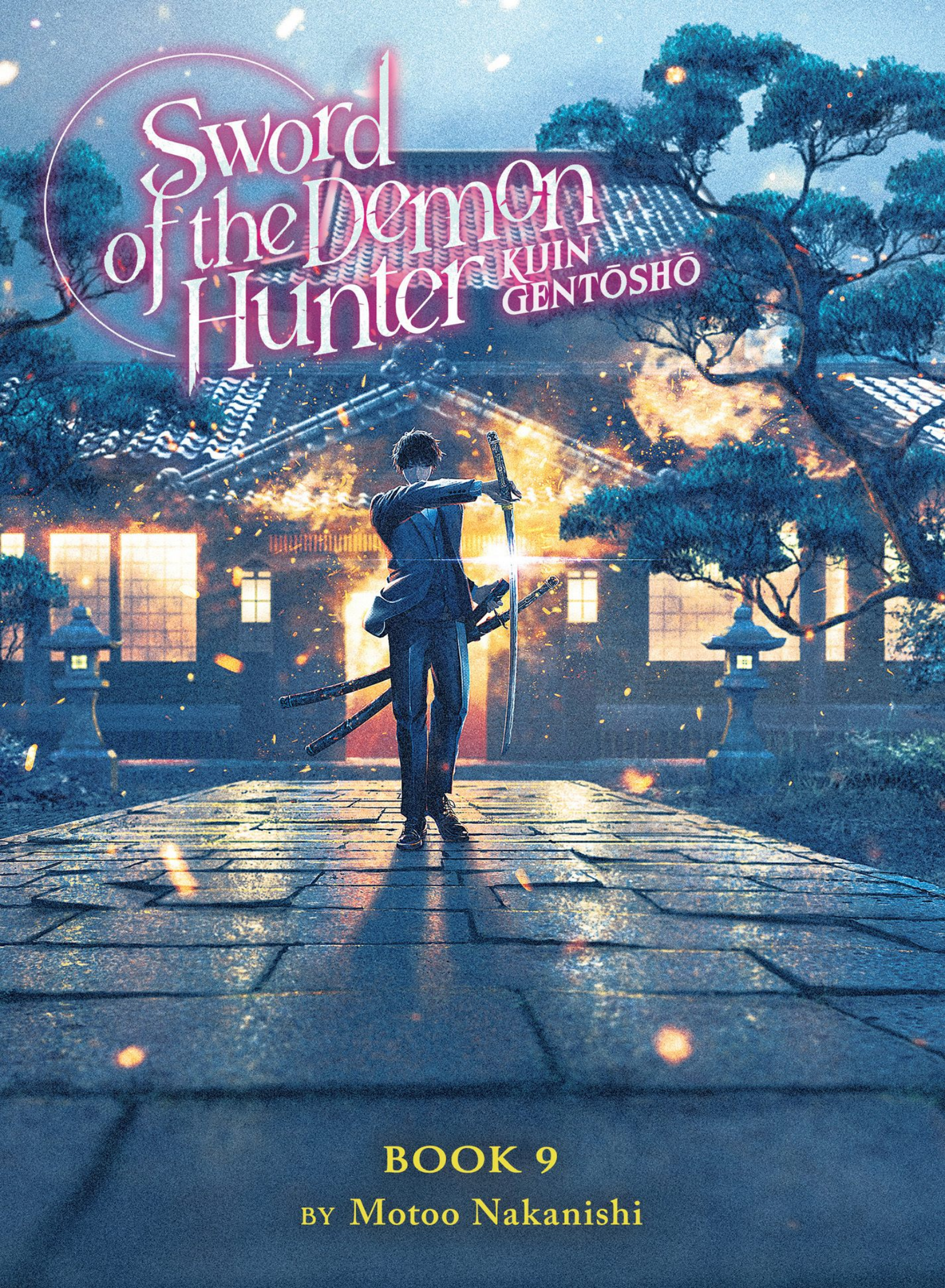

Sword of the Demon Hunter
KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ
BOOK 9
BY Motoo Nakanishi

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TRANSLATION: Kevin Ishizaka
ADAPTATION: Jack Hamm
LOGO DESIGN: H. Qi
COVER DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Jehanne Bell
PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner
EDITOR: Laurel Ashgrove
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ

BOOK 9

WRITTEN BY

Motoo Nakanishi

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

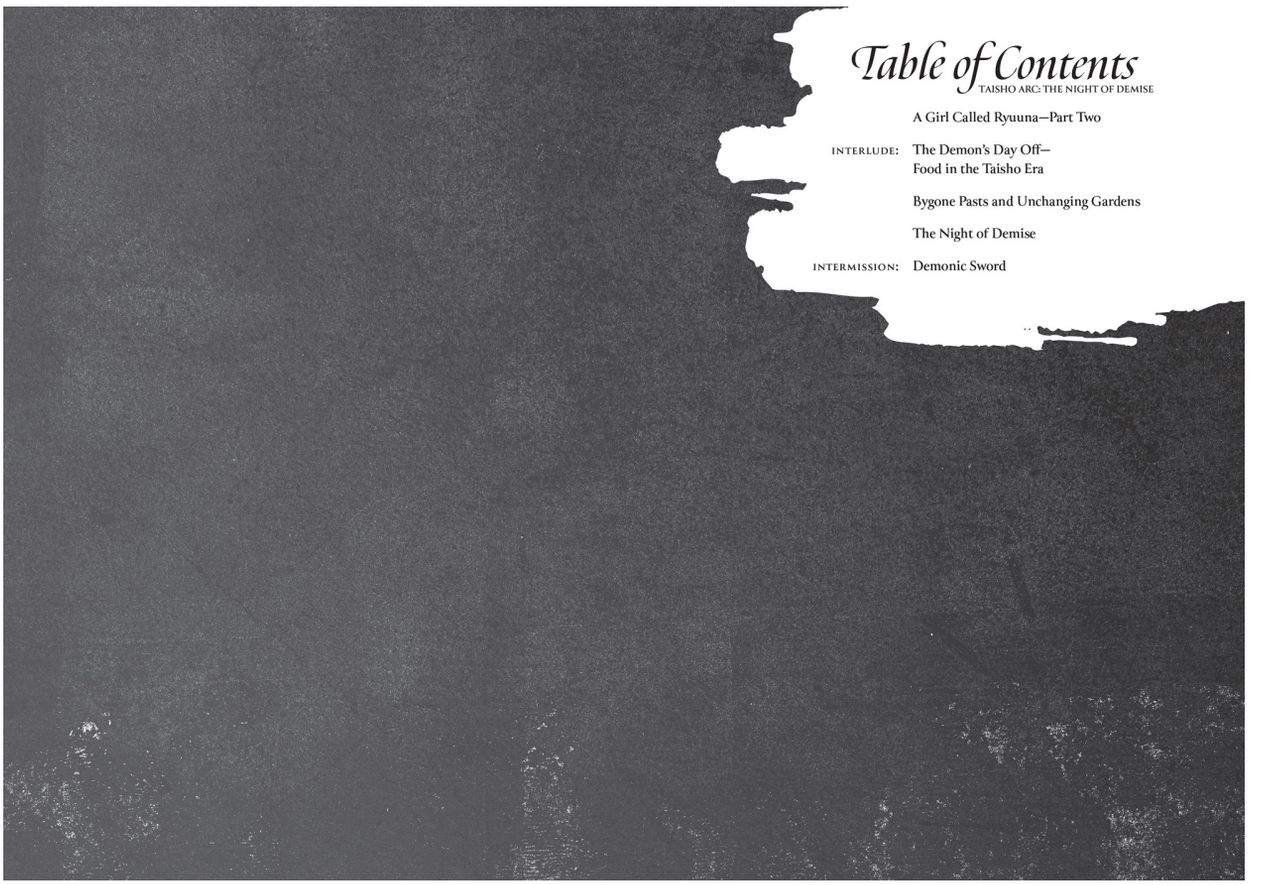


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Food in the Taisho Era

Bygone Pasts and Unchanging Gardens

The Night of Demise

INTERMISSION: Demonic Sword

Character List

Jinya: A demon in the service of the Akase family. Currently gathering strength to face the Demon God in Kadono in 170 years' time.

Kaneomi: The psyche of one of the four Yatonomori Kaneomi demonic swords. Used to serve the Nagumo, a family of spirit hunters, but now she acts as one of Jinya's swords.

Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth (Utsugi Heikichi): The fourth to inherit the name of master metalworker Akitsu Somegorou. An artifact spirit user. Married to Nomari, Jinya's daughter.

Himawari: A demon born from a fragment of Magatsume's heart.

Suzune: Jinya's sister by birth. A demon, and the one who killed Shirayuki, the woman Jinya loved. Under the name Magatsume, she wishes for the world's ruin and stands in Jinya's way.

Toudou Yoshihiko: A young man who works at Koyomiza, a motion picture theater in Shibuya.

Akase Kimiko: Daughter of the Akase, a noble family. Targeted by Eizen.

Akase Michitomo: Kimiko's father. Married into the Akase family and is the current family head.

Akase Shino: Kimiko's mother.

Akase Seiichirou: Kimiko's grandfather. Tried to offer Kimiko to Eizen as a live sacrifice after being tempted by his power.

Ryuuna: A girl raised in confinement to be made into the *Kodoku no Kago*.

Nagumo Eizen: The elder of the Nagumo, a family of ruined spirit hunters. Joined hands with demons to try and bring the Nagumo back to glory by making a world where spirit hunters were needed once again.

Character List

Izuchi: A demon serving Eizen. Has no demon ability of his own. Wields a gatling gun as a weapon.

Ikyuu: A demon serving Eizen. Has the ability to move through space.

Yonabari: A demon serving Eizen. Intersex. Has the ability to prevent someone from dying.

Furutsubaki: A demon born from a fragment of Magatsume's heart. Has been altered by Eizen. Has the ability to control humans.

Motoki Soushi: The grandson of the owner of Kogetsudou, an antiques store. The Motoki are spirit hunters who work with antiques that have developed souls, as well as items that have become spirits.

Saegusa Sahiro A young woman working at Kogetsudou. Abducted by Yonabari.


Taisho Arc

A Girl Called Ryuuna
Part Two

THOUGH HER TIME in confinement had been far from pleasant, things had at least been simpler in her cell. By leaving that world and forming connections with others, she had come to be burdened with things. Things that occasionally felt like fetters weighing her down. For Ryuuna, the outside world was not without its flaws.

"Ryuuna, can you grab me the shears?"

"Mm..."

She still hadn't grown accustomed to life outside her cell, but she'd been helping Jiiya with his work lately. She had grown used to seeing him take care of the flowers with an earnest look on his face and had stopped thinking of him as a monster because of it. He was different from her, a tool kept in darkness. He was someone both demon *and* human.

Did that mean she could become something more too, then? More than just the demon-birthing temptress she was meant to become? She thought about it for a long time but couldn't reach an answer. There were many things she had no answer for.

"Ryuuna-san, are you staying here for the day?"

The Talking Sword, Kaneomi, was assigned to watch Ryuuna. Jinya told Ryuuna to keep Kaneomi close and that she was more reliable than she looked.

Though she was supposed to become a man-made demon god, Ryuuna currently had no special abilities to speak of. Kaneomi aided Ryuuna by compensating for her lack of knowledge and was ready to use her ability to help Ryuuna escape if it came to it. As Ryuuna lacked much in the way of common sense, Kaneomi's presence was immensely helpful.

"...Mm-mm."

"Ah. So we're heading there *today, then."*

Since she was being targeted by Eizen, Ryuuna was limited in the things she could do. Normally Jinya would stay by her side, but he was busy with investigation, so she would spend the day with a

prearranged guardian instead. This guardian was a demon acquaintance Jinya knew from when he lived in Fukagawa. They always acted like they understood Jinya really well. Ryuuna didn't like that. In fact, she kind of hated them, to put it bluntly.

"It'll be all right. I'll protect you with my body and soul, as Kadono-dono has asked me to. Not that I have a body to protect you with."

The sword's joke was unfunny, but she did always make Ryuuna's time with the irksome demon more bearable.

A thought rose to Ryuuna's mind. Only after she joined the outside world had she come to dislike some people and burden others. She was freed from her cell, but she felt as though her heart was heavier than it had ever been back then.

"Shall we be off?"

The demon called Himawari often tagged along as a guardian, albeit with blatant ulterior motives.

"Make sure you tell Uncle I helped you, okay?"

She was simply acting on Jinya's request rather than any goodwill of her own. She resembled the head of the Akase family in that she was prepared to abandon others to their fate if need be. Ryuuna didn't like her much.

"Himawari-san, has there been any change in Nagumo Eizen's actions?"

"I talked to Uncle yesterday, but Eizen doesn't seem to be making any big moves yet. I think it won't be long, though. And from what I could tell, Uncle thinks the same."

"I see... It's as I feared, then."

Ryuuna had no place in their conversation. She was simply a tool that happened to be present for their discussion, too simpleminded to contribute anything meaningful. Her heart ached. Only after coming to the outside world did she learn how painful it was to be ignorant.

Ryuuna didn't say a word as they walked. The irksome demon could be seen waiting outside their destination.

"I'll take my leave here."

"Already, Himawari-san?"

“Yes, unfortunately there’s some business I must attend to. And I’m also not particularly fond of that demon there myself.”

Ryuuna and Himawari were in agreement on that point alone. She departed with a smile, leaving Ryuuna to suffer by herself.

The outside world was often more taxing than the confines of her cell. Just where had the emotions she felt when she first saw the sky gone?

***

It was the nature of spirits to be formed from negative emotions. Spirits were dark, stagnant thoughts given flesh to harm man. That was why they appeared so easily in places where negative emotions gathered. Many ghost stories were set in Asakusa precisely because of its history as a site of execution grounds.

Darkness naturally instilled fear in people, but few were afraid during the daylight hours. That was why mankind extended the daylight they had and illuminated the night, thereby reducing the number of spirits that were born. But that only decreased the number of naturally occurring spirits. The spirits made through the schemes of others remained unaffected.

Jinya fought two demons in Asakusa while it was still daytime. Neither were significant threats. They were lesser demons, slow and weak. They had attacked suddenly while he was looking into suspicious rumors that might lead him to Nagumo Eizen.

Neither seemed to have a sense of self, merely moving out of reflex. Jinya bit his palm as he retreated a step back. He used the bleeding to make a sword out of blood, dodged their wild, almost beast-like attacks, then sliced off the head of one.

With one down, he turned to face the other. It showed no fear, nor any reaction at all to its partner being slain. Recklessly, it charged at him. Its careless actions made it an easy target. With an overhead strike, Jinya smashed its cranium in.

Jinya left the back alley, unscathed by the surprise attack. He headed for an antiques store called Kogetsudou, located a short

distance away from the famous Kaminarimon Gate.

“How’d things go on yer end?” Standing in front of the store was Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth, who gave a wave as he saw Jinya approach.

They still hadn’t found Eizen’s new base of operations. The two sides were at a standstill, despite Jinya’s nightly efforts to search for leads.

“I got attacked by two demons.”

“At this time of day? Odd. Anythin’ come of it?”

“Nothing.”

The demons Jinya had encountered weren’t the naturally occurring variety but former humans made into lesser demons by a technique Eizen had gained from a daughter of Magatsume.

“Anything on your end?” Jinya asked.

“Nothin’ worth mentioning.”

Somegorou was on good terms with the people of Kogetsudou. He was fond of the grandson left in charge of the store, Motoki Soushi, and visited often. His visits had become even more frequent ever since the girl who worked there, Saegusa Sahiro, disappeared. Soushi was unstable, so Somegorou checked on him regularly to make sure he didn’t do anything reckless in the name of finding Sahiro. Being a demon, Jinya couldn’t say much to comfort the young man, so he left that side of things to Somegorou.

“The rumors of disappearances are still goin’ strong.”

People were continuing to go missing all around Tokyo, but there hadn’t been any cases of large numbers of people disappearing all at once—only inconspicuous, isolated disappearances.

“My guess is they were either devoured by Eizen or taken by Furutsubaki’s ability. Neither bodes well for Sahiro-chan…” Somegorou grimaced, imagining the worst. He gritted his teeth trying to hold back his anger. “At any rate, we best keep slayin’ these underlings of Eizen. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Something felt off to Jinya, though. Why had those lesser demons been in that alley? Being unable to read Eizen's schemes left him with a sense of foreboding.

Jinya continued his investigation and was attacked several more times. Only one or two demons ever appeared at once, and they were always oddly weak, to the point he wondered why they even attacked at all. Curiously, there were very few rumors of people disappearing in the areas where the demons were seen. Jinya still couldn't connect the dots as to why that might be.

"Uncle."

He was walking down the street when a young girl with wavy chestnut-brown hair called out to him. With her red eyes hidden, Himawari looked just like any other person in the crowd.

