groggily to his feet.

"…The hell? What *is* th—?!"

He fell silent. The scene before his eyes had changed.

It was a mountain.

For some reason, he was standing amid a vast sea of trees. Thick-trunked conifers grew wild and tall on a gentle slope as far as the eye could see.

"Huh?"

Ichijo looked this way and that. He was definitely halfway up a mountain. Mouth agape, he looked up and saw a pale-blue sky far above, finely cut into by leaves and boughs. He gaped, then pulled his chin back down at the pain in his neck. Despite the daytime hour, the mountain was gloomy, still, and utterly deserted. Even the deafening cicadas were gone, as was his companion. Ichijo was all alone.

"Wh-what's going on? But—I was just— Wasn't I outside the gate?! Is this a dream…?"

His trembling voice echoed, unaccompanied so deep in the mountains. With a shaking hand, he touched his still-sore cheek.

The vivid sensation of rough soil told him that this was not a dream, but reality.

Planning to use a talisman to summon a *shikigami*, he reached into his pocket and felt—nothing. He was sure he'd put some in his pocket in case he needed them, but they weren't there now—not a single one. Starting to panic, he turned out every pocket he had and made a thorough search, but he found nothing. He tried making a mudra with his hands—never his strong point—to activate his abilities, but this was fruitless, too. Nothing happened; he was unable to control any of his spiritual power. He had become an ordinary person.

"Why? How?" Ichijo repeated himself over and over like a broken machine, scratching his head, before regaining his composure a short time later. The mountain was silent. The only sounds were the ones he made. Nor did any animals seem to be nearby. He couldn't sense a single creature breathing—not even an insect.

He wondered whether he'd left his old world behind.

A chill ran down his spine.

Yelling in desperation, Ichijo broke into a run, but his toe soon found one of the countless tree roots stretched across the slope and brought him down. Lying where he was, he turned his head to look back. As blood dribbled from his forehead, his bloodshot eyes caught sight of the irksome root protruding from the ground. He scrambled to his feet with a shriek and stomped the thick root.

Over and over, again and again, even when it came loose from the earth.

Eventually, the root's skin was torn off, and finally it snapped entirely. With a kick, Ichijo sent it flying into a tree trunk. Breath ragged, shoulders heaving, he set out at a run again. Droplets of sweat flew as he raced down the slope. Tripping and stumbling, leaping over fallen leaves, leather shoes slipping off and flying into the air, he nearly threw himself down the mountain.

Scarlet light crept across the green mountain range. Deep in the darkening wilderness, Ichijo sat with his back pressed up against a massive tree rising from the relatively mild slope.

The slope had no end. No matter how far he descended, there was more to go. The scenery never changed. He could not get off the mountain.

When he noticed evening coming on, he finally stopped running. How much time had he wasted on his desperate attempts to descend?

Through a frame of trees, he saw the sun slip between two peaks. He had arrived at the Kusunoki residence before noon, so he must have been wandering for seven hours or more.

Both his hands were cut and grazed. He hugged one raised knee and kept watching the sun, despite the fact that it wasn't the sun he knew. He was inordinately tired but felt no hunger or thirst. Unable to accept this impossible situation, his thoughts refused to move.

He covered his bloody face with two grimy palms.

"I…I can't take any more of this."

As he spoke the last of these pitiful words, the sun fell below the horizon, and darkness surrounded him.

Ting.

The faint sound seemed to come from nowhere. In the pitch-black night, Ichijo's dull eyes flashed with fear.

Ting.

Louder this time. Where was it coming from? Ahead of him? Behind? Perhaps to the right or left? He pulled his outstretched legs back under him and raised himself slightly off the ground.

Ting.

Louder still. The sound was light, cool, and completely out of place.

And it was slowly drawing nearer.

Ichijo began to run in his torn leather shoes. He staggered as he went and soon tripped on a sprawling network of roots. He was thrown into the air, and as the wind caught him, he felt his hair, clothes, and organs all become weightless. His hands flailed desperately, but there was nothing to grasp. He had moments before he would be hurled bodily into the hard trunk of a tree.

A realization slipped through one corner of his mind: *That's a wind chime*.

His swinging foot arced through the air with nothing to halt its movement. Unable to keep his balance on the one leg still planted, Ichijo tumbled over onto the dirt.

“Ow?!”

The side of his head hit the ground hard, and he saw stars. For a time, he could only hold his head and writhe in pain. When Ichijo finally managed to raise his head, his bleary field of vision was filled with trees. He blinked furiously and looked up. Visible between the closely crowded outstretched boughs were patches of blue sky. It was daytime again.

“N-no way. Didn’t I d-die…?”

He remembered hitting the tree trunk with horrifying force just moments earlier. He even remembered the sound of his bones shattering. The mere memory of that pain, unlike any he had felt before, made his pulse rate rise, and he shook uncontrollably all over, struggling to breathe. Surely, he couldn’t possibly be alive after experiencing such agony.

If this was reality.

The left half of his body stung where he had just hit the ground. If he could feel pain, didn’t that mean this *was* reality, rather than a dream? He was alive, wasn’t he?

Completely bewildered, he shivered in short bursts until a new shock added to his woes. Into his vision, which was bleary with unstoppable waves of tears, came a thick tree root, yanked from the ground and torn to shreds. It was obvious the root had been pulled cruelly from the ground not long ago—he knew the shape of the earth scar around it, its color, and its pungent earthy smell. Turning the same pale shade as the root, Ichijo shifted his gaze, dreading what he might see. And there it was: a chunk of root, lying beside the trunk of a tree.

He was back. He had been returned to his starting point. Chronologically, physically—in every way.

Ignoring his rapidly pounding heart, he curled up and cried until nightfall.

Several hours later, exhausted from crying, Ichijo began to wildly descend the mountain. He shoved away vines that hung before his face, cursing them in his usual foul-mouthed manner.

Having succumbed to despair and cried until all his tears were gone, he found that anger had risen to fill the void.

"Why the hell is this happening to me?! You'd better believe I'm getting off this damn mountain!"

His eyes were completely calm behind their swollen eyelids, and his breathing came through his nose, rough and fiery with rage.

"Was it *him*? Did *he* do this? Of course. Of course he did. Always looking at me with that smug expression—he *really* pisses me off. This is all your fault, Harima! You did this, didn't you?!"

Ichijo's voice cracked and rose to a shriek that echoed without reply. Abandoning himself to the fury that rose within him, he snapped off the bough he was holding.

…ing.

"What? What's that noise?"

Whatever it was, it had been faint. But Ichijo was emboldened and shouting now, and he dismissed the noise as his imagination.

"Or, wait, maybe it was the guy who lives in that house? I—"

Ting!

This time he heard the noise clearly; it was close enough to make him jump.

Then he remembered: Last time, that sound had been followed by the wind suddenly rising at his back and pushing him down the slope.

Ichijo inhaled sharply, and immediately after, a gale struck him from behind. He didn't even have time to cry out before he bounced and rolled down the mountain, still clutching the tree branch in one hand.

Ichijo had now died and come back seven times. He sat cross-legged among the trees, twirling the torn root in his fingers. He could head downhill forever without ever reaching the bottom. How many times would he have to do the same thing? For all eternity? He shuddered and violently shook his head.

Realizing he was tensing up, he stopped himself before he crushed the root, slowly releasing his grip and placing it carefully on the ground. He held his breath and listened carefully—no wind chime. He forced his muscles, which had gone rigid by conditioned reflex, to relax. Taking one deep breath after

another, he looked at the root, which looked pitiable without its skin.

After dying and come back seven times, he had finally started to use his head.

Ichijo had discovered something over the course of this repetition: Whenever he swore or damaged something on the mountain, the wind chime sounded. Then the gale would come again, or a great tree would topple over onto him, or a huge rock would fall from above, forcibly terminating him.

He had remained obstinate at first, refusing to change his ways, but now he had finally resolved to turn over a new leaf. He knelt in a relatively flat place among the crisscrossing tree roots, facing the tree root in front of him.

“Please forgive me.”

He bowed deeply. Head still down, Ichijo bit his lip hard and clenched the fists on his knees as tightly as he could.

The wind rose and ruffled his drooping bangs. His head flew up, and he watched the twirling root with sweaty palms. Its rotation slowed and stopped, the tapered end pointing up the mountain. Ichijo swiftly rose to his feet.

Once he began climbing the mountain, he saw a change.

Unlike the endless sea of conifers below, the trees up here were broad-leaved. He walked between their massive trunks, beneath unfamiliar leaves rustling in the wind. Soon he was above the forested zone, making his way through overgrown bushes and weeds. His entire body was drenched in sweat as he dragged his heavy feet up toward the peak. In that tunnel of green on the gentle slope, the only sounds he could hear were that of his own breath and the rustling of leaves and branches as he pushed them aside.

Finally, at the end of the tunnel, he saw an even path.

Ichijo couldn’t help breaking into a run. Wheezing, he burst out of the wooded area. Beneath the soles of his scarred leather shoes was a narrow mountain trail on level ground. It was clearly artificial rather than natural. He was so happy that he actually smiled, temporarily forgetting the pain in his legs and lungs.

To his left, he saw a gently arcing staircase stretching out below him, the steps becoming logs halfway down. Next he looked right.

Unlike the descending path, this path sloped steeply upward.

Ichijo's face clouded over. The steep upward slope was dotted with huge boulders, which blocked easy passage.

"…Which way should I go?"

Ichijo sat down on the mountainside, agonizing over which path to take until his ragged breathing grew calm.

○

Eating alone was a painfully dull affair.

After finishing lunch by himself in the dining room, Minato rose from his chair. His family had never watched television while eating, so as he walked from the dining room to the kitchen, the only sounds were the ones he made. He thought back on his family home, where the conversation was constant and lively even without the television's help, and sighed.

He wasn't yet accustomed to eating alone and in silence.

A few minutes at the sink, and the washing up was done. Minato had only used enough dishes for one person, after all, so the chore had been quick. He carefully mopped up any stray water droplets. He didn't have to hunch forward very far, because the sink had been built slightly taller than usual to suit his tall and exacting relative who had built the house. The sink was extremely convenient for Minato, and he was quite taken with it.

Finally, he washed his hands and looked out at the veranda as he dried them with a towel. The great wolf was there, stretched out as always, but its back was utterly still.

Lately, all the Yamagami did was sleep, and its kin hadn't come to visit in a long time. On one of the rare occasions when it was awake, Minato had asked the kami if it wasn't feeling well, but it had insisted there was no problem. And so he never tried to forcefully wake it up.

Still…

He took dessert out of the fridge, arranged it on a plate, then opened the glass door and stepped onto the veranda. *Tok.* He set the plate down quietly by the Yamagami's face. The bridge of its nose twitched at once. Its chest rose and fell deeply, and its tail began to wag.

The Yamagami's picked up the scent! Minato crouched down with his cheek pressed against the wood of the veranda to watch with a grin. The Yamagami's eyes flew open. "I smell *kokuto manju*!" it bellowed confidently, lifting its head. Before its nose was an offering of sweet steamed buns made with raw sugar arranged in a small pyramid. The great wolf narrowed its eyes and nodded deeply.

"…I knew it would be thus."

"Care to share these with me?"

"Aye. I believe I will."

Minato made a point of issuing these invitations to the Yamagami every so often. The kami accepted maybe seven times out of ten, which wasn't a bad result.

After the two had finished savoring the *manju*, the Yamagami closed its eyes again. It didn't seem to be wasting away, so Minato shrugged and picked up the two plates. He cast a gaze out over the garden, catching sight of the slim camphor tree; after its rapid initial spurt, it hadn't grown much at all.

Its leaves were green, so it seemed to be surviving okay. The Yamagami said it was fine, too, so no doubt there was no reason to worry. Still, he couldn't quite shake a nagging feeling in the back of his mind as he gazed at it. Then, suddenly, he realized what it was.

"…I haven't seen it move in a while…"

It used to rustle its leaves often, swaying in the wind as if playing. But now…

"…Maybe because there's been no wind?"

On top of that, Minato realized he hadn't heard the wind chime in some time as well. He stood for a while on the windless veranda, staring at the chime hanging from the eaves.

○

When Ichijo reached the top of the almost mockingly steep slope, he saw a small *hokora* shrine.

It was just an ordinary aged stone shrine, with nothing unique about it. But as he stood before it, his expectations rose, and his once-calm heart began to beat faster. The shrine was spotless,

without a hint of moss, and when he peered inside, he saw three round stones, one of which had cracked in half.

There was no guarantee that this was where he could get back to his original world.

Yet the path beyond was blocked by a huge rock, making further climbing almost impossible. He had no other choice.

Ichijo's pride was Everest sized, and he had virtually no experience apologizing, but now he dropped to his knees. He straightened his back and pressed three fingers on each hand to his thighs. Slowly, he lowered his head until his bangs, matted with sweat, reached the ground.

"I come before you on my hands and knees. Please send me—send me back to my own world. Please send me back!"

Again and again, dozens of times, he prostrated himself, grinding his brow into the dirt, begging and pleading. He spoke from the very depths of his bowels, pronouncing each word with the utmost sincerity.

But all that came back to him was the hollow echo of his own desperate voice.

His situation remained utterly unchanged. No wind, no wind chime. Regardless, Ichijo didn't give up.

"Forgive me. I'm sorry. I apologize."

Ichijo expressed his remorse again and again, in every way he knew how, to the trees, the leaves, the vines, and the roots he had hurt. All he could do was say the same words over and over and over again.

Little by little, his voice began to grow hoarse, yet he carried on. His hands quivered, fingers digging into the soil, as he forced the words out.

"O kami of the mountain, please, *please*, I beg you—"

○

"—send me back! —Whagh!"

Ichijo teetered but escaped a fall thanks to the steading hand that gripped his arm. Stumbling to stay upright, he noticed the *sukiya*-style gate in front of him, and his whole body shuddered.

"Send you back…?" a small voice asked.

He noticed the slim hand on his arm, then glanced over his shoulder and saw someone he'd known since childhood. The stone-faced Horikawa's brows were knitted together in a slight frown. Ichijo had often made fun of her face, likening it to a Noh mask and calling it depressing, but when he saw it then, a wave of relief swept over him.

"…I…I'm back…"

He forced the words out in a trembling voice, patting his body all over in a strange one-handed gesture. Where had his arrogance from a moment earlier gone? Whither went the petty tyrant?

From Horikawa's point of view, Ichijo had tried to kick the gate only to be suddenly blown away from it. To do this while visiting another's house for the first time—and a house with a strange, otherworldly aura, at that—suggested that he feared not even the kami. When Horikawa had reached out a hand to stop him, his arm had fallen back into her grip, so she had simply held him steady. Then he had suddenly shouted, "Send me back!" She was completely baffled.

His face, very close to hers, twisted as if he was about to cry. Unsettled by these sudden, incomprehensible changes in the tyrant's demeanor, Horikawa let go of his arm.

She took two steps back, to put some space between them. He took two steps forward. She took three steps to the side. He took three diagonally forward.

Crunch, crunch. The only sound in front of the gate was the gravel under their feet as they moved.

She couldn't shake him off. If he didn't stop, he would end up clinging to her, and the very thought of it made her shudder with disgust.

I'm getting scared! Somebody help me. Kami, Buddha, Mom! Anybody! Why does he have that creepy look of absolute and total relief on his face? Keep away from me!

Humiliated by her inability to say these things aloud, Horikawa bit her lower lip in frustration. And then—

Ting.

The sound came from the direction of the house, and their situation changed dramatically.

As soon as Ichijo heard the clear, high-pitched tone, his face went from red to white, and he bolted like a startled rabbit making its escape. Gravel flew noisily in every direction as he took several large steps forward before tripping over. He slid along the ground with a loud scraping sound, leaving a long, narrow gash in the gravel, then sprang to his feet and raced away down the unsurfaced road. For a while, Horikawa watched him recede into the distance, where he fell again before disappearing into the lush rice plants in the paddies. A swarm of red dragonflies cut through the air overhead.

It was the first time Horikawa had ever seen her childhood companion run like he really meant it, and she could only watch and stare.

The wind chime rang again behind her.

For some reason, the chill of fear she had felt when hearing it a moment ago was gone. It was just a wind chime, but its sound felt oddly solemn.

She also found it easier to breathe now, inexplicably. With a hint of a smile, Horikawa closed her eyes and let the cool tone wash over her.

○

“A truly bothersome fellow he was. Why did he not leave earlier?”

No sooner had the great wolf opened its eyes than it was growling and furrowing its nose.

The Yamagami had sounded the wind chime only to drive the tiresome Ichijo away, with any benefit to Horikawa being purely coincidental. The kami had no interest in the fate of mortals who failed to show respect. Nor did it feel even slightly inclined to take such an interest.

To disbelieve in the kami as a matter of course—or, worse, to mock them—and then plead with them for help in times of trouble was laughable. The Yamagami felt absolutely no motivation to heed such self-centered pleas.

The kami are neither servants at the beck and call of mortals, nor cheap heroes who come flying when summoned.

The Yamagami had just woken up, and it looked grumpy.

Minato had been sitting at the low table on the veranda. He hadn't heard the doorbell ring even once, and he rose wordlessly and went into the house. When he reemerged, he was carrying a plate piled high with *kintsuba*—sweet red beans wrapped in a thin layer of chewy dough. The great wolf, recognizing the aroma before the sweets came into view, was mollified at once.

After using too much of its divine power to keep a single mortal's spirit trapped in its domain, the Yamagami needed to sleep for a time. However, before that, it fully intended to take nourishment and regain its strength.

"Let us eat."

"Go ahead."

Watching the kami's tail thump on the veranda, Minato jabbed a toothpick into one of the sweets.

○

It was completely implausible that a bad-natured person, warped from the root, would change their ways and become a paragon of virtue in just a few months. After all, as the saying goes, people forget how hot food is as soon as they swallow it. And Ichijo's abusive tendencies, which had remained dormant for a time, were once again starting to show themselves.

It was past lunchtime at the Bureau of Onmyo. There, in a room with the blinds down, Ichijo sat in his seat, both hands in his pockets and legs spread wide. Opposite him sat Horikawa—who had seemed less gloomy lately—checking her phone.

The colleagues sitting scattered around the room cast furtive glances at Ichijo as his aura grew more foreboding. A strange sense of anticipation filled the room; everyone was on the edge of their seats waiting for something to happen.

Ichijo didn't notice any of it. All he felt was irritation at his childhood acquaintance and the way she offered only noncommittal replies to him, whatever he said to her.

"I told you not to work with him. You better not go."

"I can't not go. It's my job."

“You’ve just gotten so ador—uh, I mean *fat* lately. You’ll be even more of a burden than usual!”

With an immaculately manicured hand, a young woman sitting nearby broke a ballpoint pen in half with a satisfying snap. She tossed the two halves into the garbage can at her feet, then, without pausing, pushed her chair back. She was halfway to her feet when the woman at the desk next to her shot out a hand and seized her slim shoulder, leaving her sewn to her seat, unable to stand.

The owner of this viselike grip looked at the first woman pointedly. She was entering middle age, but her beauty was undimmed, and her expression remained cool.

The first woman, unable to bear Ichijo’s abuse of Horikawa—whom she admired as a mentor and got along with—had transformed into a *hannya* demon, radiating a sinister aura.

Don’t stop me, Sister! I’m going to crush that abusive loser like a bug! the demoness pleaded wordlessly, but the older woman shook her head. One corner of her bright-red lips twitched, and from under her fluttering eyelashes, which curled upward without mascara or an eyelash curler, there came a message:

Not yet.

Understanding the meaning behind these words, the younger woman was brought back to her senses. The *hannya* reverted to a graceful, well-brought-up young lady and smiled. The two Harima sisters, who bore a close resemblance to one another, exchanged a wordless nod.

As a general rule, the Bureau sent *onmyoji* out in teams of two. Ichijo had taken a great interest in Horikawa of late and was always displeased when she was paired up with other men. To add insult to injury, this time that man was Saiga, whom he loathed. He had told her not to go and to refuse the job—a deeply unprofessional order, steeped in private sentiment. Yet he still did not understand from whence those vexing feelings came. Day by day, the people around him watched Ichijo’s emotional immaturity with apathetic stares.

In the face of Horikawa’s bluntness, Ichijo’s irritation grew.

Horikawa stared at her phone, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Naturally, she had not noticed Ichijo’s fragile

feelings blossom, either.

"Hey!" he snapped. "Look at me when I'm talking to—"

Ting.

His voice cut off mid-tirade. Without even pausing for breath, he leaped to his feet, pushing his chair away with the back of his knees and knocking it over behind him. A look of desperation appeared on his face as he raced through the gap between desk and wall and out of the room. Sheets of paper affixed to the wall rose in the breeze he created as he passed, then slowly settled back to their original positions.

That would keep him in line for a few days.

Horikawa rose wearily and righted Ichijo's chair with obvious irritation before turning back to the others. The shoulders of the men in the room shook, and the women all flashed her a thumbs-up.

"My sincere apologies for that display," she said, but she was grinning. In fact, her vibrant lips now bore a permanent smile that showed no sign of abating.

In the seat beside her, Katsuragi spoke in an exasperated tone.

"Effective stuff. And it's only a ringtone."

"Why do you think it scares him so much? It's a nice sound."

Clutching her phone to her chest with both hands like some sort of priceless treasure, Horikawa smiled, the color blowing in her cheeks.

"You're not wrong. Maybe I'll download it, too, just in case," said Katsuragi, pulling out his phone.

Chapter 7
Days of Gradual Change

It was after dinner, and the Yamagami held a glass bowl in its massive forelegs, gulping down carbonated water.

“Delishuth! Delishuth!” it cried, enjoying the tingling sensation on its tongue.

Sitting across the table, Minato watched over the rim of his own cup as he sipped from it.

Once the Yamagami had drunk all the carbonated water, it glanced at the teapot. Minato wordlessly picked it up and poured tea into the heat-resistant bowl. The Yamagami’s nose twitched at the curling steam, and its tail swept back and forth in satisfaction.

“Isn’t that bowl hard to drink out of?” asked Minato.

“No. It gives me no trouble.”

The bowl was nice and thick and had a good weight to it. The Yamagami was able to hold it securely, so in that sense it wasn’t difficult to drink from. Still, using a heat-resistant cooking bowl as a drinking vessel for a kami—well, it wasn’t a great look, Minato thought belatedly.

Setting his own handleless ceramic teacup on the table, Minato folded his arms and tilted his head.

“Maybe a *donburi* bowl…? No, that’s not it, either. It should be a cup, right?”

The Yamagami watched Minato as he ruminated on finding the proper drinking vessel for a kami.

“This thing you call a ‘bowl’ is perfectly fine with me.”

Muttering as if it had little interest in the topic, the Yamagami plunged its face back into the bowl.

So answered the Yamagami, and yet…

“Ah! So this is Hagi ware pottery. The warm colors—very nice indeed. Ahh, and this must be what they call Oribe ware. Truly, its forms are many and diverse! Aye, a feast for the eyes. Exquisite.”

The moment they arrived at the tableware store, located just off the main shopping strip in town, the Yamagami had headed straight for the matcha bowls. They were arranged on a display table in the center of the spacious store, sitting in generously spaced rows on a mat of red velvet. The kami examined them closely, peering down from above and from the side, its golden eyes the very image of seriousness.

Couldn’t be *more interested,* Minato thought with a hint of exasperation. Just to be sure there were no unfortunate accidents, he stepped toward the table.

The kami’s movements were generally very slow and measured, and it was being careful not to touch anything, so there didn’t seem to be much to worry about.

“Karatsu ware! Verily is it plain, and humble besides. But that, too, is good.” The muttering Yamagami was so absorbed in its perusal of the cups that it barely even blinked. And oddly knowledgeable—those long hours of poring over magazines and Minato’s laptop yesterday must have been preparation for this. It was a wise kami that planned ahead. Minato waited patiently as the great wolf agonized over its options, ears twitching busily.

When Minato bought something, he spent so much time making his choice that his family all but wrote him off, but he spared no expense once that choice was made. This meant that all his possessions were things he took true pleasure in, and he used them right up until the end of their useful lives. Many had served him for a decade or longer. That being the case, he was happy to wait patiently until the Yamagami similarly found something that took its fancy.

It was just after opening time on a weekday, and the store wasn’t quite the kind of place one might drop in for casual browsing, so there were no other customers there with them—

just an elderly employee sitting deep within an easy chair behind the counter near the front door. He was relaxing with a newspaper and paying them no notice. In fact, he didn't even seem that interested in doing business. That would let the Yamagami take its time choosing something it liked, without being overwhelmed with information or followed around.

Minato strolled around the store with the Yamagami, looking around as they slowly moved past the shelves. The matcha bowls were the only ones big enough for a wolf, even if he had no plans to whisk up a cup of green tea. The Yamagami showed no interest in anything but the tea bowls, either.

After inspecting every single tea bowl in the store, the Yamagami returned to the central display and, without hesitation, pointed its nose at a raku ware tea bowl in black.

"This one."

"You got it."

It was just like the Yamagami to choose a tea bowl that had been given a special place among its peers, standing out from the rest of the display. Without a single reservation, Minato called out to the clerk.

Their next stop was a bedding-and-cushion store. Minato felt awkward about always being the only one to sit on a cushion and had decided to buy the Yamagami one of its own. The kami, once more, protested that this was unnecessary—yet once they were inside the store, it made a beeline for the cushion area at the back, tail wagging happily back and forth. Minato chuckled ruefully at how easy the kami could be to read.

The great wolf prodded and patted the miniature sample cushions with one paw to test their padding. Minato joined in with a finger to camouflage any unnatural indentations. But the white-haired gentleman sitting in a reclining floor chair on the tatami mats was intent on his sewing and paid them no mind anyway.

"Grr… This one is rather thin."

Minato pulled another, more tightly stuffed sample toward them. After poking it a bit with one great paw, the kami closed its eyes and nodded.

"It is good. This one shall serve me well."

The Yamagami's satisfaction meant the decision was made. The color also required no deliberation, as the choice was obvious: deep purple, the hue of the noblest beings. Minato had insisted on that, while the Yamagami, who cared nothing for color, sat boldly before the old man. Showing no restraint, it stroked the material of the cushion the man was currently sewing.

"…Aye. So soft. This is hard to give up."

Testing the feel of the cushion, the great wolf growled in admiration.

Unsurprisingly, a cushion big enough for the Yamagami needed to be made to order. It was basically bedding, Minato mused to himself. The price they were quoted wasn't cheap, but the Yamagami never shed, so the cushion wouldn't get covered in fur. Nor would there be any idle gnawing of the edges, meaning it should last a long time. The Yamagami's kin never shed, either, which was a great help to Minato in his capacity as their caretaker.

When they stepped out of the dimly lit store, Minato squinted at the brightness of the sun, which was now high in the sky.

The streets were noticeably busier. Minato glanced to his side and saw the kami's dazzling white form rivaling even the sun overhead.

"I might need to buy some sunglasses soon."

"'Sun-glasses'? Like the ones yon mortal wears?"





The Yamagami pointed with his black-tipped nose at a youth in shades coming their way. *Aye, I know these 'sun-glasses,'* the smug Yamagami seemed to be saying, and as it slowly advanced, the youth naturally gave way. The hour was a little too early for lunch, but the streets were still busy. Yet despite this, not a single pedestrian got in the way of the Yamagami, who strolled regally through the streets. The crowds parted before it, much like the miracle of the parting seas once performed in a distant land.

The Yamagami hid its form intentionally, but it still radiated a certain divine might that people instinctively sensed and kept their distance from. Minato marveled at the mysterious sight as they strolled along.

A balmy breeze rose up before them, ruffling the kami's white fur.

"Wow, something smells good!" exclaimed a black-haired girl, stopping in the street behind them. A second girl of about the same age, walking with her, also stopped and sniffed the air around them with a dubious expression.

"Huh? I don't smell anything. What's it smell like?"

The black-haired girl took a deep breath and smiled faintly.

"The mountain."

"Huh…? I can't smell that at all…"

"Really? But it's so lovely!"

Minato chuckled as the conversation faded out of earshot. Evidently, the first girl had caught a whiff of the Yamagami.

The Yamagami was, in fact, redolent of the forest.

The phytoncides that constantly came from its body created an air of restful ease. There was no need for air freshener inside the Kusunoki residence when the Yamagami was on the veranda; all Minato had to do was open the window and receive the kami's blessing.

As he walked past a hardware store, neither slowing nor stopping, Minato's gaze fell on an old woman sitting in a chair outside the greengrocer next door.

The Yamagami had once told Minato that no matter how the kami try to conceal themselves, the pure and faithful of heart can always sense them in one way or another. The girl just before was one such example, and the woman ahead another.

The great wolf padded gracefully past the heaped produce. As he did, the old woman—who until then had been leaning back in her wooden chair dozing—opened her eyes as if they were spring-loaded. Her heavy, drooping eyelids flew up, and she stared at the Yamagami as it passed. Then she clapped her hands together and began to pray.

The Yamagami's golden eyes glanced at the woman as she began chanting the Buddhist *nenbutsu* with fierce devotion. The kami blinked, and stardust flew. As if struck by lightning, the woman sat bolt upright and silently began to weep. Her daughter, just entering middle age herself, came out from the back of the store and shrieked.

"Mom?! What happened?! Does something hurt? Wait, why is your back so straight?! I haven't seen you like that in twenty years!"

She hurried to her mother, who now sat upright.

The Yamagami and Minato continued down the street, which was lined on both sides with buildings of every sort, as if nothing had happened. An orange tabby cat curled up under a bench outside a fishmonger sat up and stared wide-eyed as they passed. Keeping its tail warily wrapped around its body, it watched the human and the kami until they had receded to a safe distance down the street.

Their shopping done, Minato and the Yamagami headed for their most important destination today: Echigoya.

The great wolf's tread was a little lighter as it padded regally down the middle of the covered shopping arcade. Minato smiled inwardly at this, but only a moment later, the Yamagami wrinkled its nose in displeasure and growled.

"Grr…"

Stopping in its tracks, the Yamagami began to snarl as it looked down a side street that crossed the broad arcade. Minato peered down the narrow alley as well.

"…Something's down there, huh?"

"The stench is unbearable."

It was easy to imagine what might inspire such a clear display of aversion: There was a den of evil spirits somewhere in the

alley, and Echigoya, purveyor to the Yamagami, was on the same block. Minato pulled his notepad from his sling bag.

“You think they’ll give us trouble?”

“They are pitiful at best.”

The great wolf changed course to head down the alley. Minato kept pace alongside it.

The arcade itself was brightly lit by sun streaming in from overhead, but the instant they set foot in the winding alley that led off it, everything dimmed. Despite the plentiful natural light the alley received, there was a lingering atmosphere of decay and ruin, and the very air felt clammy.

Among the alley’s ageing houses stood a two-story building of unfaced concrete. The vertical sign by the door announced it as a tutoring school of some kind, but the sign itself hung at a precarious angle; it looked liable to fall at any time, with one side completely detached from the wall. There were ugly cracks in the main glass doors, and broken windows on both floors. The miasma that oozed from these openings enveloped the entire building. The great wolf’s fur stood on end with disgust.

Minato couldn’t see the miasma, but the building’s dilapidated state was enough to make him stop in his tracks for a moment. Regardless, when the Yamagami headed straight for the front door, Minato followed.

Minato’s talismans were gradually becoming more effective, and by that point they could make short work of a nest of minor evil spirits.

When he stepped inside the building, its gloomy interior cleared up in the blink of an eye. The Yamagami looked delighted as it walked beside him, chuckling with mocking glee. The deep, low noise echoed across the now-bright entrance hall, which extended up through the second floor.

The Yamagami led the way up the stairs, taking them three at a time. As Minato followed, climbing the stairs one by one, malevolent spirits lunged in his direction, but each one was snuffed out before it could touch him. His gait was completely normal, even light, as he reached the second floor. Having failed to flee in time, a handful of straggling spirits huddled on the landing and were unceremoniously wiped out.

Every door in the corridor was open. Doing his best to avoid the fragments of glass scattered across the floor, Minato walked through the nearest door into the room beyond. Whatever furnishings it had formerly contained were long gone, leaving it an empty space. Minato took a slow stroll around it, brightening the gloomy room, then headed for the door.

As far as Minato could see, the walls and ceiling were clean and devoid of cracks or other damage.

"The building still looks pretty usable," he said.

"The *building*, yes."

"What a waste."

Their conversation was unhurried as they repeated this process in other rooms. In the last room they visited, they saw the remains of a meal someone had brought, along with unopened packages of food. Someone living on the street might have found their way in. The Yamagami glanced at the items left behind.

"Whoever was here, I doubt they were able to stay long."

"… Is that how it works?"

The haphazard scattering of food and trash suggested that whoever it was might indeed have fled in haste. Minato wondered how the state of the building had gotten this bad; it didn't even occur to him that the miasma was the main cause. Being as resistant to its corruption as he was, it did not matter to him anyway, putting it beyond his understanding.

At the Yamagami's urging, the puzzled Minato turned his back on the scattered foodstuffs.

"The mortal body is all too weak."

"True."

"Not, I will grant, that I have cause to boast on that score."

"Well…yeah."

A complicated expression crossed his face. The Yamagami was lazy and slumbered for vast spans of time. Once, it had slightly overslept and awoken to find that it was too late; its failure to periodically purify the spirit trail that ran through the mountain had allowed it to fill with evil spirits that set about devouring each other and coalescing into *onryo*. And this was not the only stroke of ill fortune—the Yamagami's powers had also been

weakened, rendering it helpless against the infestation. The *onryo* had claimed the mountain for themselves, leaving it to grow wild. Minato was just glad he'd met the Yamagami before it, too, became corrupted.

They went down the stairs, back to the ground floor.

There was an unplaceable chill to the corridor, which was filled with the sort of melancholic air all abandoned buildings have. Minato and the Yamagami set about making a full tour of this floor, too, but the Yamagami stopped before the door to the final room. Its cold, stern gaze had detected a dark lump in a corner. A small, humanoid form sat hugging its knees, its outline quivering.

The great wolf padded into the room. Serenely, solemnly, soundlessly, it slowly approached the spirit.

"An evil spirit is the ruined husk of a soul that has fallen to corruption. Bereft of a body, unable to go where it knows it must, bowed by the weight of the passions it pursued in life, clinging grimly to the world where it left so much undone, it is the final fate of the most foolish and pitiable beings."

Despite the notepad blazing in his hand with jade light, and despite the ample spirit-dispelling power still at his disposal, Minato stayed in the hallway. He simply watched the white kami and listened to its grave voice.

The Yamagami looked down at the mass, which only quivered with no sign of resistance. The great beast narrowed its eyes and raised a forepaw clad in golden light.

"Be grateful to be dispelled by me."

The kami brought its paw down briskly. When it made contact, the black humanoid shape was enveloped in pale golden light and seemed to melt away. The spectacle was a subdued, even tranquil one.

The Yamagami had the power of purification. Minato had the power of elimination—the power to return something to nothing.

Was the soul happy to have its corruption swept away by a kami and to be forced back into the whirlpool of death and rebirth? Would it have been happier had it simply been eliminated without a trace by Minato? Such things were not for even a kami to know.

Shaking its paw as if it were soiled, the great wolf turned on its heels.

Back outside the building, the two of them looked up at the former school now that its grimy veil had been lifted. The great wolf's tail swept back and forth.

"Aye. It is good."

"Want to head off, then?"

The satisfied-looking white wolf and the lanky youth turned away from the school and began walking back toward the main strip. Behind them, the vertical sign fell off the facade of the building and tumbled to the ground.

Make way, make way! Make way for the kami of the mountain!

Naturally parting the crowds, Minato and the Yamagami hurried on to their destination, which was, of course, Echigoya, renowned for their *amazake manju*—buns made with sweet sake.

The store was an aged building built in a pure Japanese style, well befitting the venerable local institution that it was. The standing sun shade that protected the sliding door had ECHIGOYA written on it in a calligraphic hand. After sizing up the store's appearance, the great wolf flattened its ears against its head.

"No change at all. It is the same tumbledown hovel as ever."

"That's harsh."

"How is it, I wonder, this place can be on the verge of collapse every time I visit?"

"Maybe it's the timing. It does look like they've been rebuilding every so often."

According to the Yamagami, Echigoya looked almost exactly as it had when the kami last visited a few centuries ago. Minato was practically a regular by now, having visited so many times, and the sweet aroma of its wares inside spilled out into the street. Minato parted the *noren* hanging curtain and entered the store, accompanied by the constantly sniffing great wolf.

They were the only customers in Echigoya's modest interior.

A gruff "Welcome!" reached them from the kitchen, which lay behind a bench filled with rows of *wagashi*.

The speaker had his back to them, hard at work. The Yamagami sat in the middle of the store and watched quietly. Unaware of the kami's gaze, the white-clad twelfth master of Echigoya opened the lid of a bamboo steamer he had just taken off a boiling pot of water.

The master was stout of build, as if his drastic weight loss during a certain period recently had never taken place at all. His face was deeply lined but had a healthy glow. As the steam billowed up around him, he considered the plump, freshly steamed *amazake manju*.

"Ah, looking good!" he said, and his wrinkles deepened further.

Minato stood beside the Yamagami. He had seen the master of Echigoya only once before, and on that occasion the old man had been bony and gaunt. Today he looked like an entirely different person. As Minato and the Yamagami watched, he rubbed a fine potbelly and grinned.

"…It's good he seems healthy, I guess…?"

"Echigoya, you are tempting fate…"

His build was worrying for the opposite reason now.

The great wolf heaved an extravagant sigh as it watched the man at work.

"His internal organs were ailing, leaving him unable to eat a single piece of the tempura he loved so much. He was listless and forlorn, feeble in body and soul."

Incidentally, the master of Echigoya's hobby was visiting ramen restaurants, and he was a hearty eater who drank every last drop of the soup.

Humans are born with set lifespans. At the moment of their first birth cry, the date and time of their death is already decided. To bend this principle and prolong a mortal life was beyond the Yamagami's powers. Yet the Yamagami did have the power to grant a mortal good health until the very end of their allotted span; the great wolf's intervention had affected a remarkable recovery in the master of Echigoya's ailing stomach and intestines, allowing him to once again enjoy eating whatever he wished. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying himself to excess.

As the master of Echigoya took the *manju* out of the steamer, he suddenly turned his head to the side to look at Minato.

"Can I interest you in some freshly steamed *manju*, sir?"

Why was it that his ruddy, cheerfully smiling face gave off the indefinable impression that he was plotting something wicked? And yet Minato felt oddly at home with the man; he cast his eyes down and to the side. In a deep, resonant voice, the kami pronounced its judgment.

"Two packs."

"Two packs, please."

The twelfth master of Echigoya flashed a lopsided grin. With smooth, flowing movements, he transferred the buns with swollen, glistening dough and sweetly fragrant bean paste into the boxes. The Yamagami's tail was in constant motion by then, busily sweeping Echigoya's floor.

"Since they just came out of the steamer, here's one more. My treat."

"Thank you."

"You've bought from us before, haven't you, lad? Didn't you say you moved in by the mountain?"

The master of Echigoya pointed toward the Yamagami's true form as he asked the question, and Minato nodded, surprised that he remembered.

The old man wrapped rubber bands around the packs with practiced motions. "Have you hiked the mountain yet?"

"Yes, I've been a few times."

The master cast a quick glance at the entrance to the store, then lowered his voice.

"And did you meet…you know?"

"…Meet who, sorry?"

"The one that lives on the mountain! The Great Dog!"

"I am a wolf."

"…No, can't say that I have. You said it's called the 'Great Dog'?"

It wasn't a lie. Minato hadn't met any *dogs* on the mountain.

The master of Echigoya raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Not having heard the Yamagami's pointed interjection, he leaned forward over the counter. Minato had a vague idea what this was about but had decided to ask his question anyway.

The master of Echigoya lowered his voice further, as if furtively revealing some past mischief, and told his tale.

"Up on that mountain, you see, lives the very kind and generous Great Dog. Back when I was still young and hot-blooded

—”

“He was a runny-nosed child.”

“—I lost my way in the mountains. Call it an excess of youthful enthusiasm. As I rushed madly trying to find my way out, I saw the sun begin to sink. I was hungry; I was thirsty; I was tired. I was trudging along, dejected, when a huge white dog suddenly howled at me from among the trees. *That* was a surprise. I leaped up into the air and ran for it.”

“He was the first wanderer fool enough to flee *up* the mountain. Also, I am a wolf.”

“Well, the dog kept after me, still growling in that voice as deep as an earthquake.”

“*Wolf.* And I was trying to stop you from running the wrong way.”

“In the end, it actually started chasing me.”

“After you finally found the right trail, to my relief.”

“I ran and ran with all my might, then all of a sudden, I realized I was back at the foot of the mountain.”

“It was indeed a long, long way.”

“That was when it hit me—I’d been *guided* back down off the mountain. I was pretty far from where I’d started climbing, but still.”

“Beggars cannot be choosers.”

The Yamagami gave a haughty snort. The master of Echigoya nodded several times, lost in reverie, then grinned wickedly. Minato managed to smother what would have been inappropriate laughter, showing only a vague trembling. He accepted the bag holding their *manju* from the master of Echigoya. Then the master whispered again.

“It was a *yokai* I saw that day. You ever hear of an *okuri-inu*—a dog that guides travelers?”

“I am the kami of the mountain, and as I have said many times, I am a wolf. Does the same sawdust yet fill that head of yours?”

Despite the Yamagami’s exasperation, there was a certain kindness to its voice. It would have been easy enough to reveal itself to the ears and eyes of Echigoya’s master, but the Yamagami refrained from this. It was not angry at not being heard; it was simply enjoying adding its one-sided commentary to the tale.

Also, a dog was one thing, but a *wolf* guiding a traveler through the forest sounded like something else entirely. Minato thought it best not to attempt a clarification.

Echigoya's master, not noticing the Yamagami, grinned his lopsided grin again.

"*Yokai* or not, though, it came to my rescue. For that, I'm grateful. That's why I call it the Great Dog—to show my gratitude. There's a stone Jizo statue right where it showed me the way out, and I often leave offerings of *manju* there."

With a chuckle as wicked as any corrupt administrator, the master of Echigoya slapped his potbelly, sending ripples across it.

The Yamagami was already staring at the bag in Minato's hand. Minato felt the kami glance up at him, applying additional pressure.

"I hope I get to meet the Great Dog myself someday," said Minato feigning ignorance as he paid for the *manju*. "See you next time." He headed toward the door as the cheerful master of Echigoya watched.

As they were about to leave, a burly teenage boy rushed into the store.

"Sorry, Grandpa. We ran late."

"Not to worry. Club activities come first."

As the swaying curtain receded behind Minato and the Yamagami, so did the conversation between the twelfth master of Echigoya and his grandson, who would one day succeed him as the thirteenth.

○

The trees of the mountain turned yellow and red, completing the change to their autumn garb. Yet the garden of the Kusunoki residence enjoyed an eternally unchanging spring. A mild breeze, ignoring seasonality in its entirety, set the leaves of the camphor tree rustling.

The wind chime had come down from the eaves. It was completely exhausted after all the work it had done, and the red goldfish decorating the glass were limp with fatigue—or so it seemed to Minato. He had polished the wind chime carefully before putting it back in its box and placing it in the back of the

walk-in closet, where it now slumbered. It would be needed again next summer, but for now, it deserved a rest.

As if serving as a replacement for the wind chime, a hard grinding sound echoed across the quiet garden at regular intervals. Minato, the source of the noise, was seated at the low table on the veranda, busily rubbing inkstick against inkstone. The sound made him oddly drowsy.

The Yamagami, lazing on its custom-made supersize cushion that had arrived a few days earlier, opened its mouth wide in a yawn.

"…That takes some time, I see."

"Yeah, but I think it'll be extra effective."

After all, Minato was using not ordinary tap water, but sacred water from the pond to make his ink.

Minato's quest to make his talismans more effective had involved repeated trial and error. After trying a diverse array of pens, he found that brush-style pens made it easiest to imbue writing with power. But no sooner had he decided to stick with brush-style pens than Saiga gifted him a high-grade calligraphy set. Ten brushes, every one so magnificent that the quality was evident even to Minato's amateur eye, and an inkstone, dense and heavy enough for him to feel its pressure directly. It was all far too luxurious for a beginner like him.

Still, *not* using it would have been even more wasteful.

Minato set about learning to use the tools he had received, doing online research to get started. By now he was getting the hang of things; he'd always been good with his hands.

"There's that nice inky scent."

He added a drop of water to the pool of thick ink from a small ceramic water dropper, then ground the inkstick on the inkstone again.

"This is kind of calming. Maybe I'll try copying out some sutras."

"That might be well. More so if you use that paper."

The Yamagami's eyes were directed at a bundle of washi paper at the edge of the table. There were sheets of every thickness and size, from folio to business card. This, too, had been a gift from Saiga.

The moment Saiga had produced the paper from his bag on a recent visit, the Yamagami had sniffed at the air. It had been made from *kozo* trees—a kind of paper mulberry—felled on the Yamagami's mountain. Minato was startled and impressed that the Yamagami could identify things from its own mountain immediately by smell alone. Saiga had seemed even tenser than usual, but even though the Yamagami showed no anger, the *onmyoji* simply handed over the paper and hurried away. He was not the kind to linger.

In any case, if Saiga was hoping to receive more effective talismans as a result, Minato was prepared to rise to the challenge.

Judging his preparations about complete, Minato dipped a brand-new brush into the dark pool of ink, then touched its tip to the dazzling white washi.

"Hey, there's no bleeding! Not like those cheap brush pens."

The stark black of the ink stood crisply out against the white paper. The soft tip of a brush had to be handled differently than the hard nib of a pen, and Minato wasn't yet used to it. However, as he began to form characters, stroke by flowing stroke, he smiled at how easy it was to focus spirit-dispelling power into the result.

He wrote a few more talismans, each one imbued with power in a different way. Then he held up the first one he'd written and the last one, and he turned to show the Yamagami.

"What do you think?"

"The one on the right is better by far. Each stroke of the brush is evenly imbued with power, right to the end."

"Huh. Okay. Thanks."

The Yamagami didn't offer detailed, thoughtful advice, but it did let Minato know how successful his efforts were, since he couldn't see for himself. Minato had gotten better at concentrating and transmitting his spirit-dispelling power, but he still had no way of judging its finished result as a talisman.