"Yes?"

"I have some information to share," she said. She was investigating things herself as well.

He gestured with his chin for them to move to a more private location. They stepped between some buildings where no one would overhear them, and he kept his distance from her as he listened.

"I've been looking into the rumors of missing people, but I haven't heard any mention of Furutsubaki lately."

The faceless demon called Furutsubaki, a daughter of Magatsume, was abducting humans on Eizen's orders. Despite there being no sign of her recently, the disappearances continued.

"Maybe she simply hasn't been coming out, but she could have also taken a different form than the one we last saw."

Like with Shirayuki and Nagumo Kazusa, the daughters of Magatsume could consume a person to gain their appearance and personality.

"Would her ability's strength change if she consumed someone?" Jinya asked.

"It would depend on whom she takes in. If it's a normal human, she would likely get weaker. Gaining a personality would

allow her to think for herself, making her harder to control, but I'd assume Eizen has something planned there. He must have wanted her to have more wits and be able to pass as a human."

Jinya couldn't see much benefit in it for Eizen. But if Eizen had really gone through with it, then either he must have found a human worth feeding to Furutsubaki or his plans were far enough along that it didn't matter if one of his underlings was weakened.

"One more thing. There have been a small number of demon sightings. Very few people appear to have been harmed, though," Himawari said.

"I've noticed that myself. I've looked into the areas around the sightings, but I've come up empty."

He'd been attacked a few times, but that was it. He felt like there was a purpose behind these indecipherable actions, but he couldn't figure out what. He didn't think Eizen would use up his forces for no reason, though.

"Is there anything else weighing on your mind?" Jinya asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. There's nothing I can share with confidence, at least," Himawari said with an indifferent look. She hid her thoughts well.

"Is that so. How's Ryuuna, then?"

"She's having problems getting along with her assigned bodyguard. Not that I blame her; that demon annoys me too." Himawari's serious demeanor crumbled as she puffed her cheeks out grumpily.

"Was it too soon for her to interact with others?"

"No, I just think this particular person was not a good candidate for that. Goodness, you should see how they act like they understand everything about you. It's irritating."

Though Himawari and Jinya were enemies, she was still fond of him. Perhaps because of that, his strong hatred for Magatsume did not extend to Himawari. She resembled the innocent Suzune he knew before he came to despise his sister.

"Although, to tell the truth, she really doesn't communicate much with anyone. I feel like the more time she spends in the world, the more bewildered by it she gets."

Jinya had noticed that as well. Ryuuna only knew of the outside from what she'd been taught in her cage. Experiencing the world firsthand seemed to disorient her.

"She'll just have to get used to things."

"Indeed. There are good and bad sides to everything. She'll have to understand that if she's going to live in the world of man."

On the surface, it sounded like Himawari cared for Ryuuna's well-being, but Jinya had a hard time believing that. Jinya and Himawari both hid their true intentions from one another, and the reasons behind their actions were slightly different. For instance, Jinya's main goal was to slay Eizen so that he could protect Kimiko and Ryuuna, while Himawari was helping the girls for the purpose of seeing Eizen slain. The only thing they had in common was the desire to slay Eizen. But Himawari's main goal was to stop the birth of a man-made demon god. She wasn't so vicious that she would sacrifice the girls for her aims, but their safety was unmistakably a low priority for her. What's more, she was almost certainly taking actions behind the scenes that Jinya didn't know about.

"I'll take my leave here, Uncle. I intend to look into other rumors here and there."

"By all means. I'll do the same."

She turned to leave and mix back into the crowd, but Jinya abruptly called out to stop her. "Himawari... Just what are hiding?"

"That's a secret," she replied without hesitation. Demons could not lie. If she wanted to pull the wool over his eyes, she could have phrased her words ambiguously, but instead she chose to cleanly admit she was hiding something from him. "But do not worry. I have no intention of letting Kimiko-san or Ryuuna-san be harmed. I would hate to see you sad."

"Then why won't you tell me what you're up to?"

"Well, a scheme isn't a scheme unless it's kept secret. Just as you have your own thoughts on how one should act, I have mine."

Her stubbornness reminded him that she, too, was a demon. However, the thought of violently forcing her to reveal her plans did not occur to him. Her ability was necessary to fight Eizen, and he

was certain she wouldn't betray him at least until the old man was dead.

"Oh, and I have a request to make of you, Uncle. Please take good care of those girls. Especially Kimiko-san. She's a bit moody right now because you're only paying attention to Ryuuna-san lately." Her seriousness disappeared again as she made another childish face.

"Is that part of your scheme as well?" he said sarcastically.

"But of course," she replied, leaving him baffled.

The next day, Kimiko and Ryuuna had Jinya take them on an outing. He felt annoyed to be acting in accordance with Himawari's request, but the girls certainly needed a breather. His investigations were getting nowhere anyway, and he didn't expect any attacks to come from Eizen's camp like last time.

At Kimiko's request, they went to Koyomiza, the motion picture theater. She also insisted Ryuuna come along. The two girls had grown quite close—Kimiko treated Ryuuna like a little sister now.

"I really can't see him around. Can you?"

"Mm-mm."

Kimiko scanned the area in search of Jinya. She had asked him to display his demon ability *Invisibility* for her. He'd used it to secretly protect her numerous times before, but this was the first time he was deploying it with her knowledge, and she seemed amused by it. He smiled slightly out of nostalgia; he used to use the ability to sneak Shino, Kimiko's mother, out in the past.

"It's an amusing parlor trick, don't you think?" Jinya said.

"I'm pretty sure this is more than just a parlor trick, but it is wonderful. You're like one of those Koga ninjas I've read about in stories."

"I'm a demon, though," he said flatly.

"I know that! I was making a comparison." She made a face, unamused by his reply. But she wasn't angry, and she quickly smiled again. "Let's enjoy our movie, Ryuuna-san."

"Mm..."

Ryuuna was beautiful, but her inexpressiveness made her seem cold. Kimiko wasn't put off, however, and pulled Ryuuna along by the hand toward Koyomiza.

Kimiko was as obsessed with motion picture films as ever, but lately she seemed just as eager to talk to Yoshihiko. She often talked with him at length, forgetting the time. Perhaps she was just that happy to have a friend her age. He seemed to think of her as a friend as well, so Jinya didn't mind. Michitomo would probably kick up a fuss if he ever found out she had a male friend, but that would be a worthwhile life experience for them in its own right.

They wove through the crowd and down the street that had long since become familiar to them, and soon they reached the small theater.

"Oh? Yoshihiko-san?"

Yoshihiko was in front of Koyomiza. Even though these were his working hours, he seemed to be in a daze, just standing there blankly. When they approached, he stiffly turned to face them like a broken mechanical doll.

"O-oh, Kimiko-san. And Ryuuna-san."

"Hello, Yoshihiko-san."

There were more flowers than usual in front of the theater, and all of the strong-smelling variety. Individually they would've been fine, but the large number gave the air a muddled odor.

Yoshihiko usually welcomed them with a bright smile, but today his face was tense. He seemed more on edge than Kimiko had ever seen him.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked. "You seem a little pale."

"Aha, ha. I'm all right, I'm all right..."

He clearly was far from all right. Kimiko reached out worriedly, but he took a quick step back. Hurt by his reaction, she left her outreached hand aimlessly lingering in the air.

"A-ah, no, I-I didn't mean to—"

"No, it's all right. I shouldn't have tried to touch you without permission."

The two slunk into awkward silence.

Jinya watched them, staying hidden for two reasons: One, he didn't think it was his place to interfere in their business, and two, he sensed a strange presence near the theater.

"I see Ryuuna-san is with you today," Yoshihiko said.

"Ah, yes. And Jii—"

Kimiko was about to continue when Jinya whispered for her to keep his presence a secret. She jumped in surprise but got the message. Jinya continued to observe the situation vigilantly.

"You two have gotten rather close," Yoshihiko said.

"We have. She's become something of a little sister to me."

"I see..."

Their conversation lacked its usual energy. Perhaps feeling too uncomfortable to keep going, the two fell silent. Yoshihiko was the first to speak up again.

"Kimiko-san..." His voice was lifeless, as if he were resigned to his fate. But he took a deep breath and looked Kimiko in the eyes.

"Y-yes?"

"If it were a matter of life and death, could you bring yourself to trust me?"

The question didn't make sense. His eyes seemed desperate, but there was a certain determination in his voice. This was the first she had ever seen him make such an expression. She didn't know what his question was supposed to mean, but she could tell he was serious, so she thought hard about it.

Kimiko knew Yoshihiko as Koyomiza's ticket collector and a similarly aged friend of the opposite sex. Her experience with other people was limited, so she could not be a good judge of his character, but she answered without hesitation anyway.

"I could. I trust you, Yoshihiko-san."

She probably answered that way out of a genuine desire to see him smile again. She didn't know what problems he was dealing with, but she wanted him to know he was trusted. She'd been raised to be such a kind girl.

Her feelings must have reached him, because the tension left his body. A natural, childlike smile rose to his face.

“Thank you. I’m not afraid anymore.”

“You really do look much better when you’re smiling.”

“Ha ha! Oh, stop it.”

Without going inside, the two smiled at one another. - Occasionally a cool breeze would blow past them, but the two remained warm in its wake. They were a strange sight, but they looked happy, if a little bashful.

They stayed like that for a while. Jinya watched them out of the corner of his eye as he focused on their surroundings. The strange presence he felt still lingered.

After enjoying a film at the theater, they returned home before the sun went down. Once night came, Jinya was in his room thinking deeply. He still had no leads, and Eizen’s camp was taking no direct action against them. It would be nice if the stalemate continued forever, but Jinya wasn’t so optimistic as to think there was a chance of that.

He was about to go to bed for the day when he felt a presence outside his door. He opened it and was met with Ryuuna’s emotionless eyes looking up at him.

“Need something, Ryuuna?”

“…How?” She cocked her head to the side, apparently intrigued by the fact that he’d noticed her before she even knocked.

He answered, “I’ve been alone for a long time, so I’m sensitive to the presence of others.”

It wasn’t clear if she really understood, but she nodded anyway.

He let her inside and sat on the bed. She sat down next to him with a soft plop. It wasn’t uncommon for her to come to his room like this. Jinya was about the only person in the Akase family home she could bring herself to rely on.

“Did you have a scary dream?” he asked.

“Mm…not scary. But it was dark. I don’t like.”

Ryuuna had been confined for a long time, isolated from the world. The night reminded her of her time in her underground cell.

Not because it was dark, but because she thought she might wake up to find herself back there. That terrified her. She hadn't been afraid at all the night they first saved her, but now she had everything to lose.

"I see. You've learned to be afraid, huh?"

"...How?"

"I can tell because I'm the same. I'm a coward, afraid of so many things."

She had only ever seen the strong side of him, so she didn't fully accept what he said.

"...Being protected is hard. More than being hurt." She hung her head as she bared her thoughts. "People are nice, but that makes me sad. Things that weren't scary are scary now. Am I broken?"

It was because she now knew peace that she feared losing it all and returning to her days of imprisonment. Just like how adults developed aversions to bugs they'd been able to touch as children, knowledge could instill fear.

"No, you're not broken. You've just grown up a little," he said.

For better or worse, Ryuuna was changing. She would probably never again be her old self, the apathetic girl willing to put up with anything.

"I've lived a long life and have experienced many sudden losses," he continued.

Hoping to comfort her at least a little bit, he shared with her the lessons learned by his shameful, unseemly self.

"Most of what I've lost are things I can never hope to find again. Naturally, I had been afraid of losing them. But I've never once thought I would've been better off not having them at all."

He softly patted her head. She used to turn down his head pats. She had changed in this admittedly minor regard as well.

"That's why I'm still here, struggling. I'm afraid, but I still try my hardest to hold on to what I have."

He saw a bit of himself in the way Ryuuna was now. He wasn't so worldly that he could preach to others on how to live, but he

could at least impart a lesson as someone who had trudged a similar path.

“Ryuuna… I’m sure you’ll end up having many scary experiences from here on out. I’m sure there will be times when things are tough enough that you’ll want to give up on everything.”

He made his voice as soft as possible. He recalled how a certain soba restaurant owner had shared similar wisdom with him before. Apparently it was now Jinya’s turn to be the one giving guidance.

“But please, don’t give up. I promise someday you’ll understand the value of the things you’ve lost and the meaning in the small fragments that are left behind in your hands.”

Ryuuna’s eyes opened wide. With an unsteady gaze and a shaky voice, she asked him, “Will that someday really come for me?”

“Of course it will. Because you have a life waiting for you to live.”

She made a deep nod and awkwardly smiled, seeming to finally be at ease. She began nodding off shortly after that. He laid her down on the bed and ran his fingers through her soft hair.

She was unable to be hurt when she had nothing, but now she had become afraid of losing what she had. A girl like her was meant to grow and learn slowly at her own pace. But she had been robbed of such an opportunity up to this point, making all the sudden knowledge and experiences she was now gaining too much to digest.

The cold of winter was all the harsher after leaving the warmth of one’s bed. She would surely experience plenty of sadness from here on out. As Jinya was the one who brought her out of her cell, the duty to aid her fell on his shoulders. He would ensure she could sleep in peace, knowing she would wake up to yet another run-of-the-mill morning. He would do what he must to help her accept her new life. Of course, that included dealing with Eizen. Jinya now had yet another reason to slay Eizen as soon as he could.

But there was something that bothered Jinya. He had felt the presence of demons around Koyomiza. Not the lesser demons loyal

to Eizen but the ones given to Himawari by Magatsume. For some inexplicable reason, they were positioned to protect Koyomiza.

Himawari was putting some scheme into action, and Jinya didn't know what it might be. And though he hadn't followed up on it at the time, he'd thought he smelled the scent of blood on Yoshihiko.

***

Sometime before Jinya, Kimiko, and Ryuuna visited Koyomiza, Yoshihiko was busy with his work as a ticket collector. The stab wound in his abdomen was painful, but he could still move after forcibly staunching the bleeding with bandage and cloth. He had also bought plenty of strong-smelling flowers with his meager pay to mask the smell of blood.

A demon called Yonabari had stabbed him the other day, then explained to him their ability, *Plaything*. With it, they could make somebody other than themselves unable to die. Any death other than the end of one's natural life span would be impossible. Even if the person's body were physically destroyed, they would stay alive. But if their wounds were fatal, then they would die the moment Yonabari stopped using their ability.

After fully explaining all that, Yonabari began to negotiate with him. *"You don't wanna die, right? Me neither. I'd just haaate for you to die. So maybe you can do a little something for me?"*

Kimiko would do just about anything to save Yoshihiko, so he made an excellent hostage.

Yoshihiko knew no good could come out of obeying someone unscrupulous enough to unhesitatingly stab another person, but he was too afraid of death to go against Yonabari. The gash in his abdomen remained unhealed, and his guts were a mess. He couldn't eat in his current state, but he wouldn't starve either. A wound like this likely wouldn't end up healing on its own, but his situation was too bizarre to possibly explain to a doctor.

That didn't mean he was out of options, though. Yonabari made it very clear he could live a little longer if he just deceived and

lured out Kimiko for them. But he couldn't bring himself to do that, knowing it would mean that Kimiko would have to suffer in his place.

He was doing his job, worrying all the while, when a girl with wavy chestnut-brown hair called out to him.

"Hello, Yoshihiko-kun."

He thought for a moment she might be a customer, but he quickly realized that wasn't the case and tensed up. He was wary of her and how she knew his name. Being abruptly stabbed by Yonabari had made him immediately distrustful. "...Do I know you?"

"My name is Himawari. I am a niece of the one Kimiko-san calls Jiiya."

Yoshihiko's wariness eased at the sound of a familiar name, but he kept a distance from the girl, regarding her with a doubtful gaze. "So you're Ryuuna-chan's little sister?"

"No," she huffed. "She's only pretending to be his niece. I am the real, genuine article. I do not have anything against Ryuuna-san, but I'd rather you not make that mistake."

Her insistence that she was Jinya's real niece made her seem even more childish than Kimiko. Yoshihiko relaxed. He didn't feel any of Yonabari's eeriness from her.

"Are we clear?" she said.

"Um, sure. Did you need something?"

"Oh, I apologize for becoming distracted. I came here because I thought it best to tell you everything." Her expression turned serious. "About my uncle, Eizen, Kimiko-san, Ryuuna-san...and *us*."

Everything she revealed sounded outlandish to him. She told him about Eizen's schemes and about spirit hunters like Akitsu Somegorou. She told him how Eizen was after Kimiko and Ryuuna and how she and Jinya were trying to protect them. And she told him that another clash between the two was nearing.

"Why tell me all this?" he said with suspicion. He believed her without question because of the very real pain he felt in his abdomen. He should have been dead, yet he lived. That alone was sufficient proof that the world held some mysteries beyond reason. But he didn't understand what she was after.

“There’s no need for alarm. I simply wish to offer you a chance to cooperate with us. That is, my mother and me. We, who have experience working with the heart, have a far higher understanding of demons’ abilities than my uncle does. Do I understand correctly that Yonabari has used their ability to coerce you into cooperating with them?”

“…They have.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find working with us much more agreeable. If you’re going to die regardless, Yoshihiko-kun, why not die for my uncle and Kimiko-san’s sake?”

The young girl reminded him of his cruel situation. His death was only a matter of time, but he could at least choose how he went out.

“Will you cling to what life you have left and obey Yonabari, or will you risk your life for Kimiko-san? The choice is yours; I can’t make it for you.”

She sought his cooperation but didn’t care to coerce him into it. That alone made him trust her more than Yonabari, but her half-hearted attitude confused him.

“…Why do things this way? If you just wanted to help Kimiko-san and Jiiya-san, there are other things you could’ve done.”

“I won’t deny that. I could have restrained and confined you so you never come in contact with Yonabari again—just as I could have cut off Kimiko-san’s legs or tampered with her mind like Eizen, to make her lose all value as a pawn to Yonabari.”

“Okay, so why bother giving me a choice, then? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Perhaps not to you, but I have my reasons. I would hate to see my uncle saddened, you see.”

Her motive was so simple it flummoxed him. He froze in confusion while she made a genuine smile from the heart.

“I am a daughter of Magatsume. Being born from her emotions, it is only natural that I obey her. But I follow my own will otherwise.” Though she looked younger than Yoshihiko, she was more confident and sure of herself than he was. “And it is through

my own will that I choose not to do anything my uncle wouldn't wish for."

That was why she wouldn't force Yoshihiko to do anything and why she tried to keep Kimiko and Ryuuna as safe as she could.

"You can choose to obey Yonabari if you want. I won't fault you for it, and I'm sure my uncle would understand your choice. It's not wrong of you to cling to what life you possess. We all have things we can't give up on."

She likely knew that what she was doing was foolish. Confining Yoshihiko in some hidden place would be the best thing she could do for Jinya. But she chose not to do that and seemed proud of her choice.

"I'll come again to hear your decision. Goodbye." She left gracefully, despite their unsettling conversation. She seemed effortlessly able to take the harder path to see her will through.

Yoshihiko respected her resolve, but he could not match it.

"...I'm sorry. But I can't shake my fear of death."

Ashamed of himself, he simply hung his head and stood there.

Eventually, Kimiko arrived.

"Kimiko-san... If it were a matter of life and death, could you bring yourself to trust me?"

"I could. I trust you, Yoshihiko-san."

Interlude:
The Demon's Day Off
Food in the Taisho Era

SEPTEMBER 2009.

Modori River High School in Hyogo prefecture wasn't particularly known for its academics or extracurricular activities, but it had better facilities than most schools in the area. It had three school buildings—Buildings A, B, and C—and a special fourth one. The cafeteria on the first floor of Building A was fairly sizable. The walls had a white base, and there was a large window that let the sun shine in, giving the place a sense of cleanliness. When lunchtime rolled around, the room filled with bustling students.

"What'd you order, Jin-kun?"

"Croquette curry."

"Ah, should've known. You're a real croquette guy, huh?"

Jinya occasionally ate at the cafeteria, and today he ordered croquette curry. He could always rely on school food to give generous portions for a cheap price.

His lunch partners differed from time to time. Sometimes he would have a rowdy lunch with the boys, and other times he would eat while listening to someone's problems with the occult. Most of the time, though, he ate with Miyaka and Kaoru.

"Huh. You know, I've never really thought about it, but you eat Western food all the time, don't you?" Kaoru cocked her head, seeming mystified by Jinya's order of curry. She'd known him since around the time school started (though he'd known her for a bit longer), so she was somewhat familiar with his circumstances and seemed to find it strange that an elderly man over a hundred was ordering non-Japanese food like curry.

"Now that you mention it, he eats sweets like it's normal too." Miyaka thoughtfully brought her index finger to her lips.

"Right? You're not forcing yourself to eat modern food, are you, Jin-kun?"

The two of them seemed to think the food of Japan's past consisted mainly of fish, with azuki-bean-based treats for desserts. They gave him kindly worried looks, concerned he might be forcing himself to consume the foreign foods of the modern world. Their worry was unnecessary, of course.

"Not at all. I'm fine with Western food. In fact, curry's been around since Meiji times. A man of my age is probably more familiar with it than you guys."

The girls balked and looked wide-eyed at one another, eliciting a chuckle from him.

"I remember there was even an article that recommended eating curry with things like sea urchin and seaweed. Curry miso soup was also a thing for a while." Feeling in the mood, he began to talk at length. He often talked about the old world with the girl in the library, but occasionally rambling about the past to these two wasn't so bad either.

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"What a drag..." Ikyuu muttered under his breath, sounding bored out of his mind.

He joined Eizen's camp because the old man was plotting to overthrow the Taisho world, and he figured he would find plenty of opportunities to fight all he wanted. But expectations often exceeded reality. They were stuck preparing for the next clash, leaving Ikyuu with odd jobs like gathering fodder for Eizen to consume or protecting Furutsubaki. This wasn't what he'd signed up for.

He knew these things were necessary in the grand scheme of things, but he was frustrated nonetheless. And so he drank. Eizen had no orders to give him for the time being, so he sat on the veranda and knocked back drink after drink even though it was midday.

"Drinking so early?"

Here came one of the sources of his frustrations.

He looked to the side to see a woman approach, then grimaced. It was already vexing enough that he couldn't let loose and fight like the demon he was, but being stuck with babysitting a newly born demon only further frustrated him. He felt as though all the annoying chores were being foisted onto him.

He sighed, the smell of liquor heavy on his breath. Something about that made her smile for some reason. He felt even more irritated in turn and lost the mood for drink. "The hell you want?"

"Oh my. Am I not allowed to say hello?"

She had short hair and seemed like an animated sort of girl. But her voice was soft and icy throughout, in disharmony with her appearance. Her age should have been in the mid-teens, but her short height and small build made her look even younger. She was the fourth demon in Eizen's service, Furutsubaki, the featureless demon Ikyuu had protected up until now.

The only thing he knew about her mother, Magatsume, was the little he'd heard here and there. Supposedly, Magatsume was a demon god and the leader of some demons, or something like that. She must have been quite the menace for the spirit hunters. Ikyuu had some interest in her as a fellow demon who was behind the times. Furutsubaki showed no interest whatsoever in her own mother, however, and instead served Eizen.

"Drinking this early in the day reflects poorly on our master, Eizen-sama. You could do with some more self-awareness."

"Self-awareness, huh…" He wanted to say that someone without any was the last person he wanted to hear that from, but he held back.

Ikyuu was not fond of the current Furutsubaki. Eizen had fiddled with her mind and forcibly gave her the appearance of Saegusa Sahiro. Not a trace of what Furutsubaki should have been remained in her. Not her mother's emotions, nor what had once been a part of her mother's heart. All had been taken from her, and she didn't even know it. Ikyuu found her simultaneously pitiable and vexing.

"So you consider yourself self-aware, then?" he asked.

“Of course. I’m conscious of the fact I was born for Eizen-sama’s sake.”

Ikyuu was an old-fashioned demon who worshipped strength and believed dueling with one’s life on the line was the greatest thing one could do. That was why he couldn’t accept Furutsubaki, a demon who had forgotten who she was. He was willing to protect her like he had before, but he couldn’t help but dislike her on a personal level.

“Well, aren’t you something special.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to imply something, but you serve Eizen-sama too, do you not?”

“I guess.”

“Then please at least hide your discontent while you work.”

“Discontent? I’m not discontented ’bout nothin’.”

His current lack of freedom was annoying but tolerable. However, the feeling of trying to grasp something only for it to be just out of reach was frustrating.

“I would hope so. I’d rather us be on good terms, seeing as we both pledge loyalty to Eizen-sama.”

She smiled without a trace of doubt about her loyalty. Ikyuu was put off and a bit sorry for her, knowing her faith was a sham. But he had no intention of telling her the truth. A man who found pleasure in killing had no right to tell someone else how to exist.

“Sure, sure. I’ve got no interest in infightin’ for no reason. Still can’t stand that Yonabari scum, though…”

“Oh my. But I’m glad to hear at least the two of us won’t be at odds.” She tossed him a small yellow box. He caught it and made a face.

“The heck’s this?”

“Milk caramels. Eat these instead of day drinking if you’re so listless. Consider it a token to represent our newly kindled camaraderie.”

She left with a sarcastic grin on her face, and he opened the box to find it full of bite-sized square candies.

In year thirty-two of the Meiji era (1890 AD), there was a tiny confectionery in an unassuming alley of Tokyo that began to make Western sweets like marshmallows, chocolate creams, and these still-sold-to-this-day milk caramels. At the time, however, the caramel candies made according to the original American method did not sell well, so the confectionery tried changing the process to account for the tastes of the Japanese. As a result, in year two of the Taisho era (1913 AD), they came out with a new milk caramel product. In the following year, they were packaged in the small yellow boxes that have since remained iconic, even in the modern Heisei era. They were a big hit that have remained unchanged over time.

Many of the Western sweets eaten in modern-day Japan—such as chocolates, cookies, marshmallows, and much more—became mainstays around the Meiji and Taisho eras.

“Sweets, huh?”

Being a demon of old, Ikyuu had had little to do with sweets throughout his life. He had no interest in newly released sweets, and the same should have been true for a demon like Furutsubaki who had only recently gained a sense of self. And yet, she somehow knew what milk caramels were.

He found it odd for a moment but quickly pieced things together. Furutsubaki had absorbed that young human girl, so that was probably where the knowledge came from.

Something about that bothered Ikyuu. Furutsubaki was neither a daughter of Magatsume nor Saegusa Sahiro. She was none of what she should be. He felt she was a little like him, someone who lacked the freedom to carry out his wish. Perhaps the irritation he felt for her was nothing more than the pot calling the kettle black.

He scoffed in annoyance, then reached into the little box. Figuring it would be a waste to toss out what was meant to be a token of camaraderie, he took a piece and popped it into his mouth.

“...Too damn sweet.”

The new era just wasn’t for him. Milk caramels didn’t pair well with liquor at all.

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Foreign influence spread throughout Japan during the Meiji and Taisho eras and brought about a great transformation. The industrial sector flourished, urban transport was established, mass entertainment like motion pictures and magazines became commonplace, and the country's food culture took a great leap forward. One major example of development in food culture was the emergence of Western food.

"Red, yellow... Food's so colorful these days. Talk about fancy."

"Sheesh. You sound like an old man, Izuchi."

"Stuff it. You're older than me, aren't you?"

Izuchi and Yonabari were splurging a bit on lunch at a café in Asakusa. They had ordered omelet rice, which was steamed rice wrapped in a thin layer of fried eggs with ketchup on top. It was the same dish as the modern omurice, but in the Taisho era it was still called by its old name, omelet rice. A meal with such vibrant yellow and red hues was unusual for the time. Izuchi was a little bewildered by it, and he prodded the food with his spoon as though to check if it was real.

"Try it. It's good," Yonabari said.

"Right."

In year seven of the Taisho era (1918 AD), simple food halls began to appear in Tokyo. These were predecessors to the cheap restaurants that would later be seen. These food halls were public institutions that began in Kanda and then were installed in Kudan and Honjo before spreading all over to places like Asakusa. A set meal for breakfast would cost only ten sen, and lunch and dinner were fifteen sen. One could get a plain noodle meal for ten sen, paying at most only five sen more for toppings. It was a good way to get cheap meals, being a government-run institution.

Many look back on the Taisho era as a prosperous time, and there were in fact a number of people who found their fortunes in this age. However, poverty was actually quite widespread in urban areas, leading to events like the Rice Riots. No matter the era, there

is always economic disparity. Food halls were established to help the poor masses obtain cheap meals.

But even these food halls now had things like bread with jam and butter, coffee and milk, and more on their menus. Western culture had simply penetrated that far.

“Hm. All right, this omelet rice thing ain’t bad,” Izuchi said. “But it’s tiny for somethin’ that costs so much. This won’t be enough to fill me up.”

“Wow. You’re seriously demanding more when I’m treating you? That’s ballsy.”

“Don’t act like it’s not coming out of Eizen-sama’s pocket either way.”

Several years after food halls were established, Tokyo reached around thirty thousand restaurants in operation. Many of them served easy-to-eat meals like rice curry, pork cutlets, croquettes, and other such Western foods that had been given a Japanese spin. There was even a popular Taisho era song that went, “The wife’s making croquettes again today. Please let it be something else tomorrow!”

In fact, croquettes were so popular that potatoes, once considered a luxury vegetable, became a staple of the Japanese diet. Croquettes were so well-liked as a side dish that they were even more expensive than beefsteak for a time.

Western food was generally quite pricey. To gorge on it on someone else’s dime and then complain like Izuchi did was quite ballsy indeed.

“I’m surprised you can eat this stuff like it’s nothin’,” Izuchi said.

“Huh? Uh, I guess I’m used to it since I come here all the time?”

“That’s not what I mean. You’re trying to flip the Taisho world on its head, right? It’s weird how you still eat and wear modern things.”

The demons gathered under Eizen were supposed to be those who hated what the Taisho era represented and wanted to change it. It felt wrong to Izuchi that Yonabari was enjoying a Western-style lunch despite that.

Yonabari didn't seem to understand what Izuchi was so worked up about; they wore a confused look on their face. "I've liked tea since way back, but coffee's not bad either. Ooh, and ice cream. Summer has changed forever with ice cream. Yeah, there's a lot to appreciate in the new world."

"If that's how you feel, then why'd you join Eizen-sama?"

"I've told you before, haven't I? I'm just venting." They smiled unashamedly and kept eating their omelet rice. The way they held their spoon showed how used to Western dining they were. Izuchi felt like he understood them even less.

Yonabari declared the Taisho era their enemy and yet enjoyed it to its fullest. Izuchi couldn't help but be exasperated by their half-assed nature.

"I'm different from you and Eizen-san that way," they said. "It's true I've been tossed aside and trampled by this Taisho era, but I don't care enough to want to upset the world or anything like that."

They rested their elbows on the table, a fake-looking smile on their face and their gaze wandering.

"I'm not invested enough to want revenge. I didn't really lose anything important enough to want any. I'm not the type to bear a grudge either; I'd rather live my life happy and free."

Their tone was cheerful and easygoing, but Izuchi couldn't bring himself to say a word. He could feel something dark hidden behind their bubbliness.

"But this new era's shown me how empty I am, and I don't quite like that. That's why I vent. If I can annoy this world back a little bit, that'll be enough for me."

"Yonabari, you..."

"Aha ha, how'd we get here anyway? C'mon, let's eat before the food gets cold."

The oppressive mood vanished immediately as the flippant, gender-ambiguous demon went back to their usual self.

Izuchi quickly forgot the unease he felt flare inside. He looked at the menu again and read over the various unfamiliar Western dishes it listed. If time could make Japan change to such an extent,

then perhaps the strange worry he felt was nothing at all in the grand scheme of things.

“We’ll have our work cut out for us again soon,” Yonabari said. “We’d better eat up while we can.”

Eizen’s preparations were almost complete. There was no time to waste on sentimentality.

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Castella, konpeito, honeycomb toffee, tamago bolo—these were all considered to be Japanese sweets, but their origins were well known to be European. Missionaries who came to spread Christianity brought with them Western spirits, castella, caramel, bolo bread, konpeito, and more, and they were shared as luxurious foreign wonders to the Japanese. Of course, only those with power could get their hands on these goods at the time. Western sweets wouldn’t become widespread until modernization in the Meiji period.

Cakes became a well-established sweet relatively quickly, with many varieties being sold starting in the ’40s of the Meiji era. Cream puffs and éclairs were considered cakes as well and went for around four sen apiece. For reference, red bean bread cost only one sen around that time. Four sen was pricey but still within the means of many people.

With the arrival of the Taisho era, large corporations began producing cream puffs, éclairs, chocolates, cocoa, and much more, making them even more affordable. Getting cake and coffee at a café became a normal, commonplace thing for people in the city.

“Heya. I brought the sweets.”

Akitsu Somegorou visited the Akase home, locally known as the Hydrangea Mansion, with a parcel in hand. Being nobility, the Akase could regularly eat luxury sweets that commoners couldn’t easily afford. However, there was one treat that the young daughter of the Akase family—Kimiko—had particularly pleaded for.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“Naw, it’s no trouble at all. I’ve got somethin’ I wanna talk to ya about anyway.”

“Later. Lady Kimiko is currently waiting. Please, do come in.”

The servant clothes Jinya wore looked surprisingly appropriate. Jinya would forever be the soba restaurant owner in Somegorou’s mind, but he was getting used to seeing him like this.