Minato was completely devoid of spiritual sight. When the Yamagami had told him that training was unlikely to produce much improvement, he had simply given up. It wasn't as if he had ambitions to become an *onmyoji*. As Minato saw it, all he had to do was improve the precision of his dispelling power.

They say a good workman doesn't blame his tools, but writing with nice brushes really did feel different to Minato. When he set aside the brush he was using to try another, the one he picked up had white animal fur at the tip. He could only imagine the complicated expressions the martens would make if they saw him writing with weasel fur.

"…This is nice. Easy to write with."

The great wolf glanced cheerfully at Minato, who looked satisfied. Perhaps it was well that the kami's kin were not there today, as it spared them from hearing Minato's previous comment.

"How are the kids? Full of energy as always?"

"They overflow with it."

The martens were currently in the middle of rigorous training, at their own request. It seemed they'd felt quite humiliated at their inability to do anything but quiver in fear at the impure mass they'd run into on the mountain, so they were busy working to heighten their resistance to corruption. They wouldn't tell Minato the details of their training, but every time they came to visit, they exuded greater confidence, and Minato could sense how much they'd grown.

They were connected to the Yamagami. The great wolf spent its days relaxing at the Kusunoki residence, but lately, every so often, it would suddenly bark words of admonition or encouragement. "Too slow!" "Aye, I see improvement there!" "You are still soft!" Muttering to itself was hardly new for the Yamagami, but it had become more common of late.

The neatly conical tip of the brush smoothly and lightly spun characters of special power out onto the paper.

"Check this out."

Minato held up a postcard-sized sheet of paper with two words written on it:

YAMAGAMI

TURTLE

At the sight of this talisman with its glimmering jade glow, the Yamagami nodded solemnly.

"Aye. It is good."

"Better than before?"

“Indeed. It should last much longer. Though I will say one thing: The turtle’s name is Reiki.”

“Huh? Really? I had no idea it had a fine name like that.”

“It is a kami in its own right, capable of great deeds.”

“*That* I did know.”

Minato nodded earnestly. It was only after the fact that he realized Reiki had been behind his recent run of good fortune.

Nor could he have failed to notice how lucky he had remained with alcohol ever since. Every time he visited a liquor store, he was given freebies and access to rare and hard-to-purchase products. It had become the norm for him. This power, which drew sake to him in all-too-faithful accordance with Reiki’s cravings, seemed to have no limits, which was terrifying in a way.

The Yamagami got to its feet and sat at the table with Minato.

“Show me the paper on which you wrote my name.”

Minato slid across the whole felt mat on which he was writing. When the Yamagami asked for the inkstone, too, he placed it before the kami.

Without hesitation, the great wolf pressed its paw first to the pool of ink, and then to the lower right section of the paper. A stark black paw print was the result, and the Yamagami chuckled, looking proud of itself. Ink on paper was all very well, but the ink that had gotten on its white fur looked unlikely to come off easily. The kami glanced at the inky pads of its paw, and in the blink of an eye, the dark color was gone.

“…Right, because you’re a kami. Okay. So, what does this mean?”

The great wolf returned to its cushion and turned in a circle before lying down.

“I added a prayer for safe journeys.” It rested its jaw on the tightly stuffed cushion and grinned. “So that our friend does not lose his way somewhere.”

Minato, unsure what that meant, put his hands together before the paper with a “Thank you.” As the kami’s low chuckle rang out, Reiki climbed up onto the veranda. Hearing the noise, Minato turned to look.

“Hi, Turtle— Oh, wait. Should I call you Reiki?”

Minato deduced from the horizontal shake of the turtle’s head that he could stick with the same form of address as before, and

he asked what was up.

"Do as you did for me," said the Yamagami.

Minato placed the paper and inkstone on the deck of the veranda, and Reiki also made its mark. One brisk press, and the paper had a crisp turtle claw print on it, which wrinkled it slightly. Minato was unable to sense anything out of the ordinary, but it was obvious at a glance that the turtle had used a great deal of power.

"Will this improve his luck around booze?"

"Nay. With money."

"Oooh. That's something."

Paying no mind to the mysteriously chuckling kami, Minato felt a simple, pure joy. Beside the first stamp, he wrote:

SO YOU DON'T GET LOST. TAKE ME WITH YOU WHEN YOU TRAVEL!

And beside the second:

IN THE MONEY, BABY! ↑ ↑

He couldn't deny that he was being a little unserious.

○

When Saiga saw the results a few days later, he was rendered speechless as his soul flew from his body.

"Mr. Harima… Hello? Mr. Harima!"

The *onmyoji* sat frozen, eyes staring. He didn't even move to accept the sheaf of talismans as Minato called his name. Eventually, he came to his senses with a start and humbly accepted the sheets with two trembling hands. The objects in his hands made him tremble in fear, and his face was pale.

Seeing this extreme reaction, Minato finally began to understand that he had created a talisman of considerable power. Yet he attributed this to the power of the Yamagami and the turtle, excluding his own abilities from the calculation.

As for one of those great and powerful kami, at that moment, it was sweeping its tail back and forth, gaze fixed downward as it leaned over a bag of sweets on the table.

I will not move. I will not move from this place. It brimmed with stubborn willpower and overflowed with divine energy.

"Tell the man it is his to use as he pleases."

After all, if Saiga didn't hurry up and go home, the Yamagami couldn't get started on those sweets.

"Ummm… The kami says you can do whatever you like with it. Use it, sell it, hang it on the wall…"

"…Thank you. I will do exactly that."

After forcing this reply out, the *onmyoji* made a deep and beautifully executed bow.

Ting.

The familiar sound of the wind chime came from inside Saiga's trench coat. He pushed up his glasses and reached into his jacket pocket for his phone, then glanced at the display.

Minato was puzzled. "Isn't it the wrong season for that?"

"I suppose so, but I've taken a liking to the tone."

"I see."

For a moment, the wariness left Saiga's face, and an unfathomably profound smile took its place. Minato was satisfied by this explanation, yet beside him the Yamagami snorted happily.

○

At the top of the arched bridge over the sacred pond, Minato stopped in his tracks.

He had been gazing into the sacred water below when he noticed something inexplicable. To the right of the bridge, a forest of aquatic plants swayed beneath the water's dazzling surface. On the left side, however, there was not a single plant to be seen.

Reiki swam busily under the bridge, holding some vegetation in its mouth. It was moving much faster than usual, as if it was in some sort of a hurry.

"…Moving? Or redecorating?"

Compared with the left of the bridge, where the pond bed was a lonely expanse of gravel, the right side was full of life. As well as the tightly packed profusion of aquatic plants, there was a small but particularly eye-catching gate at the back. It was decorated like the palace of the Dragon King from Japanese folklore, with jewels in seven colors glimmering against a base of red and white. What *was* that, exactly?

Could it possibly be connected to a certain great palace on the other side?

Maybe if you went through that gate, you were welcomed by breams and flounders who were also expert dancers?

Though deeply intrigued, Minato had made sure never to ask.

Curiosity killed the cat; he didn't need to doom himself with unnecessary prying. There were plenty of things in the world it was better not to know about. It was no exaggeration to say that the sacred pond was Reiki's domain, and if the turtle wanted to rearrange the pond to its liking, Minato had no objection.

"…Probably wants a change of pace. Everyone feels that way sometimes, right? Yeah."

Still harboring a few questions he couldn't quite banish, Minato went back inside the house.

Chapter 8
New Omens

The chill winds of autumn had begun to blow.

Unlike the world outside, where the season had people longing for hot soup, in the garden of the Kusunoki residence a cool drink was always refreshing. Today, Minato was welcoming a delivery direct from the home of the Yamagami, who had come to enjoy a carefree afternoon with him.

That delivery was the Yamagami's kin, making this their first visit in some time. Standing on hind legs still wrapped in the cool air from outside, the older two, Seri and Torika, bowed politely.

"Thank you for showing such hospitality to our Yamagami."

"Sorry it always acts like it owns the place. Please accept this as a token of our appreciation."

Before them sat a bamboo basket piled high with the blessings of the mountain. Mountain grapes, kousa dogwood fruit, chestnuts, persimmons: All of it was plump, lustrous, perfectly ripe, and delicious-looking. Minato thanked the martens and accepted the gift. The basket was still cold to the touch, reminding him of the autumn weather outside. He sat on the edge of the veranda, smiling ruefully.

"You don't have to stand on ceremony, you know," he said.

"Oh, right."

Utsugi, who was closest Minato, tore off a mountain grape from the heap inside the basket, popped it into his mouth, and chewed loudly. The youngest marten, free-spirited as ever, paid no heed to the glares from his older siblings.

"Eat up, Minato! They're delicious!" Utsugi chomped another grape blissfully.

The fruit needed washing, to start with. Minato took the basket inside and rinsed off the mountain grapes and dogwood fruit in the sink, then piled them on a big plate. When he returned, a bag of Western-style sweets also in hand, he was greeted with enthusiastic cheers. Even the trustworthy older two martens couldn't help squirming in anticipation, which was so adorable it warmed his heart. Utsugi went without saying.

In the past, all three would have squealed and hopped around in glee, but now they restricted themselves to some mild foot stomping. It was clear they'd grown up a little.

"Here you go."

"Thank you!"

The three martens happily accepted their madeleines; they hadn't lost their manners and waited until everyone had been served. They all got along, but when sweets were involved, all bets were off. To preempt any dishonorable squabbles, Minato always gave them equal and identical portions.

Sitting in a row on the edge of the veranda, the three furballs bit into their treats.

"I hear you're in training." Minato asked.

"That's right."

"You do look more dependable than before."

"We do? That's nice to hear."

Seri and Torika wagged their tails restlessly.

"Yeah. You have a different aura to you now."

"Like the Yamagami?!"

It was Utsugi who leaned forward eagerly to ask the question, but Seri and Torika also watched Minato closely—apparently, this was their goal. They'd always resembled the great wolf in some ways, but now they were starting to give the same impression of reassuring, immovable stability. Or so it felt to Minato, at least.

Minato cast a glance behind them at the Yamagami, who was curled up with its eyes closed on its cushion in the middle of the veranda. What was clamor to a kami? The miniature white mountain, planted so firmly that Minato doubted he could dislodge it even with a lever, rose and fell regularly. It was resting soundly as usual, without a care in the world.

"Sure. The resemblance is growing."

"Yaaay! Can we have another sweet as a reward?"

Their complete lack of restraint is like the Yamagami, too. But even as he mused on this, Minato removed the packaging from three buttercream sandwich cookies and put them into three sets of little forepaws. When the martens received a snack for the first time, they always began by sniffing it all over, turning it this way and that, before exchanging a nod and biting down as one. It was an amusing show of solidarity: *If we go down, we all go down together*.

The instant they bit into the cookies, twinkling stars flew from their beady little eyes. They ecstatically and wordlessly stuffed their faces, clearly taking a liking to the sweets. The older two, similar to the Yamagami, took smaller bites and enjoyed the treat a little at a time. Utsugi, however, stuffed the whole thing into his face and held his mouth closed with his forepaws as he chewed.

They were particularly fond of buttery sweets. Minato had been sure they would enjoy today's treat, with its thick block of buttercream sandwiched between two thin, crispy sablé biscuits, ever since seeing it in the local newspaper. Funnily enough, the martens turned their noses up at snacks that used margarine or shortening instead. Their gourmet tastes were just another thing they had inherited from the Yamagami.

The martens had Saiga to thank for their good fortune, of course. Minato had mentioned their diligent training and written the store and product name on one of the talismans as always, and the *onmyoji* had hit the jackpot on his first pull. When Minato remembered how disappointed the Yamagami had been when Saiga turned up bearing that as his house gift, it made his chest ache. Saiga, for his part, had been quite alarmed by the reaction, which Minato also felt bad about.

Back in the present, Minato kept a watchful eye on the martens as they happily agreed that they were ready to get back and train even harder.

The leaves on the garden's trees rustled as a gentle wind blew through, and hearing the sound, Minato looked toward the garden. He saw the young, unsteady camphor tree rustling its own sparse leaves.

Seri, finished with his snack, noticed the troubled look on Minato's face.

“Minato? What’s wrong?”

“…I think the camphor tree has stopped growing.”

Minato stood up from the veranda and walked along the garden path toward the camphor tree. The three martens hopped to the ground and followed. The young tree’s leaves were still green, a completely different color from the autumn foliage that covered the mountain in the background. After its initial growth spurt, it had remained at about eye level, growing no taller. As the four surrounded the young tree, its slim crown rustled, as if shivering.

“It looks healthy enough, and it often sways like it’s playing with the wind—it moved just now, right? But I don’t think it’s grown a bit since it first shot up. I water it with sacred water every day, but it’s not getting any taller or growing any new leaves.”

“I don’t see any problems in particular. Hmm… I wonder why that is. This tree lives by different rules than a normal camphor, after all.”

“It does?”

“Well, it’s a sacred tree.”

“…A sacred tree. Right… Normal trees don’t move their leaves or their branches.”

Torika’s comment had reminded Minato of this fact. He’d spent so much time in the garden of the Kusunoki residence that his feel for normality had gone askew.

Utsugi looked up at the camphor tree from his place at Minato’s feet.

“Still too skinny to climb…”

The three martens, all expert tree climbers, patted the tree’s roots. Its trunk was slender enough for any of the little martens to encircle with one paw.

The turtle came out of the sacred pond and crawled toward the concerned-looking group. Minato realized Reiki was looking up at him intently just as the Yamagami’s kin sent a sharp glare in the direction of the rear gate. Judging from their reactions, it looked like something was there.

“It seems you have a visitor,” said Seri.

Minato and the martens followed the swiftly moving Reiki across the garden to the gate. Minato glanced back along the way

to see the Yamagami lying belly up on its cushion. Apparently, their visitor would not be trouble, and Minato felt the tension leave his shoulders.

Reiki looked back from the gate, waiting for the others to catch up. The turtle's rapid movements were a far cry from its usual relaxed approach, so Minato reasoned that Reiki must be expecting a guest, and he hurried to the gate to check. Through the latticework he saw a long, slender being standing lightly on the ground.

It was a dragon.

It had two long horns and wings like a bat. The dragon's wings were folded on its back as it stood elegantly on its three-clawed hind feet. When its eyes met Minato's, it nodded politely. *Clearly a very courteous dragon*, Minato thought as he reflexively bowed back.

Minato opened the gate, inviting the dragon in, and it slipped through the air past him, leisurely flapping its wings. The dragon was a little smaller than the martens crowded around Minato's feet. He kept realizing he was staring, which was only natural considering he had always thought dragons were fictional. Yet one had just appeared right in front of him.

When the dragon stood alongside Reiki, it was clear they were beings of the same kind. Its pearly glow had a strong bluish tint, made even more beautiful by the sunlight that fell from the autumn sky.

After facing Reiki and having some kind of conversation, the dragon glanced first at the camphor tree and then at the veranda. The lazing Yamagami raised a forepaw and flicked the air dismissively.

I leave it to you.

By now Minato knew enough to understand the Yamagami's meaning.

Finally, the dragon glanced at Minato. It seemed to be seeking his permission for something.

"I don't quite follow whatever this all is, but if the Yamagami's okay with it, be my guest."

The dragon responded with an understanding nod, then rose lightly into the air and flew toward the camphor tree. It circled

the tree once, its eyes glowing faintly and blue-silver light radiating from its body. Soon one of the countless woolly clouds drifting in the high-vaulted sky overhead silently descended toward the garden. The cloud stopped in midair about a meter above the tree, which it was just big enough to cover. Minato and the martens, on standby near the gate, boggled in surprise.

The dragon shone more brightly, and a thin rain began to fall from the cloud. The glowing creature started to fly around the cloud in circles, and the rain grew stronger, then weakened. Just as Minato realized the dragon was adjusting the intensity of the rainfall, the cloud began to rise back up into the sky. Finally, the camphor tree gave one huge shiver.

Then it shot up to twice its height.

"Whoa!" Minato and the martens cried out in surprise.

Ignoring the outcry from the upturned faces below, the tree kept growing with a rustling of leaves and a creaking sound like a house settling. Taller and taller it grew, chasing the rising cloud above it, higher and higher, stretching and growing. They watched its trunk thicken, its boughs lengthen, and its crown grow leafier, expanding both upward and outward. Standing beside the trembling Minato, Reiki poked out its neck and opened and closed its mouth. Immediately, the tree's prodigious growth stopped at about twice the height of the house, and the fluffy cloud continued rising to rejoin its fellows in the sky.

In its wake was a fine specimen of a camphor tree, big enough to be called "towering."

Its dense, spherical crown quivered in an apparent expression of joy.

Minato was still gaping in slack-jawed amazement as the dragon approached them again. Its face was filled with the satisfaction of a job well done.

Alighting to stand beside Reiki, the dragon looked up at Minato expectantly.

"…It says it wants to live in the pond."

"…Oh, right. Sure. If Turtle doesn't mind, be my guest."

Still astonished, Minato made his reply through Seri, who acted as his impromptu interpreter. The dragon gave another deep bow, its whiskers swaying.

The dragon's name was Oryu, and this new addition to the household was an oenophile.

It tended to overindulge and loved to fly once it had a bit to drink. It drifted through the air around Minato in the cool of the evening. Holding its wineglass in one clawed hand, it floated here and there, nimbly avoiding any collisions. Minato admired its skill.

A recent compulsory upgrade to Minato's luck around alcohol, courtesy of Reiki, had left him winning bottles not just of sake, but also of wine. Enough bottles, in fact, to fill the wine cellar that the former owner had left. Minato had been starting to worry about what to do with all that wine with no one to drink it, but that problem had been solved in a single stroke. Apparently, it had been Reiki's welcoming gift to Oryu.

The mystery of Reiki moving to the right side of the sacred pond had also been resolved. The turtle had cleared out the other side, bare down to the gravel, so that Oryu could move in there and decorate it to its own tastes.

The Yamagami had previously explained to Minato that Oryu had been trapped for many years inside an *onryo*. This *onryo* had finally been dispelled by the family crest on Saiga's hand, and so the dragon was incredibly grateful to Minato. Yet Minato couldn't help but think that Saiga had done the actual dispelling, not him.

In any case, Reiki and Oryu got along well, and the once-lonely sacred pond was now filled with life, which was a joyous outcome.

As usual, the Yamagami had eyes only for *wagashi*. It was devouring the *mitarashi dango* that Minato had brought out for dessert after dinner. The sweet soy-glazed dumplings were, of course, loaded with generous servings of smooth bean paste.

Dangling his legs over the edge of the veranda, Minato dried his hair with a towel.

"I should've gotten out of the bath earlier. I'm still hot!"

"A rare misstep for you. Do you not usually bathe like a crow in that 'sho-wer' of yours?"

The Yamagami, now glancing at Minato's flushed face, wasn't great with some newer words and tended to stumble over them a

little. For Minato, this always brought back fond memories of his grandfather.

"I guess so. Back home, I could hop into the *onsen* pretty much any time of day or night, so it feels like a hassle to draw a bath just for myself."

"…You miss your *onsen*, then?"

"A little, sure. I didn't realize till I left home how good it was at relieving fatigue. Ours is full of sulfur, so it's great for relaxation and recovery."

Minato chuckled. The great wolf munching its dumplings, the turtle gulping down sake from a huge bowl, and the dragon chugging wine straight from the bottle were all listening closely to his words. The three kami quietly exchanged a glance that Minato did not see.

○

What to make of *this*?

When Minato pulled the curtains open, he found that one corner of the garden had become an open-air *onsen*.

The round basin was ringed by rocks large and small and was covered in steam. It was a wonderfully freeing design that complemented the rest of the garden perfectly.

Still holding the half-open curtains, Minato could only stand and stare. Another dramatic transformation had taken place in the garden.

"…Right, of course I'd be surprised… That's an *onsen*, right…? Seriously?"

Through the steam, he saw a huge white creature soaking in the water, chin resting on one of the rocks at the edge. The great wolf had its eyes closed, and even from a distance, Minato could see it enjoying the steaming water.

Minato opened the sliding glass door and stepped outside. After slipping on his sandals so as not to disturb the tranquil morning atmosphere, he quietly trod the paved path. The grassy area around him had changed its position, and the sacred pond had shrunk a little. But it had been huge to begin with, and since it had only two residents, it didn't seem cramped.

Peering into the pond on the way, Minato saw the pearly glow of the turtle and dragon at the bottom, the two kami apparently asleep. They had stayed up late drinking the night before, so they probably wouldn't be up and about till noon.

Oryu's half of the pond was a rocky expanse, quite unlike the lush green of the other half. Apparently, the dragon liked to slip into the gaps between the huge underwater rocks and sleep snugly tucked away. The bridge was the dividing line between the two kami, and though they got along very well, the line was firmly drawn.

Still beside the pond, Minato looked up at the lush sacred camphor. It had grown to huge proportions, and its great rugged trunk was too big to get his arms around. It gently rustled its leaves above his head, not moving anything else. In its boughs farther up, he saw three widely spaced balls of white fur. The Yamagami's three kin, having completed their training, were sleeping in their favorite spots, and the tree presumably didn't want to wake them. Minato touched the bark lightly, returning the gentle tree's morning greeting.

As he approached the *onsen*, the faint smell of sulfur reached his nostrils, and he smiled at the warm feelings it brought back. It had been several months since he'd smelled that familiar smell—longer than he'd realized. He crouched down at the edge of the *onsen*—just by the rock where the Yamagami was resting its head, eyes still closed—and dipped his hand into the water. The heat seeped cozily into the marrow of his bones. He made a makeshift bowl of his hands and scooped up some water, watching the flowers of sulfur float in the viscous water.

"…It's a real *onsen*…"

Before he could stop himself, he murmured in astonishment. The bathing wolf opened one eye a fraction. As usual on such occasions, its august face wore an expression best described as smug.

"I can't believe this."

Sensing the reverence and awe in Minato's astounded voice, the Yamagami let out a long, silent breath of satisfaction through its nose.

"Well? Care for a morning bath?"

“Much appreciated. Don’t mind if I do.”

The Yamagami was much bigger than Minato, but the *onsen* had plenty of room for both. The high walls around the garden meant he didn’t have to worry about prying eyes, either. He hurried back to the house to grab a towel and a change of clothes, then joined the Yamagami in the hot water.

It was his first dip in an *onsen* in months, and he had stayed in the water so long it made him lightheaded. Now he was stretched out on the veranda, lying face down with his cheek pressed against the cool wooden boards.

“Ngahhh… What bliss…”

“Indeed.”

The Yamagami, suffering no lightheadedness, was enjoying a postbath snack of sweet potato *yokan*. Contented as the kami had seemed in the bath, it appeared even happier now.

After getting reacquainted with the veranda’s boards for a while, Minato sat up.

“A freestanding house with an *onsen*—talk about fancy. But I hear the original owner owned his own company…so maybe not?”

His head was still a little boiled, and his voice sounded dazed. The great wolf sitting across from him stuck its nose into the carefully selected tea bowl it held between two huge forepaws. The Yamagami preferred lukewarm tea to piping hot, so a nice, lukewarm cup of roasted *hojicha* was just the thing after a bath. After drinking its fill, the kami raised its head.