Jinya led him not to the servant’s quarters but into the main building’s parlor. Kimiko and Ryuuna were already waiting there, eagerly anticipating Somegorou’s gift.

“Hello, Akitsu-sama,” Kimiko greeted him.

“Heya, missy. I brought the sweets I promised.”

“Wow! Thank you so much!”

Somegorou opened the package he brought, revealing a castella dough sweet that sandwiched yokan paste. Known as Siberia cake, it resembled a traditional Japanese confection, but it was actually made and sold by bread bakeries using the residual heat of ovens. This sweet had remained popular all the way from the Taisho era to the Showa era, and it was even said to be the most sought-after sweet by children during the early Showa years.

“Well? Does it meet yer expectations?” Somegorou asked.

“Absolutely,” Kimiko said, nodding repeatedly. “It looks wonderful, doesn’t it, Ryuuna-san?”

“...Mm?” Ryuuna didn’t seem to see the allure.

Siberia cakes were relatively expensive, but they weren’t the kind of luxury sweet that a well-to-do girl from a noble family would seek out. Somegorou found it a little strange that Kimiko was almost jumping for joy over such a thing.

“Ya like ’em that much, huh?” Somegorou said with a look. “Don’t mean to be rude, but wouldn’t an affluent girl like ya be used to things a bit more fancy than this?”

“That’s not the point, Akitsu-sama. Siberia cakes are ‘in vogue’ right now.”

“In *what* now?” He scratched his head, confused.

With a wry grin, Jinya said, “She means they’re the current trend.”

Siberia cakes trended in the Taisho era because their use of so many eggs caused people to regard them as high-class items. As such, coffee houses and milk halls often served them. A famous writer was even quoted as saying, “Spending one’s time at a milk hall and drinking milk coffee with a Siberia cake is what’s in vogue these days.”

In other words, Kimiko was after a stylish experience, not the Siberia cakes themselves. Being a girl with a keen interest in popular trends, she wanted to take part in some form since she couldn’t visit a milk hall herself.

She giggled giddily and said, “I’ve already asked the servants to prepare some milk coffee for us. Please, feel free to join us, Akitsu-sama.”

With everything prepared, she got into the mood and started acting like she was one of those stylish modern women. She killed time with Ryuuna, who was sitting on the parlor’s sofa with her, as she waited eagerly for the milk coffee to come.

“Yer a bit of an odd girl, aren’t ya?” Somegorou turned to look at Jinya. “Say, why not just take her to a milk hall yourself if she’s this interested?”

“Are you out of your mind?” Jinya shot the idea right down. Many milk halls were fronts for brothels. As Kimiko’s caretaker, he couldn’t let her near such uncouth places.

“Sheesh, talk about overprotective… Whoa, wait, what’re *you* doin’ here?” Somegorou yelped. Out of nowhere, Himawari was suddenly sitting with Kimiko and Ryuuna on the sofa. She should have seemed right at home among them given her youthful appearance, but knowing she was a demon only made her stick out like a sore thumb.

“Excuse me? I’ll have you know I was properly invited by Kimiko-san as well.”

“That’s right. It’d be a waste not to share this experience with everyone,” Kimiko said.

The girls looked at one another and smiled. Such a thing should have been heartwarming, but Somegorou only felt a

headache coming on. He put a hand to his forehead and sighed. “I feel rather exhausted all of a sudden…”

“You *are* getting on in years,” Jinya said.

“Oh, shut it.” A hundred-year-old demon was the last person he wanted to hear that from.

Jinya shrugged, then gave Somegorou a discreet look. Somegorou nodded back, and the two left the room together. Then Jinya’s air changed from that of a kind caretaker to that of a demon.

“There was something you wanted to talk about?”

“Right. Some strange things are happenin’.”

Somegorou hadn’t come by just for the fun of it. The Siberia cake was only an afterthought he had picked up while he was investigating various locations.

“I’ve looked around everywhere but haven’t found anythin’. There haven’t been any lesser demons attackin’ lately, and the number of rumors ’bout missing people have gone down.”

He had hoped to find a clue leading to Eizen, but his search ended up being nothing more than a stroll.

“I see. Thanks.”

“It feels weird to get thanked for turnin’ up empty-handed. How’s things on yer end?”

“The same. Nothing. It looks like they’ve pulled a fast one on us.” Jinya’s gaze sharpened with annoyance.

“You got an idea what’s going on?”

“Perhaps. Remember how we always used to be attacked by demons when we were investigating? They always came alone or in pairs, and no matter how much we searched the area, nothing came of it. Those demons were most likely there to waste our time.”

The demons they encountered weren’t there for any particular assignment. They were only there to attack whoever came by. Their purpose was simply to make them think something greater was going on.

“So we were sent on a fool’s errand. But didn’t we already account for the possibility they were just tryin’ to waste our time?” Somegorou was clever enough to expect that much. They had

looked into things fully accepting the possibility they were only being made to tire themselves out.

Jinya shook his head with an expression as stiff as steel. “There were a lot of times where the places the demons attacked didn’t line up with the rumors. The rumors were varied too. Some of them mentioned signs of resistance were left behind and others said people disappeared without a trace. I thought there wasn’t a consistent pattern, but maybe there were *multiple* patterns going on.”

Somegorou finally understood what Jinya was getting at. “Ya mean more than one person was goin’ ’round, doin’ what they pleased?”

“Right. While we were distracted, Eizen’s underlings—and Himawari—took action.”

Somegorou sighed. “My head’s startin’ to ache…”

At any rate, the disappearances and the demon attacks had both completely stopped. Eizen’s camp had clearly finished their preparations.

“So what? You gonna chastise Himawari while she’s here or somethin’?”

“No need. I doubt she would do anything that’d be bad for me. In fact, revealing her schemes might backfire on us all.”

“Ya sure do trust her.”

“Trust? Hardly. I understand her, that’s all.”

And Somegorou understood Jinya well enough to know he wouldn’t explain further. To change the mood, he adopted a more uplifting tone and said, “Welp, we’ve ended up back on square one—waitin’ for the other side to make their move. No sense worryin’ ’bout what we can’t control. Whad’ya say we drink coffee?”

“Sounds good. Coffee’s perfect for a guy like you who can’t handle liquor, huh?”

“Yer really never lettin’ that go, are ya?”

The cherry blossom liquor cup Jinya had bought for him never did get used. That saddened him a bit, but liquor wasn’t the only drink meant for adults anymore. The bitter memories of the past

could be washed away with coffee now. One might say that spending the afternoon in such a way was “in vogue” these days.

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As he talked to Miyaka and Kaoru in the cafeteria, Jinya recalled things he would rather stay forgotten. Back then, he had not just been one step behind Eizen but Yonabari as well. There were a lot of things he could’ve done better, but it’d be a waste of a lunch period to grumble about it, so he brought the topic to a close.

“...And that’s the gist of it. Western food and sweets have been around for a surprisingly long time.”

The two girls were fairly surprised. They had no idea that modern foods like curry, beef cutlets, steak, sukiyaki, shortcake, chocolate, gum, candy, and more had all been around since Meiji and Taisho times.

“So basically, whenever someone is complaining about how old-fashioned Japanese sweets are, we can tell them the Western sweets they eat might be even older?” Miyaka said.

“Oh wow, I didn’t even think about that.” Kaoru laughed.

The two of them seemed to enjoy hearing Jinya talk about the past.

“There’s a surprising lot you might not know about the past. Your parents and grandparents were once young, and they probably chased the trends of their time. Ask them about it if you have a moment. You might hear a funny story or two.”

Jinya knew Miyaka’s parents from when they were younger. The thought of their daughter pestering them for the embarrassing memories of their youth amused him a little.

“I’ll ask them when I get the chance, then. Anyway, I’m glad to hear you’re all right with Western food.”

That seemed to have weighed on her mind because the school menu consisted mostly of Western food. It was honestly nothing short of a miracle that such a kind girl came from her father.

“Thanks. I’ll admit, though, some of the earliest Western things I tried did surprise me quite a bit at first.”

“Like what?”

“Well…like shaved ice, for example. During the summer in Edo times, ice was a luxury only a few members of the upper class could enjoy. It scares me to think a kid can now buy some with their allowance.”

A shaved ice treat cost five hundred yen at most now. It was hardly a luxury item. But that only became feasible after the ice-making industry began in Japan. Jinya would probably never forget the joy he felt when he first tried tea with ice in the summer.

“Shaved ice, huh… Hey, Miyaka-chan! Let’s get some shaved ice with everyone on the way home since it’s so hot today.”

It was September. Summer had passed, but the harsh heat still lingered. Kaoru’s attention shifted when shaved ice came up.

“Wanna come too, Jin-kun?” she offered.

He’d been soft on her ever since the whole candied apple thing. Turning her down wasn’t even an option to him now.

Miyaka agreed to the idea as well, and other classmates came by who wanted in. Jinya may have been past his hundreds, but his life in high school was quite enjoyable.

He watched the boisterous young teens fondly. If someone asked him whether he preferred the present or the past, he wouldn’t be able to answer. Life was full of conveniences now, but there was something to be said for the inconveniences of the past too.

For the time being, though, he planned to indulge in the now-cheap luxuries of the present. Eating shaved ice in the lingering heat of September as he reminisced about the past didn’t sound so bad.

Bygone Pasts and Unchanging Gardens

1

ONE AFTERNOON, Jinya was hard at work tending to the Akase home's hydrangeas. Kimiko watched as she relaxed in the garden. Ryuuna had been proactively helping Jinya with his work lately, leaving Kimiko to wait for them off to the side. Ryuuna couldn't do anything too important yet, but she was still happy to be praised for her help.

At first, Kimiko did not like watching the two of them get along. Jinya was supposed to be her caretaker, but he spent all his time looking after Ryuuna instead. However, her feelings of jealousy faded as she got to know Ryuuna, and the two quickly became friends. Since Kimiko wasn't allowed to go to school, Ryuuna was the first female friend she had made. The two of them both smiled more than they used to thanks to their newfound friendship.

Though they knew it was only the calm before the storm, things were peaceful.

"Jiiya, did you really used to be my mother's attendant?"

Jinya was checking for damage on the hydrangea petals when he stopped and turned to look at Kimiko. The two girls, whose appearances were so similar, looked like sisters sitting side by side. Ryuuna still didn't talk much, but she seemed to get along well with Kimiko in her own way.

"Not quite, strictly speaking. But yes, I was treated as such."

"So you've always been here?"

"No. Not until your father, Michitomo-sama, found me."

Ryuuna scowled. She didn't like Michitomo much. In fact, he was the only person she hadn't warmed up to in the Akase estate.

"Don't make a face like that, Ryuuna. He may be a bit twisted, but I owe him a lot." Jinya patted her head, making her scowl fade. He treated Kimiko similarly from time to time. He likely saw little difference between them all. Both Kimiko and Ryuuna, and probably even Shino and Michitomo, were children to him.

“If anything, we’re the ones who owe you,” a new voice chimed in.

“Indeed.”

“My wife has always been fond of Jinya, though. Enough to make me a little jealous, even.”

With perfect timing, Michitomo—the head of the Akase household—had appeared together with his wife Shino. There was a nine-year gap between the couple. Their age difference used to be quite apparent when Shino was still a child, but now it was less so.

“Oh. Mother, Father.” Kimiko greeted her parents.

Ryuuna happily walked up to Shino, of whom she was fond. But she made a big detour to avoid Michitomo, something that made everyone chuckle.

“Seems like I’m still hated,” he said wryly.

“It’s what you get for being so shady,” Jinya said.

“Hey, what’d I do to deserve that treatment from you too?” Michitomo complained. He seemed to be enjoying himself, though. Jinya’s banter was proof of their long bond.

“The two of you are really close, huh?” To Kimiko, their bond seemed like one between friends, not master and servant. Michitomo was the only person on the Akase estate to whom Jinya spoke so bluntly; it was like they had their own special connection.

“I guess we’ve known each other for a long while,” Michitomo said. “I’ve scratched his back, and he’s scratched mine. I’m sure I’ve caused him a lot of trouble over the years too, but I’d like to think I’ve paid it back and then some.”

“I’ve never once felt troubled by you, but I’ve been in your debt more times than I can count,” Jinya said.

“Glad to hear it. I’m sure I’ve made more than a few demanding requests of you, though.”

Jinya nodded nostalgically. “I won’t deny that. But you’re nowhere close to Shino-sama in that department.”

“Now, now. There’s no need to delve any further into that, Jiiya.” In a firm tone, Shino interrupted the two. She had been quite

the tomboy in her younger years and had run circles around Jinya and Michitomo both.

“Mother used to cause you trouble? Really?” Kimiko asked.

“Oh, yes,” Jinya said. “Shino-sama was positively overflowing with energy in the old days. She slipped out of the home with Michitomo-sama quite a few times and constantly caused us trouble. I still remember that time with the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka…*”

“I think you’ve said enough, Jiiya.” Shino raised her voice slightly, not wanting her shameful past to come to light. That incident had come to a peaceful resolution, but she wanted the topic to stay buried.

Stifling his laughter as best as he could, Michitomo giddily tacked on, “Ah, right, *that*. To think Shino, of all people…”

“Oh, would you two cut it out?”

“Hey, I’m only joking. There’s no need to pout.” Michitomo relented, but it was too late. Kimiko and Ryuuna’s curiosity was piqued.

“Jiiya, just what *did* happen?” Kimiko asked, leaning closer together with Ryuuna.

“Girls, please…” Shino pleaded, her usual ladylike grace gone. She looked to her husband for help, but he didn’t know whether to take his wife’s side or his daughter’s and got flustered.

Such minor worries were a sign of peaceful times. Things were so calm that a yawn wouldn’t feel out of place. Relaxed, Jinya wistfully thought back on the past.

Twenty-two years ago, Michitomo and Shino became betrothed. Shino had only been eleven at the time, so their marriage was obviously one of convenience. Seiichirou had picked Michitomo as a suitor, deeming him to be a capable man and passing him the position of family head without any trouble.

In a perfect world, that would’ve been the end of it. But Eizen tempted Seiichirou with the promise of eternal life, inadvertently dragging both Jinya and Michitomo into the situation.

The men met a full four years before the betrothal was decided. It was year twenty-nine of the Meiji era (1896 AD) when they first encountered the cannibal.

***

Kimizuka Michitomo's father worked for Nippon Yusen, a large shipping corporation. Hence, Michitomo received a proper education from childhood and lived a life that lacked nothing. His household was a new-money family, bearing no noble rank, but they were far wealthier than the many ruined nobles of the time. He knew he was a part of the upper class, but he also understood that there was a divide between him and those of noble birth.

Those around him saw him as an earnest young man who knew how to relax. He was gifted despite only being from new money, and he stoked the envy of many sons from more reputable families. At the same time, he earned the admiration of the common-born and was generally well-liked by his instructors for his studiousness. But occasionally he wished he could escape all the expectations and cut loose.

One night, he went out to town with his high school friends. He wasn't sneaking off to the red-light district, though. He just wanted to walk the dim streets alongside adults and feel like he was a part of their world. He figured the liquor and women could wait until he was of age and could clean up after his own messes.

He and his friends enjoyed their night out, then split up to go home. But there was something about the world they were ignorant of: The vestiges of Edo times lingered into the Meiji era, and the night still belonged to the spirits.

Michitomo saw a faint figure in the darkness of night—a woman, alone. He was concerned to see a woman alone at this time of night, then got a better look at her and froze in his tracks. She wore all-white robes, and her face was covered in white powder makeup. Her hair was madly disheveled, and in her hand she held a sickle. Traces of rust and a wet, dark-red gleam along the blade made it clear what it was used for.

It was hard to believe she was a prostitute. The air she exuded was far too chilling, sending shivers down his spine. He couldn't bring himself to look away from her, and he had the misfortune of seeing her face.

He saw a ghastly smile, impossibly wide, that stretched from ear to ear.

“Wh-wha…?”

This night was his first encounter with the creature known as a spirit.

His body, paralyzed with terror, finally unfroze. Before the monster could fully turn toward him, he ran and hid behind a nearby building without looking back. It didn’t seem to have seen him. He stifled his breath and prayed for the slit-mouthed woman to disappear.

The spirit, a demon, looked around as though searching for something. He heard its hoarse chuckle grow in volume and realized it was drawing closer. His heart felt like it would leap out of his chest, but it seemed to pound in slow motion. The air became tense with fear, and he didn’t dare breathe. He pleaded for it not to come his way. He made himself as small as possible but still heard its breathing draw closer.

And then he heard the sound of flesh being torn. Fresh blood sprayed forth.

“…Huh?”

No matter how long he waited, the slit-mouthed woman didn’t come. Confused, Michitomo peeked out of his hiding spot and saw something unbelievable.

“What in the world…?”