“Hot spring water strikes you as a luxury?”

“It would for most people.”

“For me, it differs but little from any other water.”

“Huh.”

Learning that the kami did not consider an *onsen* a luxury item, Minato took a sip of his water. The Yamagami set about its last piece of *yokan*. Chewing as slowly as possible, it shot a sharp glance at the rear gate. After a three-second pause, there was the sound of rustling leaves. Seri and Torika raced down the trunk of the camphor tree, and Utsugi dropped to the ground with a *plop*.

Startled by this sudden commotion rupturing the peaceful atmosphere, Minato looked over at the tree.

“Huh? What? Why are they—?”

“Ha! Too slow.”

At this rumbling admonition from the Yamagami, Seri and Torika ran even faster toward the rear gate. Utsugi scrambled to his feet and raced to join them.

After dispelling the momentary clamor and restoring serenity in an instant, the Yamagami swished its tail and spoke to Minato, who was getting to his feet.

“Another guest, it seems.”

“To see me?”

Question marks floating above his head, Minato headed toward the gate but was thwarted along the way. Reiki and Oryu, who had risen groggily from the sacred pond, were blocking the path. Neither of them got hangovers, but they did seem a little unsteady on their feet, and Minato stopped in his tracks.

“…Don’t tell me… This is an acquaintance of yours?”

The two kami nodded. Minato had asked them offhand, but it turned out to be true.

The two kami led the way, reeling and staggering, and Minato followed behind. The martens were standing at the gate, and they looked out through the lattice, then at Minato, then back, over and over again. They seemed to want to say something. Minato found this puzzling but decided to check who their visitor was first. He was used to this by now—it was the second time, after all. Excited to see what manner of being had come to visit today, he looked out through the lattice.

The visitor was hiding behind the gatepost, head half poking out to peek at them with one eye. Apart from that, Minato could see only one foreleg, which was covered in scales and had a creamy pearlescent glow. It had a distinctive dragon’s head with long, dangling whiskers.

“Oh, I remember you!”

It was that fast deerlike creature they’d helped on the mountain not long ago—a kirin.

Startled, perhaps, by the slightly raised volume of his voice, it jumped and cringed in a corner. Its barely visible tail was tucked

completely between two quivering hind legs. It was afraid for some reason; if Minato wasn't careful with his words, it might run off completely.

At a loss, Minato turned back and looked first at Reiki, then at Oryu.

The two came forward past Minato, looking as if they'd been inconvenienced, and stood at the gate with the kirin on the other side. Presumably, they were trying to reason with it. The martens, who could hear and understand the conversation, stood silently at Minato's feet.

Eventually, Reiki looked back toward them, and Seri looked up at Minato.

"It wants to know if it can come in."

"It's welcome to."

There was no need to open the gate; the kirin passed right through it. Minato suspected the reason all these kami were so careful about obtaining permission to enter despite the lack of physical barriers was because the Yamagami lived here. As for Fujin and Raijin, well, what was there to say? It didn't take much contact with them to recognize that they were free spirits.

In any case, even after the kirin was inside the garden, it stayed just inside the gate, making no attempt to approach further. It was paralyzed with fear.

It was scared out of its wits. Was it afraid of Minato, or of humans in general? The kirin's terror made Minato feel guilty, although he couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong.

Thinking it might be better to keep his distance, he took three big steps back. Any conversation would go through the martens anyway, so that shouldn't be a problem. Understanding his intentions, perhaps, they stepped back with him.

"I'm counting on you," he whispered, and Seri responded with a confident nod.

Once Minato had put some more distance between them, the kirin stopped trembling. Its face took on a sharp, determined expression, and it planted its hooves firmly on the ground. Its tail, however, was still between its legs. This newfound enthusiasm made its defiant pose look even nobler.

“I should like to offer my sincere gratitude for the time you came to my rescue.”

Seri relayed the message to Minato, and Minato smiled and waved it off with one hand. He kept his movements to a minimum, so as not to overstimulate the kirin, and had decided it might be better not to talk.

“Your intervention allowed me to recover my sense of self and my freedom. For that, I thank you. Words cannot express the depth of my gratitude. I owe you a debt I shall remember for the rest of my life. Yet once the deed was done, I committed the unspeakable rudeness of fleeing without a word of thanks, for which I am truly—”

The speech of apology and gratitude went on and on; the kirin might have been timid, but it sure did like to talk. *I probably look harmless enough*, Minato thought, a faint smile on his lips as he listened politely and nodded at appropriate intervals.

Five minutes later, Reiki and Oryu were leaning together for mutual support, both having fallen half-asleep with Seri’s ceaselessly interpreting voice as a lullaby. The kirin still stood beside them, proud and upright, eyes dewy with emotion. Minato stood with his hands folded together before him and maintained his best customer-service smile, even though the corners of his mouth were starting to ache. Seri continued his earnest and calm interpretation.

“…That moment, the moment when your power bested and brought low that evil being, I felt as though I were soaring to the heavens. Well—I *was* soaring to the heavens, but I trust you understand my meaning. In any case, I became excited to a degree quite unbefitting of my years, and I cannot tell you how embarrassed I am as a result. Yet could such a thing have been avoided? Nay, I think not. Any attempt to express the shock I felt at that moment in words would be far, far too—”

The torrent of gratitude and emotion showed no sign of stopping. Utsugi had long since lost interest and was now slumped against Minato’s leg, and Torika poked her brother in the back.

Another fifteen minutes later…

"…And while I am at it, might I be permitted to remark on what a lovely residence this is? How comfortable it looks. How livable! I cannot tell you how envious I am. I myself am roaming the world at present, a very tumbleweed. After all, it has been some time since I saw the light of day. Everything has changed, making me feel almost as if I am Urashima Taro, lost beneath the waves for hundreds of years—"

It still wasn't over.

The polite smile had left Minato's face.

Five *more* minutes later, the river of words finally took a turn toward a long-, *long*-awaited conclusion.

"Hence, as a token of my appreciation…"

The assembled listeners stood up straighter. Were they almost there?

And then, in Seri's formal yet childlike voice, the bomb dropped.

"…I shall make of you a statesman capable of seizing half the world."

"I appreciate the thought, but please don't."

The words left his mouth before his brain could process them. His opposition to this idea was absolute.

The kirin began to tremble violently, but Minato was enduring heart palpitations and cold sweats of his own. Just imagining the kirin's terrifying reward, which he could never under any circumstances accept, made him shake uncontrollably. And having personally experienced the awesome power of Reiki and Oryu, he had no doubt the kirin could make good on its offer.

There was no doubt in his mind that he lacked what it took to become such an important figure. It was too much for him, and he had neither the drive nor the ambition for it. His response here could doom the world to a future of universal misery. The pressure made his throat as dry as sandpaper.

"It's very kind of you, really, but I'm happy the way things are. I want to be a normal, everyday person. A commoner, or some sort of other nameless villager—that's about my level. I'm begging you, from the bottom of my heart. Don't do it."

Minato realized he was leaning forward slightly in his desperate entreaty. The kirin still trembled, but its head was also

tilted to one side in confusion. Clearly, it had not expected him to refuse.

"But why? Are humans not base, cold-blooded creatures? Do they not steal land and resources from each other and, not content with devouring other species, rejoice even in fighting and killing their own kind? With the power I offer, you could build mountains as high as you wished out of the corpses of your own kind."

Seri's emotionless and youthful voice made the kirin's words hit harder than he'd expected. Minato couldn't deny it. In every age, past, present, and future, humans had repeatedly done exactly what the kirin claimed.

Minato found himself unable to raise his voice to vehemently protest that not all humans were like that, or even to approach the kirin, and he grew more desperate.

Just then, at Minato's moment of greatest peril, two snickering voices descended from the sky.

"Like he said, those words of thanks are all he needs. Not everyone's cut out for every job. This kid never had any ambitions like that."

"You know what they say—conquering half the world won't necessarily make you happy."

It was support mixed with laughter, and at the sound of these familiar voices, Minato felt the tension leave his body. He looked up and saw Fujin and Raijin standing in the air above the camphor tree.

Mysteriously, however, they didn't look like toddlers anymore, but young boys a few years older.

Fujin and Raijin's intervention seemed to convince the kirin, and after another long and rambling speech of farewell, it took its leave. The storm had passed and catastrophe averted.

Fujin and Raijin sat on the veranda calmly. Minato prostrated himself before them with complete sincerity.

"You saved my life there. Thank you."

Their assistance had helped Minato avoid being cursed with the worst possible fortune rather than the best.

He felt as though he'd had a near-death experience. What would have happened if the kirin had dropped off its gift and disappeared? After going to all the trouble of taking a morning bath, Minato was drenched in a cold sweat, and he and his valiant interpreter Seri had both already drunk enough water to fill a bath in an effort to replace their lost fluids. For the two kami who'd saved his life, of course, he offered not just words of thanks but a wide selection of their beloved sake.

Fujin and Raijin cackled cheerfully as Minato filled their lacquered sake cups to the brim. Fujin spun his cup, making the gold leaf dance.

"You were in serious trouble there. The best part is, that kirin thought it'd be doing you a favor!"

"Well, that kirin's heard a *lot* of requests for exactly that over the years."

"It seemed terrified. I thought maybe a human might have done something to it."

"Who knows? I doubt a mortal could do it much harm."

"Maybe it has a physiological aversion to people? That one's always disliked humans—getting caught up in a lump of evil spirits might have pushed it over the edge."

Raijin emptied the cup, his movements as practiced as ever. As Minato watched, he asked a question.

"By the way, what happened to your bodies…?"

The two hadn't looked a day over three years old when they'd dropped by before. Now they looked about seven. They still dressed the same, though: a loincloth each, and nothing more. Here in the garden, it was eternally spring, but the outside world was rushing into winter, and the chill was starting to bite. A loincloth wouldn't be much good against that, which gave Minato a powerful urge to wrap them in something warm. Not that the cold seemed to bother them at all.

"Can I take a dip in the *onsen*?" Raijin asked, gazing at the garden.

"Of course," answered Minato without any hesitation. He wanted the two of them to warm up by any means possible.

Fujin, after draining his cup, let the cloth-wrapped bundle on its shoulders fall to the deck of the veranda. It reached into the

small package and rummaged around inside. This was something Minato hadn't seen before. Idly wondering what it was, he took a sip from his glass of green tea.

"We're on our way back to our original forms. Thanks to you."

"…What did I do?"

"When you recognize and respect our existence, our presence becomes stronger. We can also use more of our powers now. So thanks."

No one believed in kami anymore.

Compared with the days of old, even those who could sense kami were few and far between. A lack of awe and reverence from mortals didn't make kami disappear, Fujin explained, but it did make them unable to maintain their appearance.

"This is a token of our gratitude. For everything you've done for us."

Fujin grabbed a narrow, rodlike object and pulled it from the package in one quick motion.

A gigantic swordfish appeared. It had a silvery, glimmering spindle-shaped body, immediately identifiable pointy upper jaw, and clear eyes. It must have been freshly caught, because the smell of the sea rolled across the veranda. Minato and the three martens sitting around him stared in shock. The fish was easily more than three meters long—far too big to fit in that small a package.

The huge fish floated just above eye level. Beyond it, Fujin smiled innocently.

"It's already been drained of blood."

"…I appreciate the consideration there."

How was Minato meant to cut up something like *that*? This was too much to ask of a man whose cooking skills were roughly at the level of the average home cook. He had very little experience filleting fish, and his all-purpose kitchen knife definitely wasn't up to the task. His face froze in terror.

"I'm kidding. Watch this," Fujin said glibly, and he made the swordfish sail out over the garden.

Minato felt a moment of awkwardness as his eyes met those of the hapless floating fish. As he and the others watched, it came to a halt in the air just outside the veranda.

Fujin's fingers twitched, and the fish split neatly into three fillets. An instant later, countless crescent-shaped blades of wind began slicing up the meat, and in a matter of seconds, it had been cut into small mouthfuls. They were all the exact same size, down to the millimeter, and the faces of the sharp cuts glistened with fat. It looked truly delicious. Even if there was far too much of it.

Utsugi excitedly shook Minato by the arm.

"Can you do that, too?!" he asked with a look of innocent, cruel expectation.

Asking a mere mortal to perform a kami-level feat was a bit much. Driven by a few remaining shreds of pride, Minato wrung out a strangled oath: "I—I hope to be able to…one day… perchance."

"You sound so polite all of a sudden," remarked Torika absentmindedly.

Minato couldn't envision a future in which such a thing would be within his power. Not when the fastest wind he could create right now was the gentle breeze of a fan on low.

Minato hid his awkwardness behind an insincere laugh. Then he zipped past the dozing Yamagami and went inside the house to get a big plate for those floating fillets.

Once the pile of swordfish sashimi was no more, the martens staggered home to the mountain, clutching their bulging stomachs.

Minato seized the opportunity to have Fujin check on his progress using his wind powers. Comparing Minato's attempts with what Fujin could do was like comparing heaven and earth; he hadn't even been able to bear showing his meager skills before the Yamagami's kin.

Minato thrust his palm toward the Yamagami's back, and the white fur ruffled beneath the mildest of breezes.

Fujin nodded with deep pity. "You've learned to control it a little, eh?"

"…Yes."

On his next attempt, Minato made the wind as powerful as he could. Again the fur was ruffled, this time by a slightly stronger

breeze. It tickled the Yamagami's nose and soon brought on a loud sneeze from the newly woken kami.

"Sorry about that."

"Fear not. All is well."

The Yamagami's reply was generous, but it twisted its face and used its forepaws to scratch its muzzle. Minato's demonstration, for which he had borrowed the kami's shaggy white fur on the theory that it would more clearly reveal the wind he invoked, was over. Wispy. Gentle. Tepid. Those were the only kinds of breezes Minato could create. They didn't bear comparison with the razor-sharp winds Fujin could wield like mighty swords.

Fujin tilted his head, one hand on his chin. "You seem to be holding back a lot. Are you scared?"

"…Scared? Yes…maybe I am."

"If you tried a blast at full strength to learn the power's limits, you might find it easier to manipulate it freely."

"Full strength…?"

"Let it all out, blow some obnoxious pain in the ass off his feet, that sort of thing."

"I don't know anyone like that…right now, at least."

What the future held was anyone's guess. Living here had all but freed Minato from the pain of dealing with complicated, frustrating human relationships, leaving his mind ever calm and peaceful. He was immersed in good fortune, as though spending his days in a lukewarm bath—after all, it was perpetually spring. Perhaps this was why Minato had virtually no ambition to master this supernatural power he'd been granted, only wanting a basic handle on it.

But he couldn't stay here forever.

He couldn't let this place lull him into a perpetual torpor.

He would do well to learn how to bend this power perfectly to his will, just in case he ever needed it.

Also, if he ever succumbed to anger and let the wind power run wild and uncontrolled, he might find himself trapped in a very unpleasant situation, even aside from the damage he would cause. He could end up on the television news, in the tabloids, even going viral online. You never knew who might be watching, or from where.

Finally feeling a sense of urgency, Minato sat up straighter.

“I’ll give it a try. I can work harder at this.”

“Sure. Keep at it. I want to see you able to chop someone’s house in two if they bother you, without breaking a sweat.”

“That’s far too violent.”

The kami’s jovial, chuckling face was cute enough, but inside it was tough as nails.

Minato recoiled a little. Raijin, dipping a piece of swordfish sashimi into a little pool of soy sauce, looked up.

“Want to borrow my powers, too?” the lightning kami asked.

“No, thank you! That’s very kind of you, but no!”

“Aww! How come? Don’t hold back on my account.”

“I’m fine, really. I have all the power I need!”

“I bet it’d really come in handy for you. If someone got on your nerves, one zap and they’d be—”

“Please, no!”

Lightning was too terrifying a prospect to consider. Ashen-faced, Minato desperately shook his head and waved his arms, rejecting the proposal with every ounce of his strength. Fujin and Raijin cackled in glee as they watched.

Amid this lively atmosphere, the great wolf swept its tail back and forth as it lay on its cushion gazing at the head of the swordfish. Tomorrow the head would be broiled for dinner—truly a treat to whet the appetite.

Chapter 9
It’s Always There, Whenever I Turn Around

Minato felt someone watching.

The gaze was so hot it singed his back. He was on the veranda writing talismans when he felt it, and he slowly turned his head to see who was there. Had something just disappeared from above the garden wall on the mountain side? Minato blinked, then returned to his original position and went back to running his brush over the washi paper.

Again, he sensed an incredibly strong gaze at his back.

In the kindly shade of the camphor tree, Minato whirled on the spot, bamboo broom in hand, to look behind him. Had he just seen something white duck out of view behind the wall on the rice paddy side? He watched for a while, but when it failed to show itself again, he returned to sweeping fallen leaves into his dustpan.

He was pierced between the shoulder blades by an intense, laser-like stare.

The instant he felt it on him as he walked along the garden path, Minato spun around with such force that his neck felt the strain.

Something slipped out of view through the lattice of the rear gate, leaving a pearly glimmer with a pale cream tint.

Doorplate shattered. Reserves at zero. Requesting immediate replenishment.

The ominous e-mail arrived from his mother on a cold day with winter nearing. Minato, used to receiving such requests, sat in

warm sunlight at the low table on the veranda and began producing doorplates in bulk.

“No way it was ‘shattered.’ ‘Noticeably cracked’ at worst. Mom’s always so overdramatic.”

He picked up a wooden plaque, which had been previously painted with multiple layers of varnish and left to dry, and began using a wood-carving knife on the outlines of the characters written on its surface. His hand moved swiftly and surely as he muttered to himself. To one side sat a stack of plaques of equal size; there were enough plaques not only for the inn’s front doorplate, but also for the labels on each individual room within it. Along with these were thin strips of wood that would be used for the key chain of each room. Sometimes guests took these home when they left, so Minato always made extra.

As Minato worked, the Yamagami rose from its supersized dark-purple cushion on the opposite side of the table.

With one forepaw, the kami tapped the doorplate that lay on the floor of the veranda . A burst of golden light mingled with and intensified the jade glow of Minato’s father’s name before it would go to the Kusunoki family home. Without Minato noticing, the kami had taken the liberty of reinforcing the doorplate’s protective powers.

The fact that it was only *one* of the doorplates was, presumably, due to the Yamagami’s lazy, capricious nature.

“Strange, though, that these doorplates of yours should break so often.”

“You think? It’s been happening to us for so long it’s just the norm now. No one thinks anything of it. Even our neighbors let us know when they notice.”

Lying back down on the cushion, the great wolf wagged its shaggy tail.

“I suspect they are not *breaking* but *being broken*.”

“…You think? By who?”

“Surely there are beings that live in your house? Things other than human?”

“You don’t think it’s our *doji*, do you?”

“In all likelihood. No doubt this is its way of warning the household when a doorplate loses its power.”

Minato's wood-carving knife paused as he stared into space. Come to think of it…

The first doorplate he ever made for the inn, years ago now, had been knocked to the ground several times, despite the fact that it was secured to the wall firmly after each occasion. Each time it fell, Minato simply put it back up on the wall rather than making a new one. His grandfather had already passed away by that point, and no one in the inn could discern what the falling nameplate meant.

While all this was going on, Minato's father's health took a turn. He started shivering and complaining of cold, despite the midsummer weather. Minato's father had inherited a faint echo of Minato's grandfather's spirit sight in the form of an ability to sense certain beings through his skin. His condition grew worse by the day, filling the usually cheery household with an oppressive gloom. And then one day the doorplate was utterly destroyed.

Understanding filling his face, Minato adjusted his grip on the wood-carving knife.

"Now I know why Mom's so overdramatic. That first time left an impression on her."

He saw now that the *doji* had probably shattered the doorplate in a fit of frustration. It had been a message: *Replace this* now*!* After the death of Minato's grandfather, the *doji* must have been annoyed to find it couldn't establish a mutual understanding with anyone. Once Minato hung up a new doorplate, his father made a full recovery in a matter of days, and tranquility was restored to the Kusunoki household.

The reason he had been able to hang up a new doorplate so quickly was because he'd had spares. The extravagant praise Minato had received from that mysterious guest for his doorplate had led him to continue making them, constantly striving for higher levels of perfection.

From that point on, deep cracks periodically appeared in the doorplates outside Minato's family's inn and home. This, presumably, was the *doji* attempting to inform them that a replacement was needed in a more moderate way. This had escaped Minato back then, but he had always replaced the

doorplates quickly when they cracked—after all, it wasn't a great look. Now, knowing the reasons, he felt nothing but gratitude toward the *doji*. It had been watching out for the family for years without even a proper thank-you. He decided that when he sent the completed nameplates back home, he would include some of the finest local sweets and sake from his new home.

He kept working for a while, letting his keenly felt gratitude toward the *doji* flow into his work as sawdust scattered around him, when suddenly he felt a burning gaze at the back of his head. It was so sharp, it felt as if it would pierce his skull. His hands paused briefly, then nonchalantly resumed their work. However…

"Does he mean to use that wood-carving knife to cut down those of his own kind? No—its blade is far too short for that. In which case, he must be planning to attack their eyes. And to mine own eyes, he handles the weapon with remarkable faculty."

These unsettling remarks were delivered in the Yamagami's gruffly mellifluous voice, yet the great wolf was simply giving voice to the words of another: the source of the gaze Minato felt—the kirin, who was currently peeking over the garden wall on the mountain side.

"That deft hand, that practiced craft! Not only his own kind, but even those of other species shall be slain in an instant, I am sure."

This went well beyond a misunderstanding; it was practically defamation, and the blade of the carving knife slipped and scored an unwanted line in the wood.

"Perhaps, however, partaking of this will soothe his savage breast. One can but hope."

The kirin slipped furtively into the garden and placed a rare tropical fruit on the ground. It sent the hairy red rambutan rolling toward Minato and then leaped away over the garden wall.

With a shallow sigh, Minato went to intercept the tumbling fruit. Despite being unhappy with the situation in many ways, he was looking forward to eating the fruit, and his footsteps were light.

"What an entertaining fellow."

The Yamagami's hearty guffaws followed Minato out into the garden.

The same kirin that had stolen Minato's time with an interminable message of gratitude, then offered a reward that would have been nothing but trouble, had reappeared the other day. After observing Minato in minute detail from outside the garden, it had left a piece of fruit from a foreign land and taken its leave.

Since then, it had come by every day, tirelessly repeating the same routine: first spying, then furtively leaving a souvenir from its globe-spanning travels. These gifts were always fruit that was extremely rare and almost impossible to obtain in Japan.

Much as Minato appreciated the fruit, being spied on made him uneasy, and above all the kirin was *always* talking. It was talking to itself, so Minato couldn't hear it directly, but the Yamagami found it amusing to relay the kirin's monologues so that Minato heard them in full.

Having seen too much of humanity's darker side, the auspicious beast had a rigid preconception of humans as highly barbaric creatures. As it observed Minato's every move and gesture in minute detail, it kept up an unrequested and unsettling running commentary dreamed up to explain his actions. Minato found it all hard to bear.

The vacuum cleaner exerted its ever-unchanged powers of suction as Minato ran it over every inch of the veranda.

The Yamagami, who usually occupied the middle of the veranda as if rooted there, elegantly dodged the vacuum cleaner's approaching head. It relocated indoors and then, with a grunt of effort, placed one forepaw on its cushion and dragged that in, too. The head of the vacuum cleaner charged into the space vacated by the miniature mountain. This happened every time Minato vacuumed, and he showed no remorse.

Make way, make way! Mercilessly pushing the kami aside, Minato fulfilled his duties as caretaker. As the Yamagami didn't shed, those duties weren't so grueling. Minato hated to even imagine what it would be like if the great white wolf had a molting season.

Vacuuming done, Minato set about the mopping.

“Cleaning up the aftermath of some brutal deed, perhaps…?”

A mutter came from the Yamagami, ensconced on its cushion, and Minato’s hands tightened on the mop handle. He did not need to shift his gaze or turn his head to know what had arrived.

It had to be the peeping kirin.

“After all, blood and gore must be wiped up swiftly lest the stains become all but impossible to remove. The timber of the floor would rot. A grave matter, a grave matter indeed.”

The Yamagami added its own low bass chuckle; no doubt it was arranging the kirin’s comments to its liking. The mophead left a gleaming trail as Minato pressed it hard against the floor.

“These are quite filling, so I am sure they will satisfy him. O, may his wrath be soothed!”

With a faint sound, an armful of jackfruit was left by the wall. The breeze carried the faint, sweet smell all the way to the veranda. By the time Minato turned to look, the kirin’s pearly glow was nowhere to be seen.

Hold the ends of two long strands of hemp bark down with the foot and twist them together to form a single rope. Smooth it down and pull it tight, and the golden gleam becomes even more lustrous.

Minato’s shoulders shook as he sat on the veranda, busily braiding a *shimenawa* rope for the sacred camphor tree.

“A rope to bundle up his own kind in bamboo mats, no doubt. Drag them helplessly through the streets, and then off with their heads! I recognize this scene well. Ah, memories.”

Offering an interpretation that conveyed even the emotional contours of the kirin’s tone, the Yamagami stroked the *shimenawa*, which was made of three smaller ropes braided together, with one forepaw. A supernatural light blazed, and the wolf snorted with satisfaction.

Minato looked up and opened his mouth as if to object, but he ultimately decided not to say anything, only taking a new strand of hemp bark in his hand. The sound of his voice might drive the kirin off.

“Let us hope that this offering brings him some of the mildness of Oryu. Not, of course, that there is any resemblance but the

name…”

A dragon fruit rolled into the garden.

“And, on reflection, Oryu was not always so mild in any case.”

The kirin cast a meaningful glance at the still surface of the sacred pond.

“Perhaps I have erred,” it muttered, then hopped lightly over the garden wall.

The Yamagami, understanding the import of this parting comment, shuddered.

○

Having taken care of the many chores that had to be done, Minato decided it was time to get serious about learning to control the wind.

In that case, the Yamagami said, they must go to the right place for such matters, and it led Minato to the rear gate. Minato peered through the gate to the misty early morning outside. Beside him, the Yamagami put one paw forward.

“Come.”

“…Right. Sure.”

Not quite grasping what was going on, Minato stepped forward to open the gate. His eardrums seemed to swell, and he felt a strange full-body sensation that gave him goose bumps. It felt distinctly like stepping through some kind of membrane.

“Gah… That felt a little gross. What the— Where are we?”

“So, you felt the shift! They still have some ways to go…”

As the Yamagami delivered this stern pronouncement, Minato could only stare. The scenery around them had changed in an instant. They were on a mild slope dotted with stands of great trees. Somehow, it seemed, they were in the mountains.

Minato let his gaze follow the trunk of a nearby tree upward. Far, far above, through the gaps in its branches, was a cloudless blue sky. The sun was nowhere to be seen. When he lowered his gaze again, he realized it was oddly bright where they stood, despite the fact that the canopy should block all natural light. In fact, visibility was excellent, and he could clearly see a long way into the distance.

He looked at the great wolf beside him questioningly.

“This is a kami realm created by my kin.”

“Ohhh, so *that’s* what they meant.”

This was what the three martens had been talking about when they happily reported that they’d been getting better at making things. The Yamagami swept its long tail back and forth.

“Here, you may do any damage you wish.”

“I don’t want to hurt any trees, though.”

“Why not? They are but falsehoods.”

Minato put a palm to a nearby tree trunk. He felt nothing out of the ordinary, and it certainly looked real enough. But when he leaned closer, he realized it had no smell. Come to think of it, the unique mountain fragrance of trees and soil was completely absent from the air. The farther he got from the Yamagami and its forest scent, the more obvious it was.

“…Huh. So they are.”

“Hack at them, chop them down—whatever you wish. You may even cleave the mountain in two. Whatsoever you can do, here you may do it freely.”

The hint of teasing in the great wolf’s voice and the way it ever so slowly narrowed its eyes was highly motivating.

Minato quietly closed both eyes, controlled his breathing, and drew out the power from within himself. Normally, he kept the power suppressed for fear of losing control, but now he unleashed it in full.

As the Yamagami watched, a pale-blue shimmer began to radiate faintly from Minato’s lean body, then gradually darkened and stretched upward. His black hair ruffled. The hem of his jacket flapped. The dead leaves at his feet rose from the ground.

Slowly, his olive eyes opened.

With Minato as its focal point, a gale exploded into being and howled forth wildly, sending fallen leaves and branches flying and making the canopy over his head rustle. The last thing Minato remembered was the swaying of a huge tree nearby.

○

Not long before Minato passed out, swallowed up by his own power, an intruder appeared at the currently human-free garden of the Kusunoki residence.

That's right—it was the peeping kirin again.

Popping half of its head above the wall, it peered this way and that, scanning every corner of the garden.

"…Is he out, perhaps?"

Searching for Minato's presence inside the house, the kirin realized he was not there. Its face took on a knowing look, and its whiskers floated on the air as it nodded.

"He may have gone hunting for the heads of his own kind. Or perhaps a spur-of-the-moment raid to seize some land. Naturally, he'll be slaughtering a whole clan and its retainers, I imagine. He is Japanese, after all; one cannot fight their blood. Dear me, is it simply his youth that makes him so volatile?"

Despite its exasperation, the kirin leaped unhesitatingly over the wall. A spiky fruit floating in midair accompanied it.

"In that case, I shall leave this right here. He will surely partake of it upon his triumphant return."

The kirin set the foul-smelling durian in front of the veranda. Over at the sacred pond, bubbles began to rise in two places, and the water churned. The kirin trotted casually toward the wall, swinging its oxlike tail to and fro. Behind it, two thin columns of water rose from the pond.

Reiki burst from the surface and landed heavily in front of the veranda, smacking the durian into the air with its forepaw. The fruit flew straight toward the airborne Oryu, who spun once and whacked the durian with its long tail. It was a targeted shot, the spiky lump aimed at the back of the kirin's head. Oryu's aim seemed perfect, but the moment before the fruit made contact, it shopped short in midair. Below it, the kirin—which had by now turned around—was radiating a dangerous aura.

"What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing? That is the real question!"

"Too true."

Reiki and Oryu exuded fury as they approached the kirin from either side. The three auspicious beasts had not had a proper reunion in some time, but the air between them was as hostile as it could get. Oryu scowled down at the kirin, its whiskers standing on end, and Reiki's usually half-closed eyes were wide open and glaring.

“What makes you think you can leave your trash lying around here?”

“‘Trash’? How rude of you. This is a fruit, and a delicious one at that.”

The kirin lobbed the durian at Reiki, who swatted it back.

“You must not play with your food!” the kirin said, batting the fruit back again with its long tail. Reiki’s eyes narrowed as it braced itself for the durian approaching with startling speed.

“You call this food? Its unpleasant stench turns the stomach. If you think differently, then something must surely be wrong with you. Maybe your nose has stopped working.”

Reiki whacked the evil-smelling lump aside with a flipper, sending it up into the air toward Oryu.

“Agreed.”

Oryu contorted its long body and smacked the fruit with its tail.

“My nose is perfectly fine!” the kirin yelled, sending the fruit flying back to Reiki. The rally among the three auspicious beasts went on for some time.

At long last, a fed-up Oryu seized the durian in a three-clawed foot as it came spinning its way. Juice seeped from the durian, and Oryu turned its face away in disgust, still floating in midair.

“Now the garbage stink is on me, too! What are you going to do about this?”

As Oryu spoke, Reiki turned its own face away from its reeking front flippers. There was juice and durian smell all over the turtle; in fact, the pungent odor filled the whole garden.

Slowly, the kirin shook its head. “Dear me. I see that neither of you are familiar with this wondrously flavorsome treat. Does the narrowness of your understanding, I wonder, derive from your homebody lifestyles? Would you not be better served by following my example and roaming the world to broaden your minds?”

Oryu, its eyebrows raised and whiskers standing on end with rage, began to glow with a blue-tinged silver light.

“Take your trash home with you!”

The dragon threw the durian back at the kirin along with these words of barely contained fury. The kirin tilted its head quizzically.

“But it’s so delicious…”

Muttering in dissatisfaction, it leaped over the wall and disappeared, taking the battered and misshapen durian with it.

A beam of blue-silver light, growing in intensity, shot into the sky. Clouds began gathering from the east, clustering around it. They grew thicker rapidly, covering the Kusunoki residence.

Bright, furious light poured from Oryu’s body. With this light as their guide, the clouds emptied all the water inside them as one onto the sacred garden, instantly eradicating the smell of durian. Oryu and Reiki closed their eyes happily and let the downpour, reinforced with purifying power, wash them clean.

Later, when the Yamagami reentered the yard from the rear gate, carrying the unconscious Minato on its back, it stopped in its tracks.

The garden was dripping everywhere with water. The camphor tree looked pleased; it shook its crown as if dancing, scattering water droplets in every direction. The Yamagami glanced at the pond and saw that its surface was a tranquil mirror that reflected the green trees.

The great wolf sniffed the air. Just what had such strong purifying rain been summoned to erase? Reiki and Oryu did not look in the mood to talk. The kami realm brimmed with divine energy as always, so there seemed no cause for concern.

The kami resumed its slow advance as if nothing had happened at all.

○

Minato continued visiting the martens’ kami realm daily for training, and around the time he stopped knocking himself out, a transformation became apparent in the realm as well. A crisp wind blew through the mountains, and the sun came out.

Standing among the trees, bathed in the light that shone down between the branches above, Minato took a deep breath.

“This feels so natural. It’s just like the real thing.”

“Riiight?”

The kami realm rang with Utsugi's proud reply. But when the Yamagami tugged on one of the roots that spread across the ground, it came loose with no resistance at all. The odorless soil was as loose as sand. The Yamagami pushed down again on the exposed root with a forepaw, and it sank back into the soil and stayed there.

"You are not there yet."

"So strict."

Minato stood before a colossal tree, swung his arms, and unleashed the wind. A globe of air hit the trunk, scattering chips of bark. Minato increased the power and tried again. More chips of bark flew into the air, and a mass of leaves and branches crashed to the ground. He imagined Fujin's wind blade in his mind but couldn't re-create it; he couldn't make something that actually cut.

Minato furrowed his brow. The Yamagami yawned, looking bored.

"…I think you're starting to get the hang of this. You no longer pass out, either."

"…That's true. The power's increasing, too. Definitely."

"You could stand to be sharper."

Seri and Torika helped him out wherever they could, and Utsugi gave his unvarnished opinions. Minato clenched his fists. Hearing the encouragement of the martens that echoed around the kami realm, along with the Yamagami's sleeping breaths from where it lazed beside him, Minato kept unleashing the wind until his strength failed him.

○

The grilled scallops' shells burst open to reveal plump, juicy morsels of meat.

The fresh shellfish filled half the grill and continued to reveal themselves as the observers watched. The other half of the wire mesh grill was taken up by mackerel pike laid out in neat rows, dripping with fat. Squinting against the rising smoke, Minato used cooking chopsticks to turn the mackerel over.

Today the attendees had gathered early for a garden barbecue.

Fujin and Raijin had supplied the bounty of the sea, while the bounty of the mountain had come from the Yamagami's home, all of which Minato was cooking up on the gas grill he'd set up in the garden. Frequent barbecues at his family home had given him plenty of practice. Too concerned about the grill to step away for a moment, he kept cooking, occasionally prodding at the mackerel.

The kami, sitting as they pleased on the edge of the veranda, waited patiently for the cooking to be done. For them, meals were not for taking in nutrition, but for savoring luxurious foods. Nevertheless, their appetites were large. As soon as the first pieces of food came off the grill, the martens busily set about distributing it to the other kami.

The Yamagami leaned over the mackerel on its plate, regarding it from directly above. Plump white flesh peeked out from between cracks in the crispy skin, amid the cloud of savory steam. After enjoying the meal with its eyes, nose, and whiskers, the great wolf's jaws closed around the fish, engulfing it in a single bite. The Yamagami closed its eyes and slowly, meticulously began to chew.

Next to the Yamagami, a tipsy Reiki and Oryu were sticking to sake and red wine. Fujin and Raijin sat side by side, savoring the fragrant matsutake mushrooms with sake cups in hand.

Utsugi returned to Minato, who was still guarding the grill, and opened his mouth wide. Minato popped in a scallop drenched in butter and soy sauce. The marten pressed his forepaws to his cheeks and stomped his feet in a little dance, fur standing on end. Minato smiled and directed his own chopsticks toward a maitake mushroom baked in foil. His movements were painfully stiff and jerky. Despite daily training in the kami realm, his mastery of the wind still wasn't what he had hoped, and the unnecessary strain had left him with aching muscles over his entire body.

Torika and Seri, having finished carrying over the Yamagami's plate, hurried back to Minato.

Minato, still chewing with his cheeks full, popped butter-and-soy-sauce scallops into their open, waiting mouths as well. Just like Utsugi, they broke into little dances of joy. As Minato had

expected, Utsugi set about filling the empty spaces on the grill with more scallops, packing them as closely as possible.

"So, are you able to use the wind now?"

"…A little."

Minato had made some progress, but he wasn't quite at the level where he could respond to Raijin's question by puffing out his chest and declaring "Of course!" Raijin added a dash of soy sauce to his own mackerel, then Fujin's as well.

"Maybe I should give you my power, too, after all?"

"Why would he want that? Also, I wanted *sudachi* juice on mine, not soy sauce."

"*This* soy sauce is sweet. It's delicious—you'll love it."

Fujin let this pass with nothing more than a sigh at his carefree companion's lawless deed. He turned back to look at the Yamagami.

"Trade with me?"

"As you wish," the wolf replied, negotiations successful.

The great wolf devoured its mackerel steeped in soy sauce.

"Grrr… To add this much soy sauce hides the flavor of the fish, however tasty."

"Right?"

Voicing its agreement, Fujin squeezed *sudachi* juice over a plain mackerel and gleefully dug his chopsticks into the white flesh.

"He can't do both at the same time. It's obvious he needs to focus on controlling the wind for now. It's too much power for a human to control."

The comment did not slip past Minato. Fujin had lowered his voice for the last sentence, but Minato still heard it loud and clear. With a complicated expression, he drizzled soy sauce on a new batch of scallops whose shells had just burst open. The shellfish frothed brown, and a delicious aroma filled the air. Raijin flew toward him with a smile. Closing the distance in no time, the kami leaned close to the grill and breathed deeply, then gave Minato a once-over.





“Looks like you’ve been working hard at it.”

Raijin flew around behind Minato and touched an index finger to the base of his neck. An electric current from the kami’s fingertip raced through Minato’s body. He twitched, letting a mackerel pike fall from his cooking chopsticks to the grill. And this wasn’t the only shock—his muscle pain was completely gone.

Minato raised and lowered his shoulders. He rotated and swung his arms and legs. His body was lighter. He felt no pain anywhere at all. He turned to face the grinning Raijin.

“Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

Raijin thrust out his plate. With deep gratitude, Minato piled on as many fragrant scallops as it could hold. Mountain of food in hand, the smiling Raijin slipped through the air back to his seat on the veranda. *A heads-up would have been nice, though*, thought Minato, collecting the dropped mackerel from the grill and putting it back on his own plate.

As he sat by the continually sizzling grill, Minato suddenly realized he hadn’t felt the sharp gaze of the kirin in some time. What had become of the auspicious beast that used to appear so frequently? He remembered his first day of training, when he had passed out and somehow woken up on the veranda. The garden had shown signs of a recent drenching. Perhaps Oryu had considerately watered the plants in his stead? In any case, that had been the last time he’d seen the kirin.

Idly hoping that one day the kirin might drop by to relax with Reiki and Oryu, Minato brought a piece of buttered squid to his mouth.

○

In one corner of the yard, there stood an unassuming storage shed. Deciding it was time to survey the shed’s contents and clean it out, Minato opened its sliding door. Inside he saw an enormous earthenware jar.

The jar was made to hold drinking water, which would be scooped out through its wide spout. It was large enough for a child or small adult to curl up inside of, which would make it a

little awkward to move. That said, it also looked like it would make a nice addition to the garden. Minato couldn't quite make out the pattern on its sides in the gloom of the shed, so he leaned it on an angle and rolled it out into the light.

"Ahhh, an urn to hold the severed limbs of others of his kind. Goodness gracious, has jealousy finally seized him in its jaws? I thought his disposition was the milder kind, but I see… Those driven by jealousy become devils indeed. I know this *very* well—indeed, in the past I watched it play out in real time."

Evidently, the peeping kirin had not lost its gift for lurid fantasizing during its protracted absence.

The Yamagami, who had been waiting outside the shed, interpreted these words as if they were the most natural thing in the world. The smirk on its face was evidence of its immense enjoyment; for a wolf, it was remarkably expressive. The kirin was leaning over the garden wall on the mountain side, and Minato felt its searing gaze on his back as he settled the jar on the ground.

He had a thing or two he would have liked to say about its comments—quite a few things, in fact—but it was a relief to see the kirin looking well.

"One can only hope this offers some small comfort to his tempestuous heart. And surely Reiki and Oryu will not voice any objections this time. They always have been trouble, those two…"

As the kirin grumbled, a floating mangosteen touched down by the garden wall. The kirin then quietly slipped away, without entering the garden itself.

Minato glanced at the sacred pond: Reiki was basking on its favorite rock, as usual, and Oryu was swimming serenely through the water, occasionally sending up a splash of spray. All systems normal. Both kami looked as peaceful and mild mannered as ever.

"Turtle and Dragon voiced objections? Really?"

"I could not say."

Minato couldn't even imagine such a thing. When the Yamagami, playing innocent, cast a glance at the dusty jar, a golden light enveloped its round bulk. The thin film of grime vanished, and the earthenware vessel gleamed in the sunlight.

One morning, Minato opened all the windows in the house and started cleaning.

Thanks to the Yamagami, currently lying on its back on the veranda, a foresty fragrance filled the house. Minato hurried through the living room with an armful of bedroom linens.

“Oh my. How vigorously he polishes the place. Not a speck of dust on the floor. Not a smear or fingerprint on the windows. No grime or dust in the windowsill grooves. Magnificent—every part of the place positively gleams. Perhaps he means to invite someone over.”

The kirin, showing just enough of its head at the dining room window to peek through with one eye, considered this idea further. Soon its whiskers stood on end, and it grew alarmed.

“Of course! Today is Saturday! This must be preparation for a witches’ Sabbath. To think he would engage in cannibalism… How terrifying!”

Stretched out on the veranda, the great wolf’s body quivered as the kirin shuddered. Minato’s now-slumped back disappeared into the bathroom.

As Reiki relaxed on a rock warmed by the sun, Oryu rose from the sacred pond and walked closer.

“Looks like the kirin’s gotten pretty used to him.”

“We’re almost there, then.”

Muttering its grisly, groundless fantasies about Minato’s nonexistent villainy, the kirin had not only begun to enter the garden but was even pressing itself against the windows of the house to spy on him. It disliked humans yet was transfixed by human activity, making it an odd companion. Under normal circumstances, it would remain invisible and observe from a safe distance. Its willingness to approach Minato so closely was proof that it knew, deep down, that he was no threat.

The kami of the garden made the purposeful choice to let Minato see them. They allowed this privilege only to those who had earned their favor.

Sighing a shallow sigh, Oryu coiled up and closed its eyes.

“Even if it is hard to overcome long-ingrained memories and prejudices…”

“With one so timid…”

“Exactly. It is a difficult problem.”

Lulled toward slumber by the mild sunlight, the two kami began to drowse.

The kirin sat on the veranda, unable to tear its eyes from Minato as he scrubbed the kitchen sink. A gentle breeze was in the air, ruffling its whiskers and the fluffy tip of its tail. As the Yamagami lay firmly in place, with one hind leg hooked in the doorframe, the wind ruffled through its belly fuzz, too, and the sacred camphor tree shook its crown as if laughing.

○

In the martens’ kami realm, Minato stood amid the spreading roots of a towering tree.

He conjured a narrow stream of wind from his fingers, wrapped it tightly around the tree trunk, and then slid it upward. Boughs and branches fell to earth as the sharp upper edge of the cylindrical wind blade severed them from the trunk. The clouds of soil and dust that rose from their impact drifted toward Minato and the Yamagami but bounced off before they got too close. Minato had created a membrane of wind that surrounded the two of them at all times.

The Yamagami watched in silence as even bark began to fall from above, then nodded.

“Aye. You have grown quite skillful.”

“I’ve gotten the hang of this, I think. It’s easier now that my body feels lighter, which I guess is thanks to Raijin.”

Minato showed none of his usual frustration as he grabbed one shoulder and rotated his arm. After spending the last ten days training from morning till night, he had finally mastered the art of bending the wind to his will. In the past, his struggle to come to grips with the power had led him to overexertion and strain, leaving Minato constantly tense all over, but now he felt completely relaxed; Raijin’s casual adjustment had made the difference. The Yamagami’s white tail wagged cheerfully.

He followed up with a whirlwind that gathered the fallen leaves and branches into a single heap; Minato’s way of using the power was starkly different from Fujin’s.

The Yamagami approached the heap of vegetation.

“Not everyone is cut out for every job.”

“Right?”

“Better to walk your own path.”

“Yeah.”

Neither Minato nor the Yamagami was the type to sweat the small stuff.

Minato built on this technique to create three blades, then five, denuding one tree after another of its branches. How many blades, exactly, could he bundle like this? He embraced the challenge, seriously but not without enjoyment, as the Yamagami watched from a cushion of fallen vegetation.

The Yamagami thought Minato’s ability to use his power with such precision suggested that his training should soon come to an end, and it sniffed the air. The scent of fresh leaves was rather thin.

“You still have a ways to go. Some humans may yet doubt you if you show them this.”

“I’ll work on it.”

“Next time for sure.”

“Aw… Come on, cut him some slack! Maybe the scent is just being overwhelmed by *your* smell.”

“What was that?”

The Yamagami glared up at the sky from which the martens’ voices had echoed.

In time, every tree in the area had been stripped bare. When this was done, the scenery changed in an instant.

“Wow. That was cool.”

The breezily delighted Minato and the recently awoken Yamagami were now standing on a grassy plain. Before them rose a tall mountain carpeted with the round crowns of a forest of camphor trees. Minato ran his gaze up the mountain’s slopes, which went so high his neck started to hurt.

After a yawn wide enough to bring tears to its eyes, the Yamagami made a new pronouncement.