With her arm still raised to bring down her sickle, the woman had been cut in two at the torso. She was dead. Her corpse exuded a white vapor as it faded into nothing, like it had never been there. Eventually she became no more than mist, and not even her robes or sickle remained.

It was year twenty-nine of the Meiji era. Modernization had caused the number of spirits to dwindle, and few believed they even existed anymore. The reason for this lack of belief was simple: Most people who had been alive in Edo times had already passed away, and the majority of the current adults were born in the Meiji era.

Stories of spirits were laughed off as nothing more than tall tales told by the elderly.

The following day, Michitomo told his classmates what had happened that night, but their reaction was lackluster.

“Come on, in this day and age?”

“At least try to make your tall tales interesting.”

“You’re still going on about that, Kimizuka-kun?”

“See? Just another new-money brat.”

Nobody believed him, but he knew that he had encountered a spirit that night and that something had slain it. But all proof of what happened had vanished when the slit-mouthed woman’s corpse faded away. All he had was his memory of the events. Perhaps he would be better off thinking the whole ordeal was a dream. He tried to return to his normal life, telling himself it was for the best.

“Hey, Michitomo! Did you hear?”

But his classmate told him something that made a chill run down his spine. One of the friends he had gone out with that night never came back. Michitomo wanted to believe they had simply run away from home, but he knew it couldn’t be that simple.

Behind his father’s back, Michitomo went out to town again that night. His classmate had forced him along so they could look for their missing friend.

Tokyo still had many buildings that evoked memories of Edo. It would be a while yet before modern structures came to line the streets.

“What’ll we do if something comes along again?”

“Oh, don’t be a chicken. Come on, let’s start looking.”

They visited the place they’d been the previous night but found no leads, so they left the downtown area and came to a darker street. They were surrounded by traditional Japanese homes, and a pale moon hung in the sky. There was an eeriness there that couldn’t be found in the daytime. Michitomo walked along fearfully, with last night’s events at the forefront of his mind.

By no means did Michitomo possess a strong sense of justice. He had the same good morals as most people, but if something unfortunate happened to someone else, he would say, “That’s rough, but oh well,” and quickly move on with life. His family were non-noble, new-money upstarts, so he was used to feeling powerless. He wasn’t looking for his missing friend tonight out of a desire to do what was right.

“Hey, come on. Let’s go home already. We shouldn’t be out this late.”

The frightful events of the prior night still remained with him, but he couldn’t stop his classmate from embarking on the search and didn’t want to make him do it alone, so he tagged along. He wanted to leave right that instant, but his conscience prevented him.

“Shut up, coward! I’ll look for him alone if I have to,” his classmate said. His pace began to speed up, even though he had no real destination in mind. Eventually, he left Michitomo’s sight. Unable to just leave his classmate behind, Michitomo chased after them…and ran into disaster.

“You shouldn’t be out playing this late, child.”

It was through sheer coincidence that he encountered the cannibal, Eizen. Eizen was being indiscriminate with his targets that night, not caring what fodder came his way. Michitomo didn’t run from the man, however—the old man had his classmate by the scruff of the neck.

“I had thought I was done for the night. But since you’ve already seen me, I suppose I’ll have to devour you as well.”

Eizen’s right arm pulsed, and the body of Michitomo’s classmate began to shrivel like a vegetable that had been drained of its water content. Gradually, he was consumed by Eizen’s right palm.

Michitomo understood the same fate awaited him. He was so afraid that his feet wouldn’t move. Not a single piece of flesh, skin, or bone was left behind. After finishing his meal, the old man looked at Michitomo, seemingly wanting more.

“What good fortune. I shall devour your life as well.” Eizen moved with speed unthinkable for his old body and closed the gap

between them.

Michitomo knew no way of defending himself. He had known there were things in the night that he wasn't meant to meet, and yet he had gone out and had the misfortune to encounter something. The fate that awaited him was clear.

He heard a sickening crunch from up close, but he felt no pain. Eizen's arm, moments from taking Michitomo's life, had been lopped off. Belatedly, a spray of blood gushed forth.

"Ngh?!" Eizen responded wisely to the unforeseen development, righting his stance and retreating without a pause.

"Nice moves. I see you're not just some fiend, old man."

But he was too slow. Michitomo heard a sound like wind being cut, then saw two swords, reflecting dull starlight. In just a single strike, the old man's head had been sliced clean off.

Everything happened so fast that Michitomo didn't even have time to be surprised. A man calmly stood before him, having seemingly appeared out of thin air. He wore messy-looking Western attire and held two unembellished swords. Slowly, Michitomo pieced together that this man must have cut the old one down.

"Uh... Huh?" Michitomo looked blankly at this hunter of spirits, blood trickling down his blade, in disbelief of the fantastic nature of all this.

"First that woman last night, and now this. You seem to have a way of attracting spirits, young man."

It was through nothing more than genuine coincidence that Kimizuka Michitomo met the man known as Kadono Jinya.

2

TO TELL THE TRUTH, Michitomo was no more than an afterthought at that moment. With two swords in hand, Jinya remained focused on the fiend he had cut down.

"Good grief..." Eizen still lived, speaking even after his head was lopped off. He reached down and picked his head up, then reattached it to his neck. He was a monster in the truest sense.

Michitomo let out a slight shriek of terror. People were supposed to die when they lost their head, but the old man still lived. Or would it be better to say he had revived?

Unlike Michitomo, Jinya remained calm and observed carefully. Michitomo was fortunate that Jinya had been so greedy then.

“Is that regeneration? No, maybe resurrection? Either way, you seem like a demon worth devouring.”

Jinya had seen his fair share of inhuman monstrosities and felt no fear of Eizen. He had intervened not to save Michitomo but because he wanted something from Eizen himself.

In the span of ten years, Jinya had made himself infamous as the “Demon Eater.” He’d left Kyoto behind after losing Nomari and Somegorou the Third. The Streetwalker helped him see that the path he chose wasn’t wrong, but he still lamented his powerlessness. So he sought out demons to consume and take power from. There was nobody to stop him anymore. He was alone, and Kaneomi made no effort to get in his way. Jinya saw Eizen not as a monstrosity to be slain but as prey that could enable him to grow stronger.

“A demon dares brand *me* a demon? I am human,” Eizen spat.

“You don’t seem very human.”

“Perhaps not, but I’m still nothing like you repulsive creatures. More importantly…” The old man’s gaze sharpened, and the air seemed to thicken with tension. Jinya was very familiar with the emotion Eizen bore. “Why do you possess…that *thing* there?” Deep hatred filled his eyes. His gaze wasn’t directed at Jinya but at one of the swords in his hand. “I entrusted Yatonomori Kaneomi, the demonic sword of *Spirit*, to Kazusa. Why does one such as you have it?”

The thought of a demon wielding the sword given to his daughter, who had been slain by a demon, seemed to disgust him. Though Eizen was now a monster of a man, the hatred he showed was very human.

“Kaneomi?”

“It’s as you suspect, Kadono-dono. This man is Nagumo Eizen-sama, Kazusa-sama’s father.”

“…I see. What a coincidence.”

The Nagumo were a line of spirit hunters with a rich history. A young woman named Nagumo Kazusa had received a Yatonomori Kaneomi blade from the father she dearly respected, but she had been slain.

That was what Jinya had learned of Kaneomi’s history in the events before and during the battle with the Night Parade of a Hundred Demons. He’d thought that was all in the past, however, and had since thought little of it.

“Demonic sword of *Spirit*, why do you obey a demon now, one of the very beings that slew your prior master?” Eizen asked.

“Kadono-dono is no enemy of Kazusa-sama. In fact, he is the very one who saved her soul.”

“Her soul, you say?”

But just as Kaneomi had her own story, Eizen had his. His daughter was slain by a demon, the world of Meiji outlawed swords, and the need for spirit hunters waned. The demonic blade-wielding Nagumo family who had fought on behalf of people for so many years were denied their identity and lost their place in the world. The end result was the Nagumo Eizen of this day.

“Then I ask you, Demon. What became of Kazusa?”

“I’ve never met her myself, but I slew the demon that took her image,” Jinya answered.

“Hoh. Her image, eh? So the one who slew Kazusa was a minion of Magatsume.”

Jinya grew wary at the mention of his mortal enemy. Firmly, he asked, “How do you know that name?”

“How could I not know the name of the demon who creates demons of her own? I may not comprehend her aims, but she is still a spirit who threatens the world of man. Hence, she is an enemy of we Nagumo.”

Magatsume and Suzune were no longer the same person to Jinya. He felt nothing at all hearing someone speak ill of her.

“Just as you are our enemy,” Eizen said. In his hand was a short kodachi blade. “Demons are to be slain. So long as I am a man of

the Nagumo, they will be my enemies. Of course, I am not without a personal grudge against you."

"Eizen-sa—"

"Silence. I care not for the words of one who aligns themselves with a demon." The old man's arm moved like a whip. Such movement wasn't derived from the basics of swordplay; it was a swing that utilized the full elasticity of his muscles. Age hadn't affected the fluidity of his movement; the full effect of Eizen's years of constant training could be seen in every step.

That's why it was such a shame. Withered as he was, he was no match for Jinya. Jinya possessed the ever-youthful body of a demon and had spent close to eighty years polishing his swordplay. He blocked Eizen's strike, locking blades with him.

"But it was not Kadono-dono who slew Kazusa-sama!"

"That's enough, Kaneomi," Jinya softly said. "He doesn't want to hear our excuses. And I don't care to give any to a man who's about to die."

Jinya shoved, forcing Eizen's blade upward. He brought his elbow close to his body and stepped in, making a short swing and cutting Eizen's chest with Yarai before stabbing Kaneomi into his left side. He felt the blade pierce Eizen's heart, then twisted his wrist to crush it completely. He pulled the blade out, leaving a small, gaping hole in Eizen's chest.

"Was that it?" Even after taking what should have been lethal damage, Eizen taunted Jinya and counterattacked.

Jinya hadn't expected his attacks to be anywhere near enough, having already seen Eizen live after being decapitated. He parried with a sword, dropped low, and rammed Eizen full force in the solar plexus with his left shoulder. Even though Eizen had built up his body with training, he was still an old man and his bones were brittle. The impact alone should have been lethal.

And yet he didn't die. Eizen got up again, a broad smirk remaining on his face.

"That makes three times... Heh heh. You're not too bad. But you're nowhere near taking my life."

The old man wasn’t regenerating but reviving. He’d counted out three, so there was apparently a limit to the number of times he could revive. He’d most likely stocked up his revivals through some wicked means.

Jinya glared at Eizen. Confident in his superiority, the old man approached him recklessly.

Jinya readied his blades and stepped forward with his right. Eizen responded by sinking low, leaning greatly forward as he darted ahead. Once he was close, he kicked off the ground with his right leg and swung upward with the force of a coiled spring. The old man had skill worthy of his family’s epithet, the Nagumo of the Demonic Blade. Jinya retreated half a step, narrowly dodging the upward strike as he simultaneously released a downward blow of his own, crushing Eizen’s skull.

Even that wasn’t enough, though.

Jinya cut and tore into the man’s head, face, neck, and chest, but Eizen just laughed at all his efforts. He waited for a moment when Jinya’s blades were both digging into his flesh, leaving Jinya vulnerable, and aimed a strike at his heart.

Jinya thought about using *Indomitable* but quickly realized he wouldn’t make it in time. The man’s thrust was too fast, so instead he twisted his body as best as he could. He was unable to fully dodge, however, and Eizen’s sword dug into his shoulder.

The fame of the Nagumo seemed to be deserved. Eizen was used to fighting with demons. He knew the only way to kill one was to cut off its neck, pierce its heart, or crush its head.

Jinya forced his blades out of Eizen’s body and put distance between them. He’d come out unfavored in their exchange.

“You shouldn’t underestimate the power of a human.” Eizen made a sickening smile with his face still split in two. He boasted despite being cut up all over. Even a demon would have long died from such injuries. His continued taunting of Jinya under such circumstances clearly showed he was abnormal. Eizen could no longer be called human anymore in any capacity.

“You still think yourself human? Laughable,” Jinya said.

“I do, though. What you see is nothing less than the very strength of the human soul. I bear the lives of many humans, after all. You saw it earlier yourself, did you not?”

Jinya remembered the sight of Eizen absorbing the young man he held by the scruff of the neck. Eizen’s ability greatly resembled Jinya’s own.

“That, too, is a product of my research. Magatsume’s daughter has served her purpose well.”

Jinya didn’t know how Eizen had drawn information out of a daughter of Magatsume, but he’d likely used unsavory means. The result was this reviving ability of his. Jinya grasped the true nature of his power. At its core, it was the same as his own.

“My ability is known as *Assimilation*,” Eizen said. “By consuming other humans, I can make their lives mine.”

By stocking up on the lives of others, he made himself immortal. He was something more repulsive than any spirit, a cannibal who devoured his own kind in exchange for power.

“So you cannibalize your own, huh…” Jinya said. He himself was no better in that regard and had no right to think ill of Eizen.

Jinya had killed and devoured many demons up until then. His ability, *Assimilation*, allowed him to take the abilities of demons he consumed for his own. It was different from Eizen’s *Assimilation* in that consuming humans wouldn’t give him their lives, but their abilities were undoubtedly of the same nature. Jinya couldn’t help but think, though: What would he do if he had Eizen’s ability for himself?

He dashed away the thought just as quickly as it came. He’d already reaped many lives to get where he was, and so the answer was clear. He and Eizen were birds of a feather. The ugliness he saw in the old man was a mirror of his own.

“Don’t make me out to be some kind of monster,” Eizen said. “As a spirit hunter, I’ve fought with my life for the people. It’s only right that they offer me their lives in return.”

“…I see.” Jinya filled his lungs with night air, then exhaled hot breath all at once. *Dart*—with inhuman speed, Jinya closed the distance to Eizen and unleashed a powerful overhead strike

diagonally across his torso. “I’ve changed my mind. There’s no point in devouring you. I’ll kill you here,” Jinya said.

“Oho, how frightening. But *can* you?”

Their fight was a frustrating, violent struggle. Jinya was superior in terms of strength, but he had no way to truly finish Eizen. Their exchange continued for a long time, but it ended inconclusively.

“Hmph. So my strength is not enough. You leave me no choice but to retreat,” Eizen said.

“You’re turning tail and fleeing?”

“I simply do not wish to waste any more lives than I already have. I’ll take that sword back from you another time.”

Jinya had no particular reason to chase after Eizen. He did feel irritated, but in truth, Eizen was just some cannibal to him and nothing more. Eizen seemingly had no reason to insist on continuing their fight either, and he readily fled when he realized he was at a disadvantage. However, the two understood at the time that another clash between them was inevitable.

That was how Kadono Jinya and Nagumo Eizen first encountered each other, greeting one another with a duel right off the bat.

***

And then there was Michitomo. He now had an unfortunate connection to a cannibal and would soon begin a close, long-lasting partnership with a strange demon.

“W-wait!” Michitomo firmly grabbed the shoulder of Jinya, who had started to leave without even acknowledging him. He tried to force Jinya around, but the latter wouldn’t budge no matter how hard he pulled. Still, he didn’t want him to leave, so he held on to him. Eventually Jinya relented and turned around.

“Do you need something?”

“Huh? Uh, well, you saved my life! At least let me thank you.”

“No need. Saving you wasn’t my aim, anyway.” Jinya started to leave again.

“H-hey, wait! Please!”

Michitomo felt no fear toward Jinya, a stranger who had fought a monster unhesitatingly. He saw how he had scowled, albeit slightly, when the old man said he consumed humans, and was certain somebody who got angry over such a thing couldn’t be that bad.

“Let me at least treat your wounds or something! There are tons of things I want to ask you too,” Michitomo pleaded.

Jinya stopped in his tracks. He seemed to think for a moment before looking back at Michitomo and nodding reluctantly.

Michitomo led Jinya back to his home in Nihonbashi. Being new money, the Kimizuka house stood out as far more luxurious than the neighboring homes. The two snuck in, taking care not to be noticed by Michitomo’s family or the servants. After leaving Jinya in his room, Michitomo went around and got everything he figured could be used for first aid.

“Does this look like enough?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“So, what are you anyway?”

Though Michitomo genuinely intended to give Jinya first aid, his total lack of medical knowledge meant Jinya ended up tending to his own wounds instead. That being said, all Jinya did was haphazardly pour disinfectant onto the bandage dressing he used to stop his bleeding. His wounds were deeper than Michitomo had first thought, but Jinya showed no sign he felt the pain and kept a flat expression throughout. The two didn’t seem that far apart in age, and yet Jinya seemed far more used to a life of combat.

“I’m somebody who hunts spirits. That is all.”

“But, um, aren’t you…?” Michitomo avoided saying it outright, but Jinya understood what he meant and nodded.