“For your final test, mow down the trees on that small mountain. It is but a modest hill, not half my own size.”

“Wait, so bigger is better?”

This was beyond the ken of mortals. Under the watchful gaze of the Yamagami, which sat proudly on its haunches with its chest puffed out, Minato sent his wind blades up the mountainside. Just one at first, then two. They traveled from the mountain's base toward its peak, slicing through tree trunks as they went. By the end, he had five blades at once, and they cut through every crown on the mountain. And so, having acquired skills that would shame a landscaper, Minato ended his training.

○

The towering trees that ringed the Kusunoki residence shed quite the carpet of leaves outside the garden walls. Minato was taking his time with a rake and bamboo broom to clean them up.

He paused to mop the sweat from his brow with the towel he wore instead of a scarf. As he gazed down at the mountain of wintry brown leaves at his feet, the Yamagami nudged the rear gate open with its nose and came out to join him.

"It'd be a shame to waste these. Want to bake some sweet potatoes?"

"Aye, that would be—"

Minato looked up when the Yamagami broke off midsentence. He followed the direction in which the great wolf's black nose was pointing and saw the kirin coming down the little mountain path toward them. It was stumbling and dragging its feet, and its pearly glow appeared dulled.

The Yamagami's muzzle wrinkled beneath narrowed eyes.

"Corruption. It has picked something up on its travels."

"…It'd run away if I got any closer."

The notepad was already out of Minato's pocket, but throwing a piece of paper wasn't going to work. Seeing him hesitate, the Yamagami opened its jaws wide. Minato held out a piece of paper, and the great wolf held on to it firmly between its sharp teeth.

The kirin trudged forward, a yellow fruit floating behind it. Before it could raise its head, Minato ducked back through the gate and hid behind the garden wall.

Jade-green light radiated some distance from the piece of paper in the Yamagami's jaws. It approached the kirin, and in no time at

all, the dark miasma around the auspicious beast had disappeared. The kirin took a deep breath and cast its eyes down.

“I am sorry you had to see that.”

“Mrfgl nfglrh.”

The great wolf nodded gravely as it offered this frankly ridiculous response.

“The Yamagami sure messed that one up,” Minato muttered, leaning around the gatepost just enough to watch with one eye. When a sharp glance flew his way at this impolite remark, he ducked behind the gatepost again.

○

Baked sweet potatoes are one of autumn’s great pleasures, best enjoyed around a smoky bonfire amid the season’s chilly winds. That said, it was *cold* outside the Kusunoki property. Spoiled by the eternal springtime climate of the garden, Minato carried the leaves in through the gate.

Dressed lightly in short sleeves and cropped pants, Minato used a pair of tongs to retrieve the sooty foil-wrapped lumps from the smoldering ashes. He then rolled one over to the Yamagami, who was drooling slightly.

As the kami’s tirelessly wagging tail fanned him on one side, Minato looked over at the veranda. Star-shaped yellow fruits sat on a plate there—star fruit that the kirin had left as a gift. As for the kirin itself, it had made itself scarce as soon as it handed the fruit over to the Yamagami, all the while looking back at the Kusunoki residence over and over as it went, as if reluctant to leave.

“Why doesn’t it just stay here, if that’s what it wants?” Minato muttered sadly.

His hands protected by gardening gloves, he peeled off layers of aluminum foil and newspaper, then broke the sweet potato inside into two halves. The tuber’s golden flesh steamed sweetly. The Yamagami, huffing through its nose, listened in on the conversation between Reiki and Oryu, who were both drunk on the veranda.

“It seems the kirin likes beer.”

Minato blinked and glanced to the side. There was the turtle, clinging to its sake bowl, and the dragon slowly rising off the floor with wineglass in hand. The kirin was one of them—no doubt it liked to drink, too.

Looking completely convinced, he swiftly peeled the sweet potato and put it on the Yamagami's plate.

"I'll go buy some tomorrow."

Unfortunately, none of the house's residents drank beer, so Minato didn't have any on hand. Suddenly, Reiki raised its face. The Yamagami, panting and blowing steam toward the sky, swallowed and then spoke for the turtle.

"It says 'fake beer' won't do at all."

"I figured."

This was as Minato had imagined. Low-malt beer—the reasonably priced friend of the common folk—would surely fail to satisfy the kirin. By this point Minato took it as given that kami had expensive tastes.

"I'll bet it's super particular about the flavor, too," Minato said with a laugh, and he reached for a star fruit.

Reiki, which had just finished the last of its sake, and Oryu, by now drifting through the air, nodded deeply.

○

Shpop. The unmistakable effervescent sound of a cap coming off a beer bottle reverberated across the garden. Over on the mountain side, the air quivered, and the fiercest beam of light yet came from atop the wall. It was so hot, Minato's back was burning.

Glug, glug, glug. Minato poured the liquid noisily into a beer mug on the low table. The picture on the bottle's label looked rather like their regular guest. Minato had settled on this well-known brand after remembering the time the kirin had accused him of cannibalism.

Gulp. An uncomfortably clear sound came from behind him.

Minato took his time ever so slowly pouring the beer, aiming to tantalize. This certainly wasn't payback for all the wild accusations the kirin had made about him in the past. Absolutely not.

The crunch of hoof on soil. It was closer than before. The kirin was drawing near.

It had taken the bait. Minato couldn't help grinning at the success of his plan. The Yamagami, letting sweet-smelling steam from the matcha bowl tickle its whiskers, sent a sidelong glance at its gloating host.

The kirin crept forward on tiptoe. Three steps forward, two steps back. Its hoofbeats sounded faintly as it approached. The beer mug, now full and topped with a foamy head, sat innocently between Reiki and Oryu.

Vwip. The last three meters were covered in an instant. The kirin peered intensely into the beer mug and touched its nose to the head. Minato hadn't been this close to it since he first rescued it. The kirin's shining tail twitched left and right, slapping Reiki and Oryu in turn. Reiki looked exasperated, while Oryu slapped back irritably with its own tail.

The kirin, its heart utterly stolen by the beer, looked up at Minato with a question in its eyes. At that moment, Minato didn't see a hint of fear.

Just in case, though, Minato responded not in words but with an open-palmed gesture: *Drink up*. The kirin plunged its muzzle into the beer mug. Minato looked to the side and pressed a fist to his mouth, shaking with silent laughter. The kirin ignored him, too busy enjoying how smoothly the beer went down.

The easily captured kirin came to live in the garden with them.

It usually stayed in the shade of the camphor tree or on the arched bridge over the pond. It no longer fled when Minato came near, but it did still follow him with that searing gaze. Minato decided not to let it bother him. Not only would there be no end to the complaints if he got started, but the staring did no harm—just itched between his shoulder blades a little.

The kirin had thus found tranquility, but it seemed unable to give up its hobby of people watching. And so, it occasionally set out to travel the world, always returning with fruit.

One day a visitor disturbed the laid-back days of the Kusunoki household. It was Minato's regular client, Saiga. Greeting him at

the door, Minato was momentarily stunned into silence at how beaten down the *onmyoji* seemed. He looked awful.

Unusually for him, Saiga took off his coat and flopped down on the veranda. He looked as exhausted as he had on his first visit to the house. His clothes were neat enough, but his face was puffy and tired, instantly betraying his lack of sleep.

Minato cast a casual glance at the Yamagami. In a rare departure, it was lying by the glass door rather than in its usual spot. Its blazing eyes, however, were fixed firmly on the house gift sitting on the low table.

Perhaps because there was no being beside him emitting high-pressure divine energies, Saiga showed no sign of nervousness. His movements were a little slow, though, and his black sleeve swayed as Minato handed him the talismans. The *onmyoji* glanced at the sacred pond where the auspicious beasts were assembled on the large rock. The kirin was leaning forward, clearly fascinated, and Oryu stepped forward to block its all-too-piercing gaze.

Saiga was highly attuned to the aura various beings exuded. He might not be able to see the auspicious beasts, but evidently he sensed that something was there—probably because the kirin's gaze was so intense.

Despite having received the talismans, Saiga stared blankly out at the garden for a while, then let out a deep sigh.

"You seem very tired."

"…I wouldn't say that."

It was obvious to look at him that Saiga was a proud man. Not the kind to admit weakness easily, no doubt. On every previous visit, he had made his departure as soon as the transaction was complete, yet today, he made no move to stand at all. He often gazed at the garden while he was visiting, and Minato got the impression that he enjoyed the scenery.

The total absence of flowers was a bit lonesome, but the vivid greens of the kami's garden were kind to both the eyes and the soul. It might not be able to ease Saiga's physical exhaustion, but at least his heart would be soothed. The natural forest fragrance of the Yamagami, too, was stronger than ever. The longer the *onmyoji* spent here, the better off he should be.

And so, to prolong his stay, Minato stood up to get him another cup of tea.

When Minato returned a few minutes later carrying a round serving tray, Saiga was slumped forward across the table. Minato's eyes widened, and the Yamagami at his feet sat up.

"Like a baby," the kami said lightly, and it sniffed the package of *amazake manju* on the low table.

"Wait, what are you saying? Don't tell me he fell asleep?"

Minato peeked at Saiga's face from the side. His glasses were still on, but he was out cold. Minato went straight back into the house and returned with a blanket, which he draped over the other man's shoulders, which rose and fell lightly. The *onmyoji*'s posture and clothing were definitely not ideal for sleep, but—unusually for Saiga—he was cross-legged instead of kneeling formally. A few minutes shouldn't hurt.

The Yamagami helped itself to more *amazake manju*.

"Grr… Thirteenth master, you are soft, soft! Whatever training you have had is far from enough. To claim the title of thirteenth master with these meager skills is a dream within a dream! You are like mud to the twelfth master's clouds—the difference separating you like heaven and earth!"

"That's way too much complaining."

The Yamagami spoke at its usual volume in its usual richly resonant voice, but Minato scolded it in a whisper. Showing not a hint of restraint, the kami ate another of the thirteenth master of Echigoya's white *amazake manju*, almost swallowing it in one gulp. Then, at last, it was time for the pink *manju* of the twelfth master. Closing its eyes, applying infinite care and patience, the Yamagami savored the spherical sweet, almost as if it was treating it as a palate cleanser.

"Are they really *that* different? Both seem delicious to me."

The Yamagami shook its head at Minato, who was tearing a white *manju* in two.

"You do not taste the difference? Grrr… To that, I know not what to say. But I will say this: You are surely happier that way."

"Could be. Being too particular about things only makes life harder. Being content with whatever's on your plate is much simpler."

“You seemed highly particular when choosing a hat the other day.”

“That’s different. If you’re careful when you buy certain things, you don’t need to buy replacements for years—decades, even.”

On a previous shopping expedition, Minato had kept the Yamagami waiting while he deliberated for quite some time over a hat purchase. In the end, he’d decided not to buy a hat at all, and the Yamagami had stared at him like he was some incomprehensible thing.

“When we go hat shopping again—”

Minato broke off in midsentence at a faint groan from the now-stirring Saiga. The Yamagami ignored this development, devoting its attention to the last of the pink *amazake manju*, savoring its smell. Minato popped a *manju* into his mouth as well.

Suddenly, Saiga’s head flew up. His eyes met the still-chewing Minato’s. Still woozy and not quite grasping his situation, he quickly scanned his surroundings, then finally appeared to realize he had fallen asleep. Saiga sat up straight, took the blanket off his shoulders, and neatly folded it. His embarrassment was palpable.

Minato, who had watched this entire performance, swallowed his *manju*.

“Thanks for the *amazake manju*. Got started on them already. They’re fantastic.”

“…I see…”

“Would you care for one?”

Minato poured a new cup of tea and set it before Saiga. The *onmyoji*’s color did look healthier as he let out a deep sigh and offered words of thanks, but his lack of sleep was probably chronic. It wouldn’t be solved by a short nap on the veranda.

Had work been keeping him so busy he hadn’t had time to sleep? Was something major happening? Being an *onmyoji* was a special kind of occupation, so Minato figured they probably had nondisclosure requirements, but he decided not to ask. He wanted Saiga to relax as much as possible while he could.

“If you feel like napping here a little longer before you leave, I don’t mind at all.”

“…No, I’ve slept enough. My apologies.”

“Grrr… Gone already…”

The Yamagami let out a sad, rueful grumble, and Saiga removed the packaging from a white *amazake manju*.

"That one right there—he's no ordinary chap. What in the world is his story?"

The kirin had kept to itself while Saiga slept, but as soon as he woke up, it locked eyes on the *onmyoji* again. It stood right at the edge of the rock, forgetting everything but its urge to spy on the veranda.

"If you're going to stare, why not go closer so you can see better?" Reiki said, basking in the sunlight.

The kirin's refusal was crisp and unsmiling. Despite its fascination with humans, as a general rule, it was absolutely opposed to approaching them—it was a dyed-in-the-wool misanthrope.

Losing its patience with the kirin's refusal to stop staring, Oryu gave up and plunged into the sacred pond. It rolled onto its back as it carved an arc over the rocky expanse of its domain, creating ripples that spread and sent up spray at the rocks at the waterline.

Chapter 10
Into the Fray

Leaves danced within the diminutive whirlwind. They twirled and whirled, trapped inside a column of wind that spun on the palm of a hand. The revolutions grew faster, then slower. Borne upward by the rising revolutions, the tree leaves reached almost as high as the roof. Then it started spinning in the opposite direction, sinking lower. The three martens sat around the low table watching as Minato freely controlled the wind. He dramatically changed the whirlwind's speed, and the leaves continued to spin. As Utsugi sat beside Minato, watching intently, his eyes whirled dizzily.

With a rueful grin, Minato stopped the wind, gathered the leaves together in midair, and soundlessly lowered them into a neat stack on the table. Exerting his control to the fullest, he had done it all with his wind powers, not touching the leaves once.

Seri, watching from across the table, gently put the green leaf he was holding on top of the pile on the table.

"You like to keep things tidy, don't you, Minato?"

"Well, if I make a mess, I'm the one who has to tidy it up."

"Good point."

Utsugi nodded, eyes still whirling, swaying unsteadily and supported from the side by Torika.

"You've got complete control of that wind power now," she said with a nod.

"Well, I wouldn't dare compare myself to Fujin yet. But I have gotten familiar enough with the power to control it, so I don't think it'll be running wild anytime soon. Apparently, I'm better at using it subtly than for big things."

Smiling happily, Minato began tidying the tabletop. As the three martens reached simultaneously for the cookies on their plates, their paws froze in midair, and even Minato understood what this meant. The martens responded with extreme sensitivity to intruders from outside—it seemed Minato had a visitor.

He put away the inkstone he had gotten out earlier. As he did so, Utsugi quickly stuffed five cookies into his mouth.

The martens, including a coughing Utsugi, scrambled up onto the roof. Directly below them, a rather somber Saiga and an extremely apologetic-looking Minato sat across the low table from each other.

Saiga still looked exhausted; if anything, he seemed in even worse shape than last time, when he'd fallen asleep on the veranda. Minato was racked with guilt at the idea that he might have added to the overworked *onmyoji*'s burden.

The Yamagami sat between Saiga and the cringing Minato, exuding an unwavering resolve to remain at the table, come what may. The great wolf's white tail swept back and forth at high speed, in tune with the kami's soaring spirits.

Why? Because today's house gift was more lavish than any that had come before.

Along with *wagashi*, the low table was all but covered with Western-style confections and bottles of sake and wine. It looked to Minato as if Saiga had brought every single item mentioned on the last batch of talismans, which made Minato realize, with some remorse, that he might have gone a little far. His face paled as he imagined how much it all must have cost. It was far too much to be described as a house gift. Maybe *bribe* would be more suitable.

But how? Minato had written store names on only two of the talismans, as usual. Oh, right… It must have been because the items had been easy to identify even without the store names. Writing the name Romanée-Conti, the crème de la crème of wines, had been a passing impulse.

Cold sweat trickled down Minato's back. Saiga, speaking with stiff formality, got the ball rolling.

"…I have a substantial favor to ask of you."

“If it’s within my power, then I’d be happy to oblige, whatever it is.”

Minato sincerely, wholeheartedly wanted to offer any assistance possible. Turning Saiga down wasn’t even an option after all the effort he’d gone to—no, that Minato had *made* him go to. He adopted a keen expression and sat up straight.

However, the sniffing coming from the muzzle exploring the *wagashi* on the table below, as loud as a vacuum cleaner, somewhat undermined the tension. And it didn’t stop at sniffing.

“…Hrmm… This smooth bean paste has a scent that is new to me. *Shiomame daifuku*…? No—*fu manju*, perhaps? Or even—”

The Yamagami seemed busy with speculation, but then:

“Grrr… With the table so crowded, the scents blend beyond reason. The smell of those Western-style sweets thwarts my efforts, too. And you, Echigoya! A joy it is that your sweets are fresh, but they announce themselves too boldly. Away to the side!”

The soliloquy went on and on. Minato gritted his teeth and clenched the fists that sat on his knees as tightly as he could, trying to stifle the laughter rising within him.

Yet the great wolf paused in its remarkable vacuum impression to send a glance Minato’s way. A smile in its eyes, the Yamagami offered another piece of completely unnecessary information: “There is mugwort here, too.” Minato had no way to reply, but internally he was begging the kami to give him a break. This was no time to burst out laughing. He tensed his stomach muscles tighter.

Acutely aware of the space occupied by the giddy Yamagami, Saiga began to explain things to the squirming Minato.

It seemed that a certain *onryo* haunt was beyond the powers of even multiple *onmyoji* to deal with, and Saiga had come to ask Minato to go there in person and purify the space himself. What was more, the *onryo* in question was highly dangerous.

So it was a request to join an anti-*onryo* mission. Taken completely by surprise, Minato adopted a dubious expression and tilted his head.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll do it—but why me?”

“The location in question is not in our world, but in a special world of its own. Somewhat like this one… You are able to reside here. Your residence here is permitted.”

“…Fair enough. You’re right—this isn’t a normal place.”

Anyone entering the grounds of the Kusunoki residence couldn’t fail to recognize that fact; it certainly couldn’t be kept hidden. *Saiga must be sweltering in that thick chesterfield coat*, thought Minato, who had only a light cardigan on over his shirt.

Minato peeked at the Yamagami. The great wolf was glaring reproachfully at the package from Echigoya, which sat on the table near Saiga, and muttering some complaint or another. However, its ears were directed toward the *onmyoji*, and it seemed to be following their conversation.

Saiga sat up straighter and continued stiffly.

“It all began the day a certain doll was taken to a temple with a request that it be purified of corruption. Ever since then, a string of accidents has befallen the people there. The priest capable of dispelling evil spirits had just passed on, so the original request could not be granted, and by the time anyone noticed, the doll had already become an *onryo*. Now the spiritual malaise is so intense that people can’t even get near the place.”

Saiga paused for a moment and shifted slightly. He was facing Minato, but it was clear he was also aware of the Yamagami.

“…We think that *onryo* is a former kami. And the spirit world it resides in seems to be a corruption of that kami’s realm. Normally, people can enter such places only if invited, but we think you might…be…an excep—”

“You dare exploit my power?”

A low, emotionless growl cut Saiga off.

It was not an angry shout, but even Minato felt its brain-rattling impact. His every hair stood on end, and the blood drained from his face. Saiga, who had been hit by the blast of divine power full-on, was deathly pale.

The sacred beast raised its head, chilling the air with the divine energy that streamed from it. Every inch of its white fur stood on end and swayed. The overpowering might of the kami bore down on them. The warmth of spring was gone in an instant, and harsh winter arrived. The Yamagami’s relaxed expression had become utterly stern, and it silently looked down on Saiga, who was

frozen to the spot. Shuddering at the kami's glowering gaze, Minato's body reflexively tried to flee.

As the tension peaked, the three martens poked their heads out from the eaves upside down. All of them were frowning.

"That's going too far, Yamagami," said Seri sternly.

"I agree. I know you don't want people to think they can use you whenever they like, but this is too much. Look how terrified he is."

"It won't kill you to pitch in and help. You certainly helped yourself to all those sweets he brought."

"Stop being so small and petty."

"That's right. Especially since you take up so much space."

The Yamagami brushed off Torika's and Utsugi's nagging remonstrations with a "Be silent!" then seemed to soften its attitude. In an instant, the tension in the air was gone. Noting that the white tail had begun to sweep back and forth with its usual lazy air, Minato let out a long, deep breath. Saiga slumped forward, bracing himself against the table. His breathing was ragged, and he was still trembling weakly; the Yamagami must have really made his blood run cold.

The great wolf proudly raised its muzzle and snorted arrogantly. "Very well. I suppose it cannot hurt to help sometimes. In light of the admirable mettle you always show, that is."

After a deep breath, Minato turned to face the Yamagami.

"…So your power can get me in there?"

The tension hadn't yet completely left Minato's body, but he strove to maintain a cheerful tone of voice. Saiga was startled, but Minato ignored him. They were past that point.

Saiga sat up straighter, yet his gaze remained fixed on his hands on the table, as if he was unable to raise his eyes.

The Yamagami, no longer attempting to hide its presence, pushed aside the box of Western-style sweets with its nose. Saiga stared at the box as it slid across the table, parting the sea of confections. To him it must have seemed to be moving of its own accord. He didn't seem too shocked, though; as a professional *onmyoji*, he was probably used to seeing weird things happen.

Nudging aside another package, this one richly redolent of butter, revealed the black box the Yamagami had its eye on. It was a sumptuous *wagashi* box, tied with a silver ribbon. The kami's great black nose snuffled across every inch of its surface. Usually, the Yamagami would be careful not to move what it sniffed, but now that its presence had been revealed to Saiga, it had no such compunctions. The box jumped and rattled, pushing aside the sweets around it.

Alas, Echigoya! Its package tilted to one side, then began to fall from the table.

But then—*hup!*—a savior appeared. Saiga swiftly reached out to support the package with his hand. Thus the thirteenth master's *amazake manju* were rescued.

"Of course it can. I am the Yamagami. Grrr… What can this be? Of the smoothness of its bean paste I have no doubt. Yet why wrap it up so? Such coverings will only be torn and cast aside."

"So you'll help us?"

"Aye, I will. Tell him as much. I did frighten him a bit too much earlier, after all."

"Mr. Harima, Yamagami says it'll help. Also, what's in that box tied with silver ribbon?"

"…Thank you. That's *ankoro mochi* from the Suruga main store."

Shooting stars flashed across the Yamagami's golden eyes, and a shiver ran down its great bulk. Suruga was a confectioner known across the country, and its *ankoro mochi* were a high-class city treat that the kami had once muttered about wanting to try while leafing through a magazine. They were available only directly from the store.

Having just received a reminder of the awesome might of the kami, Minato watched the great wolf wriggle and squirm with warm fondness.

○

Six days later, early in the morning, Minato stood quietly before the table in the dining room of the Kusunoki residence. Lit by the overhead light, he looked down at the items arranged there: talismans made from washi from the Yamagami's home, a brush

pen filled with ink made using sacred water, several other kinds of pens to use as spares, and a few notepad-paper talismans in his original style. The notepad talismans were made using sturdier paper than the flimsy stuff he'd used at first, though—he'd splurged.

Minato divided these supplies among the pockets of his down vest, hoodie, and cargo pants. Finally, he stuffed the sheaf of washi paper, each sheet covered in writing, into his sling bag.

He could imbue only so much writing per day with his spirit-dispelling power. For this reason, he had spent the five days since accepting Saiga's request in preparation, doing as much writing as he could.

"Good!"

It all fit, tightly enough to make his pockets bulge a little. He'd slept all day yesterday to make sure he was in the best condition possible and was as healthy as could be. That said, his voice and movements were a little tense. He was a rank amateur when it came to banishing *onyro*, having done it only once before. He couldn't even imagine what might happen inside a world swarming with evil spirits. Telling himself not to be nervous would have been futile.

The situation they were heading into was clearly a serious one, and a layman charging in wouldn't be much use. If Minato wasn't careful, he might make things worse.

That was exactly why he had taken such care on his preparations. However, his supplies took up more space than he had expected and were hindering his movements.

"…Maybe I'll cut back on pens."

On reflection, one pen per pocket seemed excessive. Minato relocated them all to his right pocket and briskly raised and lowered his arms. He crouched and stood up again. He could move just fine. He gave a deep nod.

After locking the front door of the house behind him, Minato walked around to the rear garden gate. His hiking shoes trod quietly through the garden, and he felt hot in the winter clothes he'd chosen to match the season.

When he reached the veranda, he stood facing the Yamagami in repose on its cushion at the center. He tried to make his voice as

bright as he could.

“Take care of the place while I’m gone, Yamagami.”

“Aye. You, too, must take all due care.”

The kami’s tail wagged back and forth, underscoring this grandiose injunction. With a final nod, Minato turned his back on the sight.

Reiki and Oryu stood quietly on the great rock that jutted from the pond, watching Minato walk the narrow garden path. He stopped to say goodbye to them, too.

“Back soon.”

Reiki nodded. Oryu lowered its head in a deep bow. Minato turned to face the camphor tree, looking up at its lushly growing canopy.

“I’ll come home as soon as I can.”

The tree rustled its leaves. Minato raised one hand and headed for the rear gate. As he did, a gentle wind blew. A single leaf fluttered from the top of the camphor tree into the hood of Minato’s hoodie, as if drawn there.

Only the kami, watching in silence, saw it happen.

Minato opened the rear gate. Cold air enveloped his body as soon as he stepped outside. His breaths came out in white puffs, and every breath in chilled his body to the core. The outside world was in the frozen depths of winter. Waiting in a row in the icy wind were the three martens, there to accompany Minato to the appointed location.

Their destination was in another prefecture. The temple stood in the foothills of a small mountain within the bounds of a certain town.

The Yamagami was the kami of the mountain and generally did not venture far from it. Instead, the martens had been ordered to go forth and display the fruits of their training, and the expressions across their faces made them look reliable and brave.

Chuckling to himself, Minato put his hand on the strap of his sling bag.

“Sorry for the wait. Ready to go?”

“You didn’t forget anything? Especially not the sweets?”

“Utsugi!”

The hissed admonition from Torika was emphasized by a jab in the side. Seri pressed a forepaw to his brow.



They looked right. Beyond the thick glass doors, Western-style confections sat in rows in a glass showcase: shortcake with lashings of fresh white cream, dense slices of dark-brown chocolate cake, tarts heaped with colorful fruit. The buttery cakes issued a tempting invitation.

They looked left. Beyond the glass storefront, breads and pastries sat in rows on wooden shelves: savory buns bulging with filling, sweet buns and other breads filled to bursting with chocolate or jam, bewitching butter rolls with gleaming surfaces that beckoned from within the wicker baskets in which they were piled high.

Gulp. Frozen in the middle of the street, Utsugi swallowed loudly. The marten looked liable to drool if his concentration lapsed. To the left, a tempting patisserie; to the right, a bewitching bakery. Which way to look? Utsugi’s furry head went back and forth repeatedly, not knowing where to rest.

I want to eat them. I want to eat them all. Utsugi wanted to rush right up to those shelves and wolf down every last crumb they held.

However…he clenched his forepaws into fists, planted his feet on the ground, and controlled himself.

No. This wasn’t a sightseeing holiday. They were here to help Minato. They’d come a long, long way to fulfill the role the Yamagami had assigned to them.

No way. Nope. Absolutely not. This temptation had to be resisted.

Utsugi screwed his eyes shut tight, cutting himself off from these temptations by eliminating his line of sight. But—alas—the marten’s nose continued to twitch.

After a relatively smooth journey, Minato and his companions found themselves stuck, caught in not a honeypot, but a butter-pot. They were almost at their destination. It was supposed to be only another fifteen minutes' walk away.

Utsugi quivered, arms wrapped around Minato's cargo pants. Looking down at the brave little marten's desperate internal struggle, Minato felt extremely guilty.

And it wasn't only Utsugi. Clinging to Minato's other leg, the other two martens were also shifting their noses from left to right, sniffing the air in both directions. Their hearts had been completely captured. And why not? This was the first time they'd ever seen more Western-style sweets and baked goods than they could possibly eat all in one place.

After leaving the Kusunoki residence in the early morning, the four traveling companions had taken a taxi, a bullet train, and an express train before finally arriving at a certain town with a long history.

Having been guided safely and without incident to their destination by a phone app, they exited the station and saw a long, straight brick road stretched out before them, both sides lined with old-fashioned storefronts. It was almost two PM. The thin cloud cover meant very little of the sun's blessings got through, making for chilly weather.

As Minato and the martens stood in the road, a large bird crossed the street above their heads, crying out in a sharp voice. The vertical banners outside the stores flapped noisily in the frigid wind. Minato hugged his shoulders, frozen and unable to move.

Minato was a homebody, and every time he went outside, he struggled with how cold it got. Worse yet, their mission had taken them to Japan's north, which was markedly colder than where the Kusunoki residence stood. The chill seeped into Minato's bones.

Some people enjoyed outings, but Minato preferred cheerful gatherings at home. As a result, even though this was Minato's

first visit to this famously sightseer-friendly city, he had little interest in it. And certainly not in sightseeing.

He wanted to take care of this *onryo* and get back home as quickly as possible, but the martens seemed to be rooted to the spot. They were like unto the unmoving mountain—it was easy to see whose kin they were.

Despite visibly failing to keep their drooling in check, the three martens shouldn't have been hungry, having eaten a meal on the way. In the private cabin reserved for them, they'd been able to eat their special train bento boxes without worrying who was around.

Kami didn't get hungry, but apparently their kin did, at least a little. The Yamagami once explained that they had been created in the image of normal animals.

Its kin couldn't be seen by ordinary mortals.

In a normal seat, the contents of their bento would have seemed to evaporate into thin air—a rather horrific sight. Fortunately, Saiga had thoughtfully reserved them a private cabin, and he was already at the scene waiting. They didn't know yet when they would return. Depending on how the situation developed, they might end up staying overnight, but Minato was determined to do his best and get home that evening if possible.

However, at that moment he could not advance a single step. They were completely stuck.

Minato was expressionless as he stood in the middle of the road, having decided that a goofy smile would have looked creepy. His dull, dead eyes were a pitiful sight. He had dissociated from his self, and the street's many pedestrians gave him a wide berth as they walked past. They all glanced at him with the same suspicious expression, the looks on their faces all asking the same question: *What's this guy doing blocking traffic?* It was all very different from when he'd gone out with the Yamagami—a clear difference in rank.

Feeling about at his limit, Minato looked down to see that Seri and Torika were both struggling with their base temptations as well. They were sheltered creatures who had never been off the mountain before, and because Minato had called a taxi to get them all to the train station, the only thing they'd seen along the

way were station interiors. The shock of their first patisserie and bakery had robbed them of all rationality.

The faint but delicious aroma of baking bread that drifted through the street was another dangerous trap. And the martens had noses many times keener than a human's, making things significantly worse. Even if they weren't actually hungry, the smell must be stimulating the trio's appetites.

Seri and Torika wrapped their trembling forelegs around Minato's shins. Now both of his legs were completely immobilized. He was stuck. This was a situation he should have foreseen. Perhaps he ought to have bought the martens dessert—some of the frozen-solid ice cream sold on the train, to be tackled with those famous spoons specifically designed for the job. But it had seemed too cold for that.

In any case, Minato wanted to get this *onryo* taken care of and go home.

"Let's buy some cakes and pastries on the way home," he whispered to them.

"Really?! We can do that?!"

Their eyes flew open and stared up at Minato, sparkling. Minato furrowed his brow slightly and gave them a resigned chuckle. Seri and Torika brightened up as well. A few sweets were a small price to pay for this much motivation.

Idly wondering what to get as a souvenir for the Yamagami, Minato urged the slow-moving trio forward and finally began walking again. A beat later—

Jingle, jingle. A demon arrived ringing a handbell.

The source of the sound was an employee from the bakery, which was level with them now, who had thrown open the wooden front door and emerged. Dressed in a chef's whites, the smiling imp made an announcement in a buoyant, almost singing voice.

"Apple pies, fresh out of the oven! Care for a freshly baked apple pie, sir?"

Minato and the martens took a direct hit of air fully loaded with the delicious scent of fresh-baked apple pie. The tartness of apple and the unique kick of cinnamon filled his nostrils. And the coup de grâce: the sweetness of rich butter…

Shaking violently, fur standing on end, the three martens clutched his shins.

Near the entrance to the store, Minato had been put in a desperate position by three furballs clinging firmly to his legs. His eyes met the bakery employee's.

Did he have any choice but to buy?

Sensing the fierce expectations of the three martens pressed to the glass storefront peering in, he bought three freshly baked apple pies. The moment he left the store, the wild, slavering beasts attacked.

"Wait a sec. We need to find a handy place to—"

Clutching the paper bag to his chest, Minato looked around. He heard a muffled caw from above and, a moment after the martens, looked up.

He saw a crow.

It was small and pitch-black all over, and it sat on a slate roof looking down at him. It cawed again, this time prolonging the sound. Utsugi tugged at Minato's cargo pants near his shins. At the same time, the crow wheeled around and looked back over its shoulder.

Follow me.

Minato didn't need anyone to interpret what the crow was saying to him.

○

Flapping its wings ahead of them, the crow led Minato and the martens into a side street that they followed for some time. In a gap within a residential area was a modest park surrounded by a high fence. Apart from a bench and a meager selection of playground equipment, the park was empty. They should be fine here.

The martens ran ahead to gather under the slide. Minato caught up with them and handed over the apple pies. The three of them sat down in a circle and started munching on the treats as one. There was no point in them all trying to hide their pies with their bodies, but their stealthy attempts at sneakiness were so charming that Minato said nothing.

Minato crouched beside them on the side nearest the street, blocking prying eyes should anyone walk past.

“Th-the apple’s so crispy…”

“Does pie always crunch like this between your teeth?!”

“Mrfgl grmfl!”

“Don’t speak with your mouth full, Utsugi.”

“Talk about bad manners. This is what you get for stuffing it all in at once.”

“…!”

Hearing this extravagant praise along with the usual banter behind him, Minato held out a plastic bottle over his shoulder. The martens grabbed it and noisily drank it dry.

Minato glanced at the stone pillars on either side of the park entrance. The crow that had led them to the park was perched there watching. Not cawing, not moving.

Waiting.

That was how it felt. Having savored the pies properly despite eating as quickly as they could, the three martens came out from behind Minato.

“Sorry about that, Minato.”

“We didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

“That was yummy! Fresh-baked pastries are *amazing*, huh? Like a whole different food!”

“No problem. Nothing beats a freshly baked pie, after all. By the way, is that crow saying anything?”

Minato accepted the empty plastic bottle back and put it in his bag as he stood up. Seri, standing in front of him, looked up.

“I’m not clear on the details, but it seems to be preparing to guide us.”

“So the details don’t come through clearly, huh?”

“Animals aren’t as intelligent as humans, and they don’t have a shared language. Messages come through like powerful waves of emotion.”

Torika looked up at the crow as she explained. As they headed toward the park entrance, the crow took wing. However, this time it flew in the opposite direction to the narrow lane they’d gone through to get there. Minato and the martens looked at each other and nodded, then began to follow the low-flying black shadow.

A few minutes later, the four of them were hurrying along a narrow lane through the residential area. Both sides of the road were lined with houses: old Japanese-style houses with big gardens, and very occasionally, a stylish house in the modern Western style. They wove between them, never getting lost even when the road got convoluted. The crow wasn't their only guide—a steady stream of winged creatures arrived from all directions.

Crows, pigeons, and sparrows crowded the high walls on either side, showing them the way to their destination. Minato and the martens followed the path without pausing.

There were also pigeons and crows on the power lines overhead. Countless eyes bore down on them, and the constant flapping of wings urged them onward. None of the birds made any sort of cry; they only sat in rows and waited for Minato and the martens. It was an unusual sight, but it certainly brought home how high everyone's expectations were.

Bit by bit, the expressions of the martens scurrying ahead of Minato grew more strained.

"…This is awful."

"The corruption is so bad not even mortals can live here anymore."

"Disgusting! It stinks!"

The surrounding houses were unusual as well. It was the middle of the day, but their curtains were all drawn. Unpruned trees grew wild in the yards, and there were empty places with FOR SALE signs everywhere. It was a hollowed-out neighborhood, filled with a melancholy, bleak atmosphere. The lonesome streetscapes were visible to Minato, but he couldn't sense anything else. He breathed deeply but didn't detect even an unusual smell, and he squinted but couldn't see anything that looked like corruption.

The farther they went, the slower the martens walked. Unable to detect the thickening miasma with his five senses, Minato frowned.

"Are you all okay? Is this too much?"

"It's fine. We can handle it."

“We’ll be okay.”

“No prob!”

“I’ll go first.”

The martens echoed their agreement, and Minato stepped in front of them. They regrouped into a formation where he took point, acting as a kind of walking air purifier, while the others stayed close behind.

Relief emanated from the martens. Training had given them greater resistance to corruption, but the level of impurity surrounding them now was all but unbearable.

Visibility was woeful. So was the stink.

The sun was still high overhead, albeit partly blocked by clouds, yet the great waves of miasma that billowed toward them from up ahead cast the whole area into what might as well be night. Minato pushed on through this gloom, surrounded by a spherical membrane of jade-green light, and the miasma and evil spirits that swooped toward him evaporated one after the other.

Minato carved a route for them as he went, a shaft of noble jade light ripping apart the sludgy darkness.

The way the scenery suddenly brightened up was so refreshing it inspired laughter. The evil spirits that had once been people and animals kept up a constant chorus of resentful cries and final screams. The Yamagami’s kin surmised that Minato must be one happy fellow, being unable to hear any of this.

A low hill finally came into view.

Atop the gentle slope was a large tile-roofed building all but buried in the leafy thicket of large trees around it. In front of the building was a narrow stream with a vermillion bridge across it, and this was where the line of birds gave out. After crossing the bridge, Minato looked back. He saw, silhouetted against the sky with its light cloud cover, a huge flock of birds taking up every inch of space on the power lines, the roofs, and the garden walls.

Facing Minato, who was swathed in dazzling jade-green light, the birds all cried out at once. Their feelings and hopes were all packed into that one collective shriek so strong it made the atmosphere flicker.

Minato climbed the path up the gentle slope until the two-story gate came into view. Behind it, with its hip-and-gable tiled roof, stood a solemn temple. Minato and the others paused before the august gate, the characters on its sign obscured by a black haze.

Lowering his gaze, Minato saw two Nio guardian statues, one on either side of the gate. Their bold, confident poses and brave expressions were both only dimly visible.

At this point, Minato could finally see the miasma.

That could only mean this was a place steeped in corruption. The temple had been a site of some renown with a constant stream of worshippers, but one by one its head priest and other residents had met with misfortune, and the worshippers had stopped coming. Now the temple was abandoned. Minato didn't see a single other soul in their eerily quiet surroundings.

Breathing shallowly, Minato produced his phone from his sling bag. He tapped some buttons and brought it to his ear. It was answered in three rings.

"…This is Minato Kusunoki. Yes, I just arrived. Where are you, Mr. Harima?"

"At the rear gate. You're at the front?"

"I guess so. The gate has statues of the Nio guardians."

"That's the front gate all right. I'm sorry to say we can't even get near it."

"…Okay."

Minato didn't have the heart to say that he and the martens had arrived without any real difficulties.

He lowered his gaze and saw the three martens sticking close to his legs and staring at something beyond the gate. Their grim expressions spoke eloquently of the dangers of being too optimistic about what lay ahead.

"Should I head inside?"

"…I know I'm the one who asked you to come, but make sure you know your limits. If worse comes to worst, run for it."

"I'll do what I can."

Minato ended the call and turned to face the gate. The long approach to the temple ran through the gate—the barrier between worlds—and into the depths of the temple grounds. At the far end of the gloomy square space, Minato saw the main temple building with its thatched roof.

Minato and the Yamagami’s kin slowly began to climb the low stone staircase.

The cloud cover thickened, gradually blocking the sun. The trees around the temple groaned in the howling winter wind, violently rustling as if to reject a foreign body.

Chapter 11
Onward, Undaunted

The Yamagami's kin stood in a row facing the gate, light gradually beginning to stream from their bodies. Beyond the gate lay the realm created by the kami that had fallen into corruption. Only beings that the kami had invited should be able to enter this special kind of spirit world, but the martens, being kin of a kami themselves, were using their divine power to punch a hole through and force it open.

If they could *make* a kami realm, they could *break* a kami realm.

The martens were still immature and did not have the power to destroy another kami's realm entirely. However, after their training, they were capable of prying open a hole big enough for Minato to pass through.

Minato gulped and watched as a hole as big as a thumb appeared in space. The three martens immediately grabbed onto its edges and yanked it open. Soon it was large enough to admit Minato's passage, and the martens gestured with their eyes to Minato, who nodded and ducked through the hole into the temple grounds. The three martens hopped through after him.

The scene inside the kami realm was completely different from outside.

The howling wind had died, and the chill had eased off, yet the lukewarm air felt deeply, indescribably unpleasant. There was no sun, yet oddly enough, the space was dimly illuminated by the gray, featureless sky overhead, which cast everything into an

ominous quiet. A path paved with flagstones stretched out before them, with the main hall of the temple visible in the haze beyond.

Noticing that the haze was a distinctly darker black than before, Minato swallowed.

Seri, who had been staring grimly at the building, looked up at Minato.

“Whatever’s causing all this is in that hall.”

“Nowhere else it could be, I guess. Let’s go.”

To Minato’s left and right and from behind him came a chorus of *yeah*s. As Minato and the martens slowly advanced along the flagstone path, the only sounds were their footsteps. The main hall must have been magnificent once, but not anymore. The all-pervading silence, so complete that it pained the ears, made it feel nothing but eerie.

With each step, Minato’s field of vision brightened, and soon they were standing before the main hall. At the top of a stone staircase flanked by stone lanterns was a huge, ageing set of wooden doors, closed and barred. The windows on either side of the doors were dark, revealing nothing about what lurked inside.

When Minato tried to step onto the staircase, the three martens around him bared their fangs, their fur standing on end, as the door and windows of the hall flew open. With a terrible boom, the bar across the doors, the left door itself, and the window glass exploded outward. Minato and the others immediately took a few steps back. A black haze churned out of the building and approached them rapidly, and several black objects flew out of the haze toward them. Yet they bounced off the jade-green membrane around Minato and fell to the ground one by one.

They were dolls.

Five corrupted, decaying black-haired Japanese dolls lay on the ground, their limbs at angles that would have been impossible for humans.

Another sudden attack was launched on Minato as he retreated in alarm. But once again, the attackers bounced off a barrier about a meter away from him and piled up on the ground and the staircase. The heap included Japanese dolls, European dolls, and toy animals—all in a state of decay, and many with missing limbs.

The temple had specialized in dispelling evil spirits, and unsettling objects of all kinds had been brought to it from across the country.

One day, the venerable priest who did all the temple's dispelling work had passed on. After losing this key figure, the temple had no one left capable of properly banishing a spirit, and corrupted objects had begun to pile up inside. They had been reluctant to refuse such requests, due to the not-inconsiderable fees involved, and in the end the temple had become a haunt for evil spirits.

An endless stream of dolls flew out of the main hall toward Minato.

And yet all they did was hurl themselves at him. Watching the dolls fall and break on the ground, Minato realized they had neither intelligence nor a will of their own. He didn't particularly feel as if he was in danger, but the miasma, now darker, filled the entire kami realm, and the jade light surrounding Minato had begun to dim, its efficacy at dispelling spirits rapidly fading.

The corruption was even worse than they'd thought.

Still, the martens surged forward. Minato had only a limited number of talismans; they had to preserve as many as they could.

Dolls flew toward them too quickly for the eye to track. The toys began targeting the martens instead of Minato, and the three siblings responded with wicked claws and fangs. Utsugi leaped into the air and snapped at a Japanese doll's face, tearing off a strip of it. Torika jumped to the side, dodging an incoming doll and seizing it by the hair before shredding it with her claws.

As the kami's kin, now wrathful gods, tore the dolls to pieces and cast them aside, the enemy's numbers began to thin. Seri lopped off the final French doll's head with a slash of sharp claws, then irritably shook the head loose from his forepaw, where it had gotten tangled by the hair. He looked back and called out sharply.

"Minato, your talismans are going to wear out."

"Roger that."

As Minato reached into his sling bag, an even murkier Japanese doll soared out of the main hall and stopped a few meters from

him, swaying in the air. It had long, tangled black hair, cracked porcelain skin, and old, faded clothing. No doubt it had been a splendid, charming doll once, yet what it had become was so hideous that Minato could barely stand to look at it.

A wide variety of beings followed the doll out, surrounding it and floating behind it. The doll mustered its troops, dark eyes visible between the long bangs that fell over its grimy face. The hatred in those eyes was laced with loathing and envy, and a shiver ran down Minato's spine as the doll fixed him with its gaze. It could not even be compared to the dolls that had come before, or the dolls floating under its control behind it; the dread and disgust it inspired defied all reason. Here, in all likelihood, was the doll that had started this.

The horde of dolls flew toward them as one. Inside his sling bag, Minato opened a smaller pouch and snatched out a handful of washi paper talismans. According to Saiga, even one of these was easily enough to dispel five *onryo*.

The smaller pouch, which Minato had been given by the *onmyoji*, temporarily sealed the power of the talismans away. The bundle of washi paper he drew from it bore writing in stark black ink.

Dolls hit the ground, the evil spirits possessing them dispelled in an instant. Only the Japanese doll at the center still floated in midair, swollen with rage, disheveled hair spread in all directions and oozing miasma. The martens dropped into low stances, bringing their centers of gravity closer to the ground.

"…It looks pretty mad."

"Well, it's all on its own now. What did you expect?"

"It's so *loooud*!"

The Japanese doll shrieked in a deafening, shrill voice. Its words were curses that pierced the ears, its voice so aggravating that the martens irritably scratched the flagstones with their claws.

Black haze filled their surroundings anew. A muggy wind mixed with miasma buffeted them, making it hard to breathe, and Minato's face broke into a tremendous scowl.

"I want to get out of here as fast as possible."

"Agreed."

“Let’s finish up and go home.”

“If we don’t hurry, that cake shop will be closed, right?”

With a noise of agreement, Minato tossed half of the bundle of washi paper into the air and raised a gust of wind. The talismans headed straight for the Japanese doll, but its long hair became a mass of wicked spears, jabbing and slicing the washi paper.