The cannibal had spoken the truth. Jinya, too, was a monster of sorts, but that didn’t worry Michitomo. Jinya’s identity didn’t change the fact Michitomo owed the man his life.

“Oh, right. I need to repay you somehow.”

“Like I’ve already said, I don’t need your gratitude.”

“Please. It’s my creed to settle debts I owe quickly. No matter how you feel, you really did save me. I would feel bad if I didn’t return the favor somehow.” Michitomo insisted he repay the debt for his own sake.

Jinya finally relented. “Fine. Then let’s call it even with some liquor.”

“All right! I’ll go swipe some from my father’s stash real quick.” Michitomo knew his father had many bottles of high-grade liquor around, completely for decoration. He left the room, then returned with two whole whiskey bottles he proudly showed off.

Jinya took one and drank it straight from the bottle. Even though it was high proof, he drank half the bottle in one go.

“You’re insane.” Michitomo stared in blank amazement, but quickly pulled himself together and faced Jinya directly. He’d told the truth when he said he felt indebted to Jinya, but the biggest reason he’d brought Jinya back was because he wanted to ask him things.

Jinya had a feeling that was the case. He slowed his pace and looked over at Michitomo, as though saying he would answer whatever questions Michitomo had until the liquor was gone.

“Um, so…” After a few moments passed, Michitomo hesitantly spoke up and began to explain his reasons for being out in town so late that night. He told Jinya about the slit-mouthed woman he encountered, his friend who disappeared that same night, and how the old cannibal man attacked him and his friend. He mentioned how his classmate who had been searching with him had been devoured, but the friend who disappeared the previous night was still missing.

“Is there any chance that monster was only active tonight…?” Michitomo knew it was hopeless, but he asked anyway because he didn’t want to accept things.

“It’s unlikely. The only reason I started chasing him is because I heard multiple rumors of people disappearing.”

Reality was often disappointing.

“…I see. Then—”

“Nagumo Eizen isn’t the sort to let a target escape. He’s likely already devoured your friend.”

No tears came. It wasn’t that Michitomo didn’t feel sad, but things were simply too sudden for his emotions to process. Two of his friends with whom he had enjoyed the nightlife were dead. His heart felt heavy in his chest.

“Is that all?” Jinya asked.

“Yeah. Sorry for wasting your time.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jinya took another drink.

Michitomo felt tired and uninclined to move, so he simply watched Jinya drink like he had earlier. Jinya remained as expressionless as ever, drinking heavily but showing no indication he particularly liked the taste.

“How is it? Not a fan?” Michitomo didn’t particularly mean anything by the question. He just felt a bit curious. And yet, he saw a cloud pass over Jinya’s expression for the first time.

“Good question. I think I prefer the taste of the liquor I used to drink.”

“Why’s that?”

“…I don’t quite know myself.” He finished the rest of the bottle in one go, fixed his clothes, then stood up.

“Leaving already?”

“Yeah. Thanks for the drink. Try not to go out too late anymore.”

“You sound like my father. But yeah, I’ll be careful. I’m not that eager to die.” Michitomo was hesitant to see Jinya go. With the cannibal still on the loose, he was worried about his own safety, but at the same time, he was also grateful to Jinya for saving him and thought it was a waste to just let things end between them like this. In as light of a tone as he could manage, he said, “Say, why don’t you stick around as my bodyguard? That way I can still party at night without worry.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. I’m not suited for that kind of work.”

“Why’s that? You look strong enough.” To Michitomo, Jinya seemed like nothing less than one of the spirit-slaying heroes in those ancient tales.

Jinya smiled sadly. “My past experiences have shown me I have no talent for protecting others. I’m sure I’d only cause you grief.”

Leaving those words behind, he departed. He left no trace at all that he had even been there, save for an empty bottle.

Michitomo looked at the other, still unopened whiskey bottle and muttered, “What the hell… You could’ve at least taken it with you.”

Two years passed, and Michitomo turned nineteen. After he graduated high school, his father got him a job at a bank, where he ended up passing the days. As he was busy and didn’t have much time to hang out with his friends anymore, he grew estranged from them.

Two years felt like both a short and a long span of time. Though the mentality of his student days persisted, he learned to carry himself more like an adult. His speech grew more mature and talk of marriage began.

“You’ve got to be kidding me…”

He sighed and looked at the picture once more. The girl pictured was cute, of small build, and had neat posture. She was the noble daughter of a baron, and her classiness could be felt through her photo. Michitomo wasn’t all that eager to marry her, though.

“A ten-year-old is out of the question.”

It didn’t matter how cute she was—a child was a child. Something like this might have been okay in Edo times, but it didn’t fly in the Meiji era. Michitomo wanted to tell his father a thing or two for bringing him such a ridiculous marriage offer.

The girl’s father, Akase Seiichirou, was an acquaintance of Michitomo’s father. Michitomo had been to their home a number of times. Seiichirou had no son of his own and wanted a son-in-law to whom he could entrust the family headship, but many candidates were only after his fortune. That was why he took interest in the

earnest and capable Michitomo. It was Seiichirou who brought up the idea of Michitomo marrying his daughter.

Michitomo's father was overjoyed at the offer and quickly moved things along. He even suggested the two be engaged this year or the next, even though they had yet to even meet.

Although Michitomo was not at all eager about the idea, he wasn't strongly opposed to it either. He was flattered Seiichirou had chosen him, a new-money kid, and it would be good for his father if he became a noble. The only problem was what Akase Shino thought about marrying a man almost ten years older than she was, a decision that was likely made for her.

"But I guess that's just what it means to be a noble..."

Even if Michitomo refused the offer, a different man would likely be prepared for her. In the end, he decided to go with the flow. Marriages of convenience were by no means rare. If they were to find fault in anything, it could only be the fact that he was born to the Kimizuka family and she was born to the Akase family. They both lived wealthy lives as children of new money and nobility respectively, so it was only right they put up with some difficulties in turn.

A month later, it was arranged for him to meet Akase Shino.

"Seiichirou-sama! I'm glad to see you are in good health."

"I could say the same."

The Akase home was a Western-style building with white walls, even more elegant than the Kimizuka home.

"Thank you for coming, Michitomo-kun. Let me call my daughter over."

Looking back on it now, Seiichirou's circumstances were still normal then. The two of them could have perhaps had a normal relationship as father- and son-in-law if things had gone differently.

Prompted by a look from Seiichirou, a servant left to fetch Shino. A while later, there was a hesitant knock at the door of the parlor room.

"Come in."

"Pardon my intrusion."

An adorable young girl came in. She was short and seemed like the timid sort, with lovely, neat black hair that reached her back. Despite her shy appearance, her smile was bright. She felt very different from the picture Michitomo had received.

“Um, I take it you’re…?”

“Akase Shino, yes.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, not at all.” He could tell she was doing her best to behave courteously, despite her young age.

“I see. Michitomo-sama, will you be living with us here in this house?”

“Well… I suppose it looks that way, yes.”

“Wonderful. Why don’t the two of us talk?”

Michitomo’s father and Seiichirou appeared to have something they wanted to discuss, so they left the two to their own devices and headed out of the parlor.

Michitomo wasn’t sure what to do, so he just followed Shino out to the garden on her invitation. They held hands as they walked around. Even though she was going to become his wife, there was nothing remotely romantic to be found between them given her age. He felt more like a guardian looking after a child than anything else.

“…Are you not against the marriage?” he hesitantly asked.

“Not at all. I’m a lady of the Akase, after all. And marrying at my age wasn’t so uncommon in the past, or so I’m told,” she answered with a smile. She didn’t seem to just be putting on a brave front. “Besides, if things fall through with you, I’ll just be set up with another man,” she added. There was something that seemed mature about her merry smile.

“I see. You’re awfully strong.”

“…Strong?”

“I mean it as a compliment.”

“I understand. Thank you very much.”

Shino was no pitiable noble girl being married off against her will for her father's gain. She was a bright and cheery child who understood her circumstances despite her young age and felt a strong sense of duty to uphold her responsibilities.

"One day, I will become your husband. You may not believe me since we've only just met, but I swear I'll strive to be a man who can match your strength. Shino-san, will you take me as your spouse?"

"...Of course. Gladly."

He had no way of knowing what went through her mind as she answered, but his heart was already set on her, so he anticipated no problem with their marriage. Things were almost perfect.

But then a man he'd never expected to see again appeared.

"You two seem to be hitting it off well. How heartwarming."

"Wh-what?!" Michitomo exclaimed in surprise. His body trembled and broke out into a cold sweat the moment he saw the old man's face.

"Eizen-sama? It's been a while." Shino greeted the old man familiarly.

Michitomo stepped forward as though to protect her. He wanted to flee right that instant, to tell the truth, but he mustered what courage he could manage.

"I heard Seiichirou's girl was getting married and thought I'd come by. I hope you'll forgive me. I didn't mean to intrude on the two of you."

Though two years had passed, Michitomo still remembered the old man. There was no way he could forget the man who had consumed his friend. He was the undying monster from that night.

"Oh, where are my manners? The Akase are a branch family of the Nagumo. Even now, we still keep in touch." The old man grinned ghoulishly. "I am Nagumo Eizen. Nice to meet you, future son-in-law of the Akase."

Michitomo felt as though a knife had been placed against his throat. His vision went dark.

Starting that night, Michitomo began heading out into town again. He knew the night belonged to the spirits, but after investigating newspapers and rumors, he still dared to visit the locations of unresolved incidents. He wasn't without fear, but he had no idea what else he could do.

However, his search turned up no results, so he resorted to his last option. Sparing no expense, he paid to put up a message on a number of community bulletin boards: *Come pick up the liquor you left behind, you fool of a demon. You can manage that much, right?*

He waited a few days, but the man he was waiting for didn't turn up. He had left his window open and placed the whiskey bottle he'd pilfered from his father a while ago on the desk, but it seemed to be all for nothing.

Encountering Eizen again had made Michitomo recall that night. There was nothing he himself could do against that monster, but maybe that man he had met would be willing to help. He knew he was grasping at straws but had to try anyway.

"Damn. No luck, huh?" he muttered with a sigh.

The Akase apparently began as a branch family of the Nagumo, a noble family with good standing and history. However, they were in decline now, while the Akase were flourishing in the Meiji era. Michitomo had to wonder whether the Akase were more sinister than they first appeared, seeing as they had ties to Eizen.

Michitomo was unnerved by Eizen, who acted like a human when he interacted with Seiichirou and Shino. But he didn't want to throw out the marriage negotiations—he feared Shino might be devoured by the old man.

Jinya had no obligation to come. It was highly probable he'd ignore Michitomo. There was no knowing if he was even still in Tokyo.

Praying he would come, Michitomo looked out his window.

"It's been a while. I've come to pick up that bottle like you've asked."

Michitomo's prayers were answered. With a tearful smile, he made a noise unbecoming of a man.

“I’ll be in your care, then, Michitomo-sama.”

“Same here, Shino-san.”

“We’re married now. Please, just call me Shino.”

Michitomo and Shino were engaged not long after, and at Seiichirou’s request, Michitomo moved into the Akase home early. That was fine by Michitomo, of course, since he would be able to stay by Shino’s side this way. He couldn’t be with her around the clock because he had to learn things from Seiichirou, but he arranged for her to still be protected even when he wasn’t around.

“I’ve brought a servant from the Kimizuka home with me, Shino. He’s a very skilled gardener, and I’m sure he’ll do well here. Seiichirou-sama has already approved of him, so I wanted to take the opportunity to introduce him to you now, if that’s all right.”

Shino nodded. Michitomo left and returned with a young man.

“My name is Kadono Jinya. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Shino.”

That was how Kadono Jinya came to be the Akase family’s gardener.

As it turned out, Jinya had already been pursuing Eizen at the time and knew of the Nagumo family’s ties to the Akase. Forming a connection with the Akase worked out well for him as it presented opportunities to find leads on Eizen.

“I need information on what the Nagumo are up to. Can you lend me your help?”

“What timing. I was just going to ask for your help on that same matter.”

Michitomo wanted to protect Shino, while Jinya wanted to uncover Eizen’s schemes and steal away his Yatonomori Blade with the ability *Demon Wail*. Though their goals were different, they had the same enemy.

“Um, Jiiya-san, is it?” Shino asked.

“Not quite. My name is Jinya. *Jinya*,” he repeated.

“Aha ha, what’s wrong with ‘Jiiya’? You *are* an elderly manservant, after all.”

“Shut up, Michitomo.”

“Hey, hey! I’m your employer, you know!”

“What do you mean? Starting today, my new employers are the Akase family.”

“That’s… Well, you’re not wrong. But aren’t you swapping sides a little too quickly?”

The two men’s newfound sense of solidarity now that they had a common enemy made some of the awkwardness between them fade away. Shino giggled, enjoying their banter.

“Yes, indeed. I think ‘Jiiya’ will do just fine. I look forward to having you, Jiiya.”

And so, after a series of coincidences, the strange demon who could do nothing but grieve found a place to settle down.

Though she’d lived a meek life at the Akase home for many years, Shino became somewhat willful after becoming engaged to Michitomo.

“Jiiya, we have an emergency! Apparently there’s this new foodstuff called *gyuudoon* that’s the talk of the town!”

“*Gyuudoon?* Oh, you mean Yoshidaya’s gyuudon? I’ve tried it before.”

“Have you? Well, we must go there at once! Vamos! Vamos!”

“I’m sorry, Lady Shino, but I’m still working. Could you please climb off me?”

She didn’t hesitate to bother him while he worked, a habit that continued even after she grew older, sparking rumors that they were lovers.

“You don’t read books much, huh?” Michitomo said to Jinya.

“I guess not. Never been that interested.”

“You should try reading this when you get the chance. Who knows, you might get hooked.”

Michitomo greatly enjoyed talking with Jinya, a much older demon who was still green in many ways. Jinya was strong on the outside but fragile on the inside. Hoping to give him some sense of peace, Michitomo recommended several books from the study. Jinya struggled to get through them since he wasn’t in the habit of

reading. It certainly didn't help that Shino would bother him, but he was steadily growing accustomed to that.

Michitomo and Shino started to encounter spirits occasionally, perhaps because they were so close to Jinya, a demon. One of the more memorable instances was the incident with the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*, a peculiar ukiyo-e painting. The whole event ended as a simply wonderful experience for Michitomo, but it had been quite an ordeal for Shino. The rather *embarrassing* memories of what happened would haunt her well into adulthood.

"Wow. So many hydrangeas."

"They're your favorite, right?"

"They are. Thank you, Jiiya."

Shino kept complaining about Jinya speaking formally with her, so he stopped doing it. He prayed she would one day gaze out on these hydrangeas together with her children, then her grandchildren. Though he was a demon unable to move past what he had lost, he had grown able to wish for such a future.

"Yeah, looks like liquor just ain't for me. I'm more of a black tea guy."

"A shame."

Michitomo finally learned what Jinya had meant that night he drank in his room. To Jinya, drinking was something done together with another person. He would drink with a friend on a moonlit night and occasionally have his daughter pour for him. Having grown used to that, he'd come to feel as though the liquor tasted wrong when he drank alone.

As Michitomo wasn't much of a drinker, he only occasionally drank with Jinya, but the latter would sometimes enjoy a pleasant drink alone. Perhaps the liquor had regained some of its flavor for him.

Shino was fond of Jinya. As her husband, Michitomo wanted to spend time alone with her every now and then, but whenever he tried to suggest they do something together, she would insist Jinya join them, and he just couldn't say no to the beaming smile on her face. The one to console him at such times was always Jinya. The

two of them might both have been children in the eyes of the almost-hundred-year-old demon.

Their days were eventful. Once, Jinya showed off the soba-making ability he'd cultivated a long time ago. Michitomo was surprised to learn he had skills beyond fighting. On another occasion, the three of them snuck out to a festival using Jinya's *Invisibility*.

Shino caused them no shortage of headaches, but the two men enjoyed themselves through all the ups and downs. Time passed all the more quickly since their days were filled with joy. Before they knew it, Shino grew up, and she and Michitomo fell in love and had Kimiko.

But that had been part of Eizen's plan.

"The gall of him… He's not even trying to hide it," Michitomo grumbled to Jinya. It was the night of the day Kimiko had been named.

"What's wrong?"

"The name that old man gave Kimiko is what's wrong! Damn it. If only I were in a position to say something…"

The name Kimiko meant "rare sacrifice." Their child deserved better.

"Eizen never ended up making a move for Shino, huh? The timing must not have worked out."

"Yeah. But he has the demonic sword of *Demon Wail* now, and his sights are set on Kimiko… Whatever he's planning is coming together."

Jinya wanted to make quick work of Eizen, but the man had stopped visiting the Akase home ever since Jinya became the family's gardener. Seiichirou had apparently gone to visit him a few times, but Eizen showed no opening for Jinya to make a move. It wasn't clear whether Jinya could kill him to begin with anyway. They had no choice but to wait things out.