“Wha—?!”

The doll’s hair flexed with a groaning sound and slashed at the martens in front of Minato. As Minato watched the martens roll, an evil lock of hair stretched toward him as well. It continued to extend, wrapping itself around the jade membrane, which, in the blink of an eye, became a black cocoon.

With a creaking noise, the bundle of black hair began to contract around Minato. The force was even greater than the pressure he’d felt when he’d caught the Yamagami’s divine authority full-on the other day, and he cringed with terror. Gradually, gradually, along with the creeping hair, he felt the pressure rise all over his body. Unable to bear the fierce ringing in his ears or the splitting headache, he dropped to one knee.





* * *

The martens, who'd been pushed back to the wall, sprang to their feet. Ducking the groaning locks of hair that still reached for them, they ran back to Minato. They stood around the shrinking black cocoon, stationing themselves at the three points of an equilateral triangle. Their fur stood on end, and the color of their eyes changed from black to gold.

Then they faced the center and opened their mouths wide as one.

"Awooooooooooo!"

They let out a deafening wolf's howl, and that mighty sound reverberated throughout the spirit world. Gold shock waves emanating from three points hit the cocoon, which seemed to evaporate as it disappeared, and the floating Japanese doll fell to the ground.

Minato's body lightened. The ringing in his ears and the headache and everything else vanished. When he looked up, he saw that the Japanese doll was still squirming. It crawled toward the main hall, dragging its half-removed kimono behind it.

Minato stood up. He tossed the bundle of washi paper in his hand into a gust of wind. The sheets of washi paper, which still had some faint writing on them, slapped against the doll.

Minato looked down on the doll lying face up on the ground. More than half of its hair was gone, revealing its face. Its eyeballs were still swiveling within cracked eye sockets.

Why this doll had regrets so powerful that it clung to the world so desperately, Minato didn't know. He couldn't know. All he felt was compassion. But it would not do to sympathize with a being that had such a malignant effect on the living and their mortal realm.

He sighed deeply, steeling himself in the face of the pitiable doll, then focused his power on his hand, which held a brush pen. The moment he touched the tip of the brush to the doll's peeling forehead, there was a *crack*, and a jolt ran through his hand. Ignoring this rejection, he gripped the brush pen firmly, keeping it pressed in place. Then he sent even more power into it and, in one stroke, drew it down to the doll's chin. The force of Minato's

own power combined with divine energy to imbue the thick line with even greater spirit-dispelling potency, and the doll's rolling eyeballs stilled.

The martens ran to Minato, their eyes black once more. They had shrunk two sizes, and when Minato asked about this in surprise, they explained that they had used too much power. But they laughed and assured him there was no problem, and a complex expression crossed Minato's face.

"Thanks for saving me. And sorry."

"It's nothing you need to worry about!"

"That's right! Once we return to the Yamagami, we'll be back to normal in no time."

"If we ate some butter cake, we'd go back to normal just like that!"

They didn't seem pained in the slightest; apparently there really was no problem. In any case, Minato felt relieved that the *onryo* issue had been taken care of, and he stood up straighter.

However…

"…It looks like you haven't dispelled everything yet…," Seri reported regretfully, and the three of them glared at the main hall with loathing in their eyes.

"We're almost done," Torika added.

"Yeah. Just a little more," agreed Utsugi.

Minato asked the three martens at his feet something he had been wondering about.

"That howl from before—was that the Yamagami?"

"Yes."

"It sent its divine power to us from afar."

"Pretty neat, huh?"

Minato found their proud faces charming, but he was also moved by the news. "I didn't know the Yamagami ever howled that loudly."

"Only when necessary."

"The Yamagami *is* a great wolf."

"I think it put a lot of effort into that one."

"Not like anything I've ever heard before."

The three martens nodded in agreement.

In any case, it had gotten him out of a really bad situation. Without the divine power of the Yamagami, who knew what might have happened to them? Even imagining it made Minato's blood run cold. He decided to really splurge on souvenirs on the way home.

Their relief lasted only a moment, though; they had to prepare before entering the main hall. Minato pulled out all the notepad and washi paper from his pockets and found that not a single character remained.

The same piece of paper could not be imbued with spirit-dispelling powers twice.

Minato pulled out a completely new notepad. Firmly and swiftly, he began to write.

Once more than half the pages were covered, he looked up at the hall's open door.

"Shall we go in?"

"Yeah!" the martens said in chorus. They clung to Minato's body: Seri on his left leg, Torika on his right, and Utsugi on his head. At their current shrunken size, they weren't too heavy, and Minato was worried about separating from them now that their powers were weakened. He decided they would all stick together.

Minato stepped warily through the door and found the main hall huge and empty inside.

The high roof and spacious interior was dimly illuminated by light that came in through windows to the right and left. However, the inner sanctum, where the principal object of worship should have stood, was instead occupied by a black mass that spread across the floor, oozing miasma as it gradually expanded its boundaries.

Minato headed toward the back of the huge wood-floored space. He walked slowly, notepad in one hand. The miasma drifting around his feet was eliminated as it touched his shoes.

Standing between two cylindrical pillars, he looked down at the floor of the inner sanctum, where he saw a writhing, squirming black lump, about the size of a human head. The three martens tightened their grip on him.

"…It's… It *was* the kami of the mountain…," Torika explained stiffly.

“…Oh.”

Minato was filled with emotion. He wondered if the Yamagami currently at the Kusunoki residence could have ended up this way as well, if it could ever have descended to this stage—a lump of corruption, devoid of any divinity or majesty, spawning only hate.

With a pensive expression, Minato began scattering notepad pages over the black mass. One by one blank sheets of paper drifted to the floor, the writing on them disappearing as they fell.

The corruption still hadn’t been fully dispelled by the time Minato reached his final page.

Even Minato could see the black haze. He took a deep breath and produced a brush pen from his pocket. Stroke by stroke he wrote, imbuing each character with the power to dispel. He dropped each page as soon as it was written, and several pages even slid down the side of the black mass before hitting the floor, their writing gone. Sweat beaded on Minato’s forehead. He’d already exceeded the number of pages he could write in one day, and his trembling hand imbued the final page with all the power he could muster.

A pure-white sheet of paper fluttered to the floor.

The mass below him was visibly weaker, its color faded, but it was not yet fully dispelled. Minato gripped his brush pen harder. He could not write on his own hand the way he had written on Saiga’s; the same was true of the martens’ bodies.

He looked around anxiously.

“I need something to write on…”

“What about that thing on your shoulder?”

“My bag… It’s made of fabric. It’ll be a first, but I’ll give it a try.”

Minato reached for the strap, preparing to lower his sling bag.

“Whoa!”

Utsugi, leaning over to see better from atop Minato’s head, lost his footing and slipped into his hood. The marten’s struggling pulled his hoodie tight around Minato’s neck, making him stumble backward.

“Argh…choking…!”

“Ah! A leaf! There’s a leaf in here!”

Popping up from inside the hood, Utsugi held up a familiar oval shape with a pointed tip. It was a young leaf from the sacred

camphor.

Seri's and Torika's faces lit up.

"You should be able to write on that!"

"Definitely. It's a leaf from a sacred tree! And its divine power is strong. Why didn't we notice it earlier?"

"What does it matter? Now we can dispel that thing properly!"

Utsugi handed Minato the leaf, and Seri peered anxiously at his pale, sweat-beaded profile.

"Can you still write, Minato?"

"Yeah."

Despite his firm reply, lethargy was overcoming him. His whole body felt leaden—but he had to do this.

Not just that… He scanned his surroundings. The ominous sound of cracks opening came from all around them.

He doubted this world would last much longer.

Forcing himself to take his time, he centered himself and wrote on both sides of the leaf. Normal ink would have been rejected by its surface, but this ink was made with sacred water and faced no such obstacle. Strokes of stark-black ink appeared on the green.

The martens watched with bated breath. With every character Minato added, the light radiating from the leaf grew brighter. The jade green of his writing blended with the silver of the camphor, intertwining to create a potent dispelling glow.

Minato finished writing and pushed the leaf against the mass.

Like mist melting before the sun, the *onryo* dissolved into dust and slipped away.

What became visible in its place was a bead.

Minato picked up the bead, which gleamed as if wet with a pinkish pearly glow. That pearlescence—the same glow emitted by Reiki, Oryu, and the kirin—glowed dully in his hand.

"This is— Ah!"

Minato whirled around at the rending sound behind him. The huge door that had remained at the entrance to the main hall had been destroyed, and the noise of cracking and tearing came from every part of the building.

The collapse of the spirit world had begun.

The hall shook violently from side to side. The three martens clung to Minato as he staggered. For the briefest instant the

shaking eased, just a little, and Minato hurriedly put the bead into his bag.

“Hold on tight!”

Minato ran across the floor. He raced through the main hall, all four walls of which were now collapsing from the corners, and leaped out through its doors. He descended the handful of stone steps in a single bound just as the vertical shaking began, almost knocking him off his feet. He clung to a nearby stone lantern.

The gate was just over ten meters ahead to his blurry eyes—a vast, uncrossable gulf.

Still being tossed to and fro by the furious, unceasing shaking, Minato ran for it.

A rumbling boom came from behind him. The main hall had collapsed as if crushed from above. A cloud of dust and grit swept over him, and he stumbled and fell. The martens clung on grimly.

They were only a few meters from the gate. If he could make it there, they could leave this place. A little farther, and they would be back in their world. Minato gritted his teeth and crawled forward.

But reality is cruel.

All four of them stared at the scene that appeared in their unsteady fields of vision. The hole that the Yamagami’s kin had pried open was shrinking, already too small for even one of the martens to pass through.

“…But…how…?”

“…Why?”

“We opened it properly!”

Words of despair spilled from the martens’ mouths. The spirit world narrowed and began to close like a shrinking balloon. From every direction, they felt a crushing pressure and sense of hopelessness. Minato wrapped his arms around the three martens and curled up on the gravel. When—

—a mighty thunderclap roared.

With a boom that made the ground rumble, a sacred wind swept from the heavens in a huge crescent-shaped blade, and the crushed hall was split in two. The spirit world itself fell beneath the blade’s edge.

Lightning struck, and half the spirit world burst into sacred flame, which burned out in moments. Then, before there was even time to breathe, countless bolts raced down and across the gray sky. The collapse of the spirit world halted as if a net had been spread across it.

The shaking stopped. Minato looked up from the ground at the lightning crackling in the sky.

Amid the billowing white smoke, he saw two small black figures.

At once the wind rose and cleared the air. He saw the main hall again, half of it now gone, the space beyond it connected to the world from which they had come. Beneath the crimson sky, Minato saw rows of roofs and birds filling the power lines—*They're still there?* he thought. People were waiting there, too, with Saiga at their head.

Fujin and Raijin stepped smoothly forward in the sky before the dazed Minato.

When he saw the two kami displaying their usual carefree attitude, the reality of their rescue hit him, and tears of relief sprang to his eyes. The martens relaxed in his arms and stretched out their limbs.

"Didn't I tell you?"

Fujin laughed guilelessly, head slightly tilted.

"You need to be able to easily chop someone's house in two if they bother you."

"…Oh, right… Well, this is embarrassing."

"You've got a long way to go! But first, why don't we get out of this place?"

The two dependable kami stretched out their hands to where Minato sat weakly on the ground.

Chapter 12
Today, as Ever, a Spring Wind Blows Through the Garden of the Gods

The camphor tree that stood in the middle of the garden frolicked in the breeze, tossing its crown to and fro and shaking the *shimenawa* Minato had made for it by hand. Atop the rock jutting from the sacred pond, Reiki was hard at work leisurely basking in the sun. Beside the turtle, Oryu swam swiftly through the sacred water. On the bridge above its spreading wake, the kirin sat and dozed.

The best place to view the entire garden bathed in gentle sunlight was the middle of the veranda. The Yamagami, lying there on its great cushion as usual, opened its mouth wide in a yawn. Beside the Yamagami, Minato sat at the low table writing on washi paper. The martens, back to their original sizes, were positioned on the other three sides of the table.

And there was one other resident—perched on the table was a ho'o.

The fluffy chick, pearl colored with a hint of pink, sat directly in front of Minato, observing his hand closely. Despite its juvenile appearance, it was a being that had endured long eons just as Reiki and the others had.

The ho'o was intensely curious about everything and had a special fondness for things created by humans. Partly because it had been trapped inside an *onryo* for so long, it was intent on updating its knowledge. It also took a great interest in Minato's powers, overseeing from start to finish the sessions writing his talismans. Minato thus bore the full brunt of its sharp gaze,

which belied its adorable appearance, and couldn't help but fidget; it was hard to write under these circumstances.

It had been half a month since he had traveled north to dispel the doll *onryo* at Saiga's request.

The spirit world created by the *onryo* had been chopped in two by Fujin, then burned half away by hellfire, courtesy of Raijin. A path back to the human world had been forced open, and Minato and the others had safely escaped. The instant they had set foot back in their own world, great flocks of birds had flown in from the skies in every direction, completely surrounding them in another astonishing display.

When Minato had drawn the pearlescent bead from his bag, suspecting that this was what the birds were hoping to see, they had rejoiced and sung as one. The bead's glow had swelled and ebbed, as if in response to that joyous clamor. Finally, the heartbeat-like light subsided, the bead melted away, and a pink chick appeared. When it flapped its wings vigorously on Minato's hand and let out a powerful *"Chirp!"* the birds around Minato had exploded with glee.

Minato had been forced by unbearable fatigue to spend the night in the same city before returning to the Kusunoki residence the following day.

Later, the Yamagami explained a few things to him.

The chick was a ho'o—an auspicious beast that bestowed good fortune, and one of the Four Spirits. The Four Spirits were four beings that led the four kinds of animals:

Reiki, leader of hard-shelled creatures.

Oryu, leader of fish, snakes, and others with scales.

The kirin, leader of furred beasts.

The ho'o, leader of winged birds.

The birds had flocked toward Minato out of concern for their leader.

Incidentally, when Reiki had first come to the Kusunoki residence, all the crustaceans who'd seemed to have a message for Minato had apparently been saying *Please take care of our*

leader. Reiki, it seemed, had relied on their assistance to make it to the house.

Why had the Four Spirits been trapped inside *onryo*?

Because they were leaders of spiritual beings. They attracted the animal spirits that revered them, which made them useful as bait. Evil spirits grew in strength by fighting and devouring each other, and they had used the Four Spirits to lure to themselves animal spirits, which could then be consumed to fuel their transformation into *onryo*.

The Four Spirits were auspicious beasts with no fighting skills of their own. Neither did they have defensive skills, which made them easy to capture, so all they had been able to do was protect themselves and endure as best they could. The ho'o had been so weakened by years of captivity that it had returned to its bead-shaped form.

Reiki, Oryu, and the kirin were also yet to recover their full powers.

The fact that Reiki had lately been growing larger and recovering its powers was because it was in the Kusunoki garden. The new doorplate Minato had made offered sound protection, and the garden had been transformed into a kami realm by the Yamagami after it had regained its own powers. Not a hint of evil was able to approach. In this safe zone, the Four Spirits would be able to recuperate at their own pace.

Now that they were all together again, the four auspicious beasts drank together every night. The ho'o liked *shochu* and sweets, particularly those made with sweet bean paste—but the chunky kind, rather than smooth. It frequently debated the Yamagami on which type of bean paste was best. Peace reigned.

Minato let the brush flow across the washi paper.

"Chirp!"

"Whoops, sorry."

Minato's efforts to imbue the writing with the power of dispelling had gotten a bit sloppy for a moment. The ho'o was a stern and unsparing instructor, and it hopped in place on the tabletop as if to say, *Straighten up and focus!*

Seri, stabbing a slice of butter cake with a fork, looked at the chick.

“It’s very strict.”

“He only slipped a tiny bit.”

“Talk about demanding!”

“Chirp, chirp!!”

“You don’t have to be so noisy. No need to get testy—want some cake?”

“Cheep!”

The ho’o flapped its wings as it made its way over to Utsugi, who was holding out his own half-eaten piece of butter cake. The leader of the winged birds was easy to handle once you knew how.

Raijin emerged from the open-air *onsen* and flew to the veranda. His feet, even redder than usual, descended to the floor without a sound.

“Now that’s hot! I love a good *onsen*. I end up staying in them way too long.”

Fujin flew in next and landed on the polished wooden floor silently.

“I sure could use a drink.”

“Care for some chilled sake?”

Minato cleared off the table to make room to welcome the cheerful twosome. As he was about to stand, an impressive bubble of snot that had ballooned from one of the Yamagami’s nostrils burst with an audible *pop*. The Yamagami’s eyes flew open. Its ears flattened. Its tail swept grandly. It emanated divine energy filled with the weight of its expectations.

Everyone understood immediately.

Saiga had come to visit. He had not been to the house since dropping by after Minato had completed the *onryo* mission, on which occasion he had left a vast quantity of *wagashi* by way of thanks. Naturally, it had long since been eaten.

“So, he comes at last.” The Yamagami turned its nose toward the front entrance, sniffing at the air. “…Today’s bean paste is smooth. He has made the right choice.”

The Yamagami’s satisfied voice rippled through the air, scattering the fallen leaves atop the wall on the rice paddy side.

Sometimes Minato wished Saiga's ears could pick up that voice as well.

Fujin, rising slightly off the floor, pointed at the ceiling.

"We'll be up top, then."

"Aww… What's the problem if we stay here? I mean, he doesn't even notice us," Raijin asked, tilting his head quizzically.

It was true that Saiga didn't notice them, but Minato did prefer they keep their distance. The kami felt free to say whatever came into their heads, and it looked odd when Minato reacted. But he couldn't start ordering around the two kami that had saved his life.

Four beasts devouring butter cake all looked up at the torn Minato with pleading eyes.

On top of this, Reiki and Oryu rose from the sacred pond, passed the stone lantern that was the home of the ho'o, and came toward him. The kirin followed them with a jaunty tread. Apparently, it was time to party. Minato admitted ignominious defeat.

"…Please keep it down as best you can."

As cheers rose behind him, Minato swiftly prepared a selection of chilled sake and other drinks. No sooner had he done this than the unassuming sound of the doorbell came.

Kneeling across the table from Saiga, Minato uncomfortably moved his toes.

On one side of the table, vast quantities of booze and snacks were gradually disappearing. The edible "house gifts," or more accurately, offerings to the kami, were no exception. When Utsugi leaned in from the side and asked, "Can we eat that, too?" Minato glanced at the slavering Yamagami and granted permission with a quiet "…Go ahead." The wrapper came off the item in question at once; there was no way to explain that away.

After all, they were the kami next door.

The many members of the Yamagami household, who brazenly occupied the Kusunoki residence's garden as if it were their own, were still technically Minato's neighbors. They would not eat his food without asking. That was where they drew the line, always asking permission. Not that Minato had ever said no.

Saiga, sitting quietly in the corner even as these unnatural interactions occurred before his eyes, took it in stride and coolly continued their business. Minato admired the man's nerves of steel, but in truth Minato himself wasn't so different.

"I see! So our mysterious guest was in fact an *onmyoji*."

"Chirp!"

The kirin stared at Saiga as it sipped from a beer mug, keeping as far away from the scene as possible, and the ho'o, perched on its head, gave a chirp of warning: *Don't look too much*. When the kirin showed no sign of listening, the chick irritably pecked at one of its horns.

Beside them, Reiki let its bowl clink back to the floor.

"You're wasting your breath. The kirin never listens."

"You can say that again," Oryu said, spinning its wineglass and sending ripples through the purplish-red liquid.

Raijin opened a new bottle of sake. "He's a bold one, though, for a mortal. Look how calm he is."

Fujin held out a sake cup. "Well, we did reveal ourselves to him once."

"Oh yeah! I forgot about that."

The kami of wind and thunder had been observed from a distance as they chopped and burned the spirit world. Among the many trembling witnesses, one had watched with a quieter mien.

As his rowdy kami neighbors teased each other, ate, drank, and generally cut loose, Minato cast them a sidelong glance and gently smiled.

After all, every day was fun, fulfilling, and full of happiness.

The world outside was in deep midwinter, cold enough to freeze both body and soul.

The snow that fell from thick gray clouds covering the sky did not reach the garden of the gods. No drifts of snow for them.

Against the wintry mountain and its somber, withered tones, the spring garden was a vivid green.

Even without the change of seasons, the Kusunoki residence and its beloved garden were pleasant places to be. Indeed, the very kami took their rest there.

As the mild wind blew, the camphor happily shook its dense round crown of leaves.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. I'm Enju.

Thank you very much for picking up *Kusunoki's Garden of Gods*.

I wrote this novel with a smile and—hoping that it might bring the same enjoyment to even one other person, or even that I might receive some feedback—posted it with ulterior motives on the Japanese amateur novelist website *Shosetsuka ni Naro*.

When I did so, I received both a response from an unexpectedly large number of readers and—for some reason—a message from an editor, and in no time my story had become a published book. This all happened so quickly (from writing to publication in nine months) that my head hasn't yet caught up with the reality that the tale I wrote has become a volume available in the bookstores of the world.

Now, I doubt anyone has any interest in me speaking about myself, so please enjoy these behind-the-scenes details.

—I had a hard time deciding whether to make the sacred tree a camphor or a sakura.

Based on that decision, the protagonist's name would also have been either Minato Kusunoki or Minato Sakuragi. In the end, I went with a camphor, reasoning that these are usually the kind of trees people think of when they imagine a sacred tree.

—The Yamagami actually had twelve kin.

Too many. I cut back again and again until I arrived at three. I considered borrowing the names from the Three Precious Children of Japanese mythology (Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susano'o) but decided this might be too impudent, so instead I borrowed parts of the names of Japan's three major poisonous

herbs: water hemlock (*dokuzeri*), monkshood (*torikabuto*), and coriaria (*doku-utsugi*).

—About Echigoya.

The twelfth master had no son or heir to take over the business and intended to close up shop for good when he retired. However, when he began losing weight rapidly due to his stomach ailment, his panicked grandson volunteered to take over the store. That's the backstory. This (soon-to-be) thirteenth master is a boy in junior high who has been training as his grandfather's apprentice for less than a year. It seems he hasn't yet attained the mastery required for a passing grade from the demanding Yamagami.

—In the final chapter, Fujin, Raijin, and the Yamagami were all going to shrink after using too much of their power.

I slightly regret not doing this. After all, the garden filled with little kami would be an even happier place. All of them would be unchanged inside, and just as capricious as ever, though.

—I was planning to make Minato a solid brawler.

This was supposed to be revealed in the mountains, but when I got to that point, I abandoned the idea, as the physical approach didn't seem to suit him. I think this was a heroic choice, if I may say so myself.

—About Saiga and Ichijo.

No doubt the names and crests of these two will remind readers of a certain pair of famous historic *onmyoji*. Whether Saiga and Ichijo are canonically their descendants, I will leave to the imagination.

Now, then. This is a tale of the Yamagami and its fellow kami doing whatever they please. If you enjoyed its laid-back, lazy leanings, then that would delight me.

I hope everyone who reads this finds just one sentence, just one scene—anything, something—that lingers in their heart.

In closing, I offer my sincere gratitude to everyone involved in turning this story into a published book for their tireless, titanic efforts. Thank you very much.

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