"But he's finally given us a lead by coming here. I eavesdropped on his conversation with my father-in-law. They

mentioned doing something once Kimiko turned sixteen… I'm not sure exactly what, though."

"So we still have time. Not that we can exactly take it easy," Jinya said.

"Right. Unlike with Shino, we know for sure that he'll be targeting Kimiko. The thought of someone trying to harm my little girl has me more pissed than I've ever been. Is this what it's like to become a father, Jinya?" Michitomo asked. He knew Jinya had had a daughter once. He gritted his teeth and looked at Jinya with strong resolve. "I have a request to make of you. Please, protect Kimiko for me. I'm powerless, but you have the strength to guard her."

In a weak voice, Jinya replied, "I told you before, didn't I? I have no talent for protecting others. The things dear to me always slip away. I can't make such a promise to you."

"You can be rather cold sometimes, eh?" Michitomo scoffed, deliberately making light of what Jinya said. "If what's dear to you really always slips away, then are Shino and I nothing to you?"

Jinya never said it himself, but Michitomo knew how the man felt about them. The two had grown close enough for him to understand Jinya's feelings.

"I didn't think so. Not everything you care about has left you. You're a better protector than you think." Michitomo recalled the night they had first met. He had been nothing more than a frightened child then, but now he had grown into a man who could look Jinya in the eyes like this. He narrowed his eyes and said, "You've always been rather adverse to the idea of protecting others."

"…Yeah, I won't deny that."

"Then let's compromise. Promise me you'll at least protect Kimiko until Eizen is crushed. Then once you succeed at that, I want you to let yourself believe you can live for someone else's sake." With heart, Michitomo added, "You don't have to live with your head down just because you've lost so much in the past."

What Jinya needed was affirmation, somebody else to tell him that he could be proud of his actions and live happily despite all he had lost. The only one who could give him this affirmation wasn't

family or someone who fought alongside him, but someone weak who had relied on his protection, like Michitomo.

“…You’ve gotten glib, Michitomo.”

“You think so? Maybe I just understand what makes you tick better now.”

“Ha.” The tension left Jinya’s shoulders. Quietly but firmly, he said, “You’re right. I’ve been using the past as an excuse. But that stops today.”

He couldn’t stand in place forever. That wasn’t an entirely new revelation to him, but one he had forgotten and only just remembered again.

“Here and now, I swear to protect your and Shino’s child, even if it means I must walk through hell and back.” Contrary to his fierce words, Jinya smiled gently.

Michitomo looked up and saw the soft glow of moonlight. Jinya had finally lifted his head to begin living life again, and that made Michitomo unbelievably happy.

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The much-younger Michitomo revealed a lot to Jinya about himself. Through him, Jinya understood he hadn’t really been afraid of failing to protect someone—he’d been afraid of finding a new happiness to protect. He feared that moving on would be the same as replacing the happy days he had spent with Nomari and Somegorou. But using the past as an excuse to keep one’s head down was no different than belittling the things one used to value. He should have known that, but it took him so long to remember. Growing old could be such a troubling thing.

And so, we return to the present as the girls pestered Jinya to tell them what the whole *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* incident was. He watched nostalgically as Shino lost her ladylike grace and grew flustered.

“Ah, right. So, back then…”

“Jiiya, please. I’m begging you.”

The promise Jinya made to Michitomo still held to this day. He'd joined hands with a daughter of Magatsume, his mortal enemy, and gained the help of an old acquaintance—all to protect Kimiko over these sixteen years and to repay what he felt he owed to Michitomo. Michitomo himself probably didn't know just how much their promise meant to Jinya.

"Sorry, Shino. I took my joke too far."

"That you did. Goodness."

"Don't pout like that. I won't know what to do." He patted her head. She smiled, and her mood seemed to improve. They were used to exchanges like this, but Kimiko wasn't and she gave them a funny, bewildered look. To her, a young man was patting her mother's head. The actual circumstances aside, things certainly *looked* peculiar.

"This is quite the strange sight," Kimiko said.

"For you, I'd imagine so, Lady Kimiko," Jinya said. "You see Lady Shino as your mother, but to me she'll always be adorable little Shino, no matter how old she gets."

"Oh, Jiiya." Shino turned bashful.

Michitomo smiled broadly at them, feeling as though he had returned to the past. "Watching you two makes me feel a little jealous. Jealous of you both, I mean."

"Michitomo-sama, what are you saying?" Shino said.

"There's no need to be jealous. You're still adorable too, Michitomo," Jinya said.

"Ha ha! Okay, stop. Seriously, you're embarrassing me!"

Kimiko smiled as she watched the adults play. At her side, Ryuuna seemed to be slightly turning up her lips as well.

The hydrangea garden was full of warmth. Back in Edo times, hydrangeas were disliked because they were seen as a symbol of treachery and fickleness. But perhaps fickleness wasn't so bad if it was man's fickle nature that allowed once-disliked flowers like these to become so beloved. Jinya hoped that Kimiko and Ryuuna would grow into adults and one day understand the beauty of this garden.

The gentle, almost sleepy sunny afternoon passed. The fact that he could admit his happiness to himself was proof he had moved on from his past. However, their momentary peace was coming to an end.

Eizen was finally making his move.

3

EVEN NOW, JINYA would occasionally think back to particular moments in the past. He'd lost so much. He wanted to protect all he held dear, but everything always seemed to slip through his fingers.

"Ofuu…and you too, Jinya-kun. Listen up real quick."

Back when Tokyo was still known as Edo, Jinya had lived in a cheap row house in Fukagawa. There had been a soba restaurant not far away that he went to practically every day. In his last moments, the owner of the soba restaurant, made a request to his dear daughter and Jinya.

"You two will live long lives, so I'm sure there will be days when you've lost so much you don't think you can go on. You'll think of the past, feel hurt, and find yourselves thinking you hate everything.

"But you know what? Even if you're sad for a while, there will always be somebody you can smile with again in the future. I want you two to treasure the present moment as much as you can, precisely because your lives are so long.

"That's what I wish from you both."

Jinya had no idea then, but with all the time that had passed, he had begun to realize something. Though he had lost many things, they were still with him in a sense.

"Hey, Jinya… Humans are stronger than ya think."

He recalled the words of his close friend, fearless even in his last moments.

"I may be retirin' here, but I'll still be leavin' some things behind. I've done my part. I'm satisfied.

“So ya can spare me the waterworks. Instead, go do your *part. I don’t need anyone seein’ me off in my last moments or anythin’.”*

“This ain’t goodbye…”

From his friend who peacefully accepted his death, Jinya learned the importance of passing on one’s will and thoughts. He didn’t think he would forget Somegorou’s last words for the rest of his life.

“Jinta. Become a man who can cherish his hatred."

“But will you still be my family anyway?”

“Goodbye, Jinta. I truly loved you.”

The many words left to him by family, as well as the warmth they carried, stretched out as long as a river.

“So don’t say it’s all you have left.”

“When you feel hurt, you should just say so.”

There had also been people kind enough to tell him it was okay to stop in his tracks every now and then. Thanks to them, he had been able to move forward again afterward.

And now, he had Michitomo trying to prove that Jinya didn’t need to be held back by his past.

Jinya’s life had been one full of setbacks, but there were many memories he could look back on with a smile. It was thanks to those memories that he had made it this far. In order to continue his journey, he would once more have to reaffirm the value of the many things he’d gained along the way.

It was a dark night with the stars and moon veiled behind thin clouds. The hydrangeas swayed as the wind swept past them and blew through a window that had been left open a crack. The breeze should’ve been pleasant, but instead it felt rough against Jinya’s skin, making him tense. Nights with winds like these never boded well.

“Keepin’ watch?” Somegorou asked as he approached.

Jinya was standing guard in front of Kimiko’s room. Somegorou came up to his side and stood with him in the dark

corridor, both their backs against the same wall. He snuck side glances at Jinya and cleared his throat.

He hadn't always been so hesitant to talk to Jinya. A long time ago now, before he took the name Akitsu Somegorou for himself, Utsugi Heikichi had been a boy who was unable to hide how he felt. He openly bared his hatred of demons and didn't hold back his frustrations over his lack of experience. Jinya had liked the boy's honest, straightforward nature.

"So, where's Ryuuna-chan at? Don't think I saw her come back today." This current Somegorou was different from his younger self. His expression was tense. He was here in the dead of night because they were wary of Eizen making a move. Somegorou hadn't planned on helping this much at first, but he'd reconsidered after encountering Furutsubaki and was now giving Jinya his full support.

"I put her in an acquaintance's care," Jinya answered.

"That one you know from Edo, eh?" Somegorou paused. "Is that really a good idea in this situation?"

They knew of four demons working under Eizen: Izuchi, Yonabari, Ikyuu, and Furutsubaki. But they also had to be wary of Furutsubaki's ability to control humans, as well as Magatsume's technique for creating demons that Eizen might have access to. Splitting up was risky. What's more, if Eizen did make a move, it would certainly be because he believed his preparations for victory were perfect. Jinya only had himself, Himawari, and some number of Himawari's demons. Adding Somegorou to the mix did not change the fact that there was still a great disparity between the two sides.

"I'm sure they can manage," Jinya said.

"Really? You know what we're up against, right?"

They had to consider Izuchi's Gatling gun, Ikyuu's ability, and all the humans Furutsubaki could control. Any one of them would make for a troublesome opponent, but Jinya didn't seem concerned. They may have been strong, but he was confident the acquaintance with whom he'd left Ryuuna could outmaneuver them with ease.

"I'll be blunt. It seems like a bit of a blunder," Somegorou said.

"It is."

Somegorou did a double take.

“Himawari can’t fight,” Jinya continued. “She has some demons with her, but I’m the only one among us who can actually put up a good fight. It makes sense to think that Eizen would use his full force to take back Ryuuna while she’s away from me. Afterward, he could just figure out a way to have Seiichirou bring Kimiko to him.”

There was no reason to try and kidnap Kimiko now when Jinya was protecting her. By all logic, Ryuuna seemed like an easier target.

“But Eizen won’t do that,” Jinya said with utter certainty, “because we have Himawari.”

Eizen had kidnapped a daughter of Magatsume and pulled information from her, so he had to know about Himawari as well.

“Himawari’s ability lets her remotely observe targets she’s set. If she touches someone, she’ll be able to find them again no matter where they go. So long as we have her ability, we can chase after both Ryuuna and Kimiko even if they get taken.”

They already knew Eizen wanted Ryuuna and Kimiko alive, so them being kidnapped would only reveal Eizen’s hideout to them. Himawari might not have Jinya’s strength, but her remote viewing ability was incredibly useful. The fact that Eizen knew about Himawari’s ability made things even more ideal.

“I get it now. If that Eizen geezer’s gonna target anyone, it won’t be Ryuuna-chan, even if she’s on her own,” Somegorou said.

So long as Himawari was around, there was no real point in going after Ryuuna. But his target wouldn’t be Jinya or Somegorou either.

“Right. He’ll attack here first…to kill Himawari,” Jinya said. In order to proceed, Eizen had to rob them of their eyes. “That’s why I made such an obvious blunder. He’ll know it’s bait, but I’m sure he’ll jump at the opportunity regardless. I predict he’ll send sixty percent of his forces to attack the Akase estate and thirty at Ryuuna. The remaining ten percent will be devoted to killing Himawari.”

This was the main reason Jinya agreed to work with Himawari. Not only could she help protect Kimiko, but she would also act as an even higher-priority target that would lure danger away from

Kimiko. He didn't need to worry about her betraying him, and if she died, that would only make things easier for him further down the line. It was a win-win situation.

"I'd forgotten. Yer the kind who'd do *anythin'* to see your objectives through." Somegorou clicked his tongue in irritation. Unlike his broader-minded master, the fourth Akitsu Somegorou disliked underhandedness. But given the situation, he didn't hassle Jinya for it. "Yer read might be right, but don't sleep on the strength of Eizen's forces. Even if they're split up, they might manage to seal you away, take Ryuuna-chan, and kill Himawari. You could very well lose on every front."

"I'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen. Like I've told you before, I've still got a card or two up my sleeve."

Jinya stepped away from Kimiko's room. The atmosphere had changed. Their guests seemed to have arrived, and it'd be rude not to welcome them.

"Somegorou, protect Kimiko for me."

"Don't worry, I'll keep her safe. Though a promise like that doesn't mean much comin' from me..." Somegorou's voice lacked energy. Things hadn't gone well the last time Jinya had tasked him with protecting somebody. Nomari's memories were erased, and the days of peace they'd known crumbled away. Somegorou's failure then still pained him.

"Don't beat yourself up over what happened, Utsugi. I'm grateful to you. I couldn't have entrusted Nomari to anybody else," Jinya said. With a smile, he realized it was thanks to Michitomo, Shino, and Kimiko that he could be so honest here.

"Heh. Well, I'm flattered."

Jinya's words weren't intended for Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth but for Utsugi Heikichi. They were meant to console the child in him still depressed over his small mistake. A light grin formed on Somegorou's face, and a familiar gleam filled his eyes as though he had returned to those bygone times.

"If yer gonna use my old name anyway, ya could at least call me 'Heikichi' instead of 'Utsugi.' I'm yer son-in-law, after all. No need to be such a stranger."

“You have a point there. Ah, what a shame, though.”

“Hm? What is?”

“I wanted to do that thing all fathers do where they try to scare off the boy their daughter brings home. I never quite got that chance with you.”

“Ha, yeah, I’ll pass on that! Jeez…”

It was only meaningless banter, but it removed the tension from their shoulders. Jinya touched Yarai, affixed to his hip. He had given Kaneomi to Ryuuna. Kaneomi should be able to protect Ryuuna with her ability if it came to it.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it, Heikichi.”

“Heh. Ya got it.”

Jinya made for the home’s entrance. He stepped outside and was greeted by a moonlit night. Straining his eyes, he saw shadows dancing in the darkness. Dozens of humanoid figures walked, their eyes lifeless. Many had more arms, legs, and heads than they should’ve. Eizen had the power to both toy with life and control people under his command. This much was well within Jinya’s expectations.

“I’m afraid we don’t accept late-night guests. I ask that you leave for the night.”

Every inch of the garden was filled with the monstrosities. Jinya was already surrounded on all sides. He drew his blade and slackened his whole body. Numbers wouldn’t intimidate him. Far from it: He felt more motivated than ever before.

“Sorry, but I’m afraid we can’t do that.”

A huge demon loomed behind the grotesque crowd: Izuchi. He held a Gatling gun in his hands and stood ready to fight. Gradually, more and more demon minions began to gather.

But even this should only have been sixty percent of their forces. A smaller number should have been sent Ryuuna’s way as well.

Izuchi scanned the area, then sighed as if he was let down. **“Akitsu the Fourth isn’t here? How disappointing.”**

“What’s the matter? Am I not enough for you?” Jinya taunted, but he didn’t get much of a reaction. Perhaps Izuchi took his words as empty bravado. Outnumbered and facing a Gatling gun with only a sword, Jinya had to look like a fool to Izuchi.

“I didn’t say that, but…”

“No, that’s exactly right. You’re no match for us alone.”

A voice picked up after Izuchi’s own trailed off. Jinya watched as a small young woman quietly approached. He realized who she was.

“Saegusa Sahiro, wasn’t it?”

She was one of the young spirit hunters Somegorou had saved at the evening party. He’d only gotten a good look at her face when she visited Koyomiza with Motoki Soushi, but her short black hair and lively personality left a strong impression. However, while the young woman he saw now was the mirror image of Sahiro, this was not the same person. Sahiro’s once strong-willed eyes were now clouded with emptiness and colored red.

“Nay. I am Furutsubaki, subordinate of Eizen-sama.” She made an unfamiliar smile. “Surely you do not think you can fight us alone? Your arrogance will be your downfall.”

“Furutsubaki… I see. So she was consumed, then.”

Like Nagumo Kazusa and Shirayuki, Saegusa Sahiro was consumed by a daughter of Magatsume. But Furutsubaki was different from her sisters in that she had been altered by Eizen. She was now neither a daughter of Magatsume nor Saegusa Sahiro, but a puppet that moved as Eizen willed.

Jinya pitied her, but at the same time he felt relieved. He didn’t have to hesitate at all to kill a mere puppet.

“You have numbers on your side, I’ll give you that,” he said.

There were at least thirty demons there, and Izuchi was already pointing his muzzle Jinya’s way. Furutsubaki’s confidence wasn’t without reason. But if this much were really enough to scare Jinya, he wouldn’t have come in the first place.

“…This feels a bit unfair, but I suppose it is what it is.”
Izuchi’s hesitancy over fighting such an uneven battle showed his

personality well. He took no pleasure in an easy victory. Though he was an enemy, Jinya didn't hate that kind of guy.

"You have to do all you can to win. If anything, this is playing fair."

"You think so?" Izuchi laughed dryly. He sounded more resigned than anything. **"The only thing I wish for is a world where demons can be demons. Yet here I am, fighting with a Gatling gun and a horde at my command, while my opponent stands against me with just a sword. How ironic."**

Though Izuchi lamented the situation, he clearly had no intention of backing down. He supported Eizen in the belief that it would bring him the world he desired. He wouldn't toss that aside for the sake of some stubborn pride.

"Let us begin," Furutsubaki said. "We're only up against one fool who can't grasp reality. This should take no time at all."

The look on Izuchi's face changed as he made up his mind. It was sword versus firearm. By all logic, his weapon was stronger, but he had no intention of letting his guard down. He would not hold back nor wait and see Jinya's move first. He spun the Gatling gun's crank to get the mechanism moving. Bursts of gunpowder ignited as lead bullets rained over the spot where Jinya stood, but they missed. Jinya escaped the line of fire before the volley could land.

"You're mine!" Izuchi immediately started leaning the muzzle over, readying the Gatling gun to fire again.

Jinya managed to dodge the initial bullets, but he had cornered himself in the process. He found himself surrounded by a pack of what looked to be humans modified into lesser demons. Normally he would have cut them down with ease, but doing so now would give Izuchi the time he needed to punch him full of holes like a honeycomb.

The other demons ignored the clamor and creeped closer to the Akase home. Eizen's crude assault relied only on numbers, but it was effective nonetheless.

Cornered, Jinya murmured to himself, "It's been thirty-nine years…"

Izuchi released another round of bullets, aiming to end things. Jinya couldn't dodge this time; he didn't even have the room to meaningfully move. The onslaught continued unabated, stirring up a plume of smoke and dust. Each bullet was a direct hit.

"...So that's it, huh?" Izuchi made a weary sigh as he stopped firing. He'd killed a number of spirit hunters already. Renowned master swordsmen and martial artists alike were all nothing before modern weaponry. Not even the strongest of demons could beat the passage of time. Izuchi knew that fact of the world all too well.

But that was only because he had yet to meet Jinya.

All at once, the demons making their way toward the Akase home were scattered. There had been no explosion or anything; they simply went flying without warning. At least, to Izuchi's eyes that was what happened.

He fixed a glare at the rising plume of dust. He didn't understand what had happened, but there was only one person who could have done it. Soon the dust cleared, and he was shocked by what he saw.

"Call me arrogant if you will, but underestimate me at your own risk. I'm tougher than I look."

Though he'd taken direct hits from all the bullets, Jinya stood unfazed. This wasn't his first time using *Indomitable* in front of Eizen's demons, but it surprised them nonetheless.

"That can't be..."

"You're as much of a monster as the old man."

Furutsubaki and Izuchi's faces both stiffened with shock. Jinya quickly seized the opportunity for his next move.

"...*Invisibility, Jishibari*."

He swung his blade even though he was nowhere close to any target. It looked like he was just swinging at air. A sharp *whoosh* sounded right before several demons were cut down.

"*Flying Blade, Invisibility*. Invisible slashes... Maybe I'll call this one Hidden Blades."

But things didn't end there. He raised his left arm overhead, and four chains appeared. They snaked forward too quickly for the

eye to follow, aiming at a pack of demons. In a blink, five were killed.

"*Dart*, *Jishibari*. Speedy chains… Hmm, I can't think up a good name for this one."

Izuchi couldn't comprehend what Jinya was doing. Staring in disbelief at what he saw, he shouted, **"What…what is this?!"**

Jinya replied with calmness unsuited for a battle, "It's been thirty-nine years since I lost to Magatsume. I haven't sat around this whole time doing nothing."

He had fought furiously only to be squarely defeated, and all the things he'd wanted to protect slipped through the gaps of his fingers. What was lost was gone for good, but fragments of the past still remained in his heart. At least, that was what he had told himself all these years, and he truly did believe it. But his regrets still piled up to no end. Perhaps he'd chosen wrong somewhere. Perhaps there had been a better path. His doubts followed him wherever he went.

Kadono Jinya was a man who had only known failure in the moments it mattered. He lacked something that could solidify his belief in his chosen path.

"I see. So you had a trick up your sleeve."

"That's right. This isn't something I've devoured from another—it's my *own* ability."

Memories of the past flitted through Jinya's mind. The soba restaurant owner told him to be proud that he could look back sadly on the past. His friend taught him of humanity's strength and the importance of passing on one's will. His second father told him to become a man who could treasure his hatred, indirectly acknowledging what was inside Jinya's heart now.

All the things Jinya had lost were what allowed him to keep walking. In their memory he swore to himself that he would become strong, this time for sure. Not with the strength to defeat his enemies or follow through on his hatred, but with the strength to admit that the small things he'd found along his mistaken journey brought him joy. He wanted to become a man who could

move past losing his old happiness and come to treasure the new happiness he discovered thereafter.

That was the moment he gained his ability. A demon's ability wasn't inborn but a manifestation of the heart's unattainable desires. His impossible desire was to remain forever with everyone he knew, struggling and striving together. It was a foolish, childish desire. But it did take what shape it could.

His ability was called *Oneness*. It was perfect for a pathetic man like him who had to rely on other people's aid to keep himself going. It was an ability that would be wasted on anyone else, allowing him to combine the traits of his multiple abilities into one.

Izuchi and Furutsubaki stiffened in front of him, but Jinya had already made up his mind to show them no mercy.

"I can't stand in place forever. I have to move forward...even if it means scattering everyone who gets in my way."

4

WHAT FOLLOWED was too one-sided to be called a battle. Izuchi watched in shock as the gathered demons were easily dispatched, managing to put up hardly any resistance.

Jinya's ability, *Oneness*, was powerful, but his cultivated skills were no laughing matter either.

"Blood Blade, Indomitable."

He bit his left hand and used the blood to make a sword longer than he was tall. Because the blade was made from his fluids, it too was a part of him. He hardened it with *Indomitable* and swung, killing three demons in one go.

Oneness brought cohesion to his many abilities, but there was unity in his techniques as well. He stepped forward and used *Dart* to dash, then used *Superhuman Strength* for only the very instant he swung his red blade full force. His skills brought out the full strength of his abilities. It was using his demon abilities and human techniques together that made him so strong.

“…You really were strong, Tsuchiura. It’s taken me decades to reach where you stood.”

Abilities alone wouldn’t be enough to face Magatsume. In search of greater strength, Jinya had reflected on the martial arts Tsuchiura demonstrated.

Tsuchiura’s ability had been *Indomitable*, which gave him an unbreakable body but left him unable to move. But Tsuchiura activated it only for the instant he was struck, combining an impregnable defense with sharp reflexes. Jinya aimed for something similar.

He used *Dart* to rush in and *Superhuman Strength* for the instant he attacked. Shortening the usage of his abilities to only the very moment he needed them lessened the strain on his body and improved the base efficiency of his movements. The martial arts he’d polished over the thirty-nine years since his defeat were in no way inferior to his new ability.

“Th-this can’t be!” Furutsubaki seemed unable to pull herself out of her flustered state.

A relentless assault from the Gatling gun fired. Smoke spread, threatening to fill their lungs. Izuchi had likely been the favorite in every fight he’d been in, possessing both the powerful body of a demon and his Gatling gun. This was the first time he had known what it was like to be on the losing end.

Jinya dodged the rain of bullets, thinning the crowd of demons as he moved. Nothing seemed to stop him. He was a true demon, relentless and unforgiving, like the ones written of in books and spoken of in tales of old.

“Ha, ha ha…ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Izuchi laughed at the spectacle. **“Ha ha! Damn it, I can’t even hit him! And even if I could, it wouldn’t do a damn thing! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”**

Even though he was so clearly disadvantaged, Izuchi felt no anger or frustration. If anything, he was trembling with delight.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“You bet your ass I am! You’re incredible! Exactly what I aspire to be!”

“I’m flattered, but don’t think I’ll hold back for you just because you said that.”

“Who said I wanted you to?! I’ll kill you here and now precisely because you embody my ideals!”

With a wide grin, Izuchi continued to fire his Gatling gun. Jinya took the red blade in his left hand, longer than he was tall, and threw it at the gun’s muzzle. However, the effects of *Indomitable* vanished from it, and the sword was pulverized.

Even with plenty of training and an ability of his own, the Gatling gun remained a threat to Jinya. But he showed no nervousness or hesitation. Without missing a beat, he began to move.

Izuchi was astonished by Jinya’s strength, but Jinya was harder pressed than it seemed. Using *Indomitable* on himself left him unable to move, so he had to choose his timing carefully. Izuchi seemed to think he was simply indestructible, but that was a gross overestimation. As things stood, Jinya couldn’t let a single unguarded strike land—be it a hit from a bullet or even a scratch from the lesser demons he was thinning out. Izuchi would quickly regain his calm if he learned Jinya wasn’t as invulnerable as he seemed, and that would spell trouble. Jinya had to end the fight as quickly as he could.

“*Falsehood, Invisibility.*” He created multiple illusions of himself while he attacked from a completely different direction.

“D-damn you!” Izuchi sprayed bullets in a wide, sweeping arc. In his panic, he thought it would be enough to just shoot the multiple copies of Jinya that had suddenly appeared—but to his dismay, they were all fake. The real Jinya was hiding with *Invisibility*.

Izuchi froze up when he saw his bullets slip right through the illusions. Jinya took the opportunity to close the distance and reappeared from up close. Izuchi gritted his teeth and pulled his right leg back, directing the Gatling gun’s muzzle toward Jinya.

But the muzzle had been Jinya’s target all along.

“Let’s get a bit flashy with it… *Superhuman Strength*, *Dart*.”

Before Izuchi could spin the Gatling gun’s crank, Jinya’s left arm swelled up with *Superhuman Strength*. He clenched his fist tight

enough for it to creak, then punched with all his might while using *Dart* to speed himself forward.

The sharp sound of metal snapping cut through the air. Jinya's fist reached the Gatling gun before it could fire. Its barrel bent, then snapped from the impact. A single punch had turned the firearm into scrap metal.

"Eeek! M-monster!" Furutsubaki shrieked. Her voice was shrill, as if she were an ordinary young woman. She began to flee as fast as she could, and Izuchi made no move to stop her.

"Looks like your friend has turned tail," Jinya said.

"That's fine. This raid has failed; she can run away if she wants to. I won't run, though."

Though his Gatling gun had been destroyed, Izuchi's will to fight remained. He tossed his broken weapon aside, stepped forward, and—with a rush of wind—threw a punch. The sound of his fist alone showed he was skilled. Though he'd used a Gatling gun, he was also a master of martial arts.

"Is that out of loyalty to Eizen?"

Even without a weapon, Izuchi was strong. The average spirit hunter would be killed by his martial arts. However, it measured up poorly to Jinya. Izuchi clearly had no chance of winning this fight.

"Hell no. I just don't wanna flee like a coward here, even if it means dying!" Fist, elbow, backhand—Izuchi chained his attacks without giving Jinya a moment to breathe.

Jinya smiled lightly and said, "How nice. To think there are still demons like you around in this era."

Once before, Jinya had asked a demon he faced why they killed humans. They had answered it was because they were a demon. Their nature demanded that they pursue their purpose. To them, a demon lived by emotion alone, seeking a purpose worth seeing through and then dying to achieve it.

But such demons were rare these days. Perhaps stubbornly clinging to one's way of life had grown out of style. The sight of Izuchi, someone trying to live like the demons of old even in the Taisho era, was nostalgic to Jinya.

“I am known as Kadono Jinya. Demon, will you grant me your name?” Though they were in close combat, the question left Jinya’s lips before he even knew it. He already knew Izuchi’s name, but hearing it from him directly meant something. It would be a waste to kill him as a mere underling of Eizen. If Jinya were to slay him, it would be as Izuchi, the demon.

“I am Izuchi!”

“I see…”

Izuchi attacked further. Bellowing, he fired a punch at Jinya’s face. Jinya slid his left foot diagonally forward while positioning his left arm against the inside of Izuchi’s own striking arm. With the slightest of movements, Jinya diverted the strike, then used the opening to draw closer and drop his weight, bashing Izuchi’s solar plexus with all his force.

“Grngh?!” With a grunt, Izuchi was knocked away.

Jinya brought Yarai overhead and gazed sharply at Izuchi. “I respect the will you’ve shown me. Farewell, Izuchi. Though you lived in the Taisho era, you were unmistakably a demon of old.”

Jinya didn’t hesitate. In respect for Izuchi’s way of being, he brought down his sword with all his strength.

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…Izuchi fell to the fierce blow. No fear or hatred welled up inside him. He felt only unadulterated joy before he lost consciousness. The Demon Eater had recognized a fledgling like him, who hadn’t even awakened his own ability yet, as a demon of old. His heart burned with a fever that outshone the pain of being cut down.

It had been Izuchi’s belief that spirits had been collectively defeated by the ways of the Taisho era. But here the Demon Eater was, still continuing to live as a demon. He killed with ease, as if he were one of those wicked demons that fought heroes in those archaic stories. Izuchi had thought it was the fate of spirits to fade away with the changing times, but the Demon Eater lived as though he were still in the old world. Being able to face him and earn his

recognition brought Izuchi joy. He may have lost, but he was satisfied.

Izuchi was sure he was dead, and yet he awoke once more. He opened his heavy eyelids and indistinctly saw the night sky above him. The light of the stars seemed blurred, looking more murky than phantasmal.

The Demon Eater was gone, and the hydrangea garden had regained its peace. Izuchi stirred, his muscles aching heavily. Blood loss had left his body heavy and his mind hazy.

“I’m…alive…” he murmured. He did not yet know whether to be happy about that or not.

“Oh, yer up.” Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth looked down at Izuchi, who lay in the garden with his arms and legs sprawled out flat. Izuchi hadn’t seen him in the earlier fight, but he seemed aware of what had happened.

“Akitsu the Fourth…”

“That’s me. Sorry, but yer other attack failed too.”

Izuchi and the rest were really meant to be a distraction. Their flashy display of force was designed to make an opening for Himawari to be killed. But their plan was seen through from the start, and the demons that snuck into the Akase home had been easily dealt with. Izuchi felt impressed.

“Where’d the Demon Eater go?”

“He’s chasing after Furutsubaki. But you’re pretty tenacious, ain’t ya?” Somegorou teased him with a smile. Though the two were enemies, he treated Izuchi like an old friend. However, Izuchi did not share the man’s good mood. He felt dispirited despite having lived to see another day.

“I was…*spared*, wasn’t I?” Izuchi said dejectedly. He had fought with all his body and soul, but he meant so little to the Demon Eater that he could afford to overlook him. How pathetic. How laughable. He had known he was outmatched, but this mortified him.

“Naw, I think he meant to kill ya. Yer just tougher than he expected.” Somegorou, perhaps possessing an old man’s wisdom, read Izuchi’s thoughts and waved away his worry. “Jinya can kill *anyone* if he has to. He’s not the kind who’d spare someone out of

mercy. He fought ya with everything he had, and you did the same. This was a fight in which ya both put it all on the line, I'm sure of it."

"I see..." That cleared away the doubt in Izuchi's mind. Somegorou knew the Demon Eater well enough to speak on his behalf. Izuchi breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"But of course, if yer still itchin' for a fight, I'd be happy to oblige," Somegorou offered.

"No, I'll pass on that. I can't win empty-handed." Smiling weakly, Izuchi turned him down.

Without his Gatling gun, Izuchi was just an ordinary lesser demon, lacking a demon ability. Not only would he be no match for the legendary Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth, but he couldn't even move in his current state—not because of his injuries, but because his spirit was too depressed for him to muster the energy.

"I..." On his back, he looked up at the sky and began to speak. Perhaps he just wanted somebody, anybody, to hear him bare his heart. "...I couldn't stand to see us demons culled from the world by the changing times. Science brought light to the night, swords were abandoned and guns became commonplace, and we spirits lost our place in the world. Great demons became things of stories and no more. We demons have become weak, to the point that we're not even a match for humans."

In the developed world of the Taisho era, many spirits were forgotten, and demons were no longer viewed as the absolute tyrants they had been in the past. The wave of modernization forced the now-weak demons to hide in the recesses of the world, to eventually be forgotten and made into fictional beings spoken of only in children's stories.

Izuchi refused to accept such a fate.

"I was so bitter. What worth does a spirit who even loses to humans have? I wanted to tear this whole world down and create one where a demon could be a demon—someone who's strong forever."

He just wanted his kind to be perceived rightfully. He wanted a world in which demons lived as demons and people lived as people.

Like in the olden times, when man feared demons and worshipped the gods.

"But I was wrong. Even now, great demons continue to exist. Demons haven't become weak. Only I have. How pathetic... In the end, I'm nothing more than a brat having a temper tantrum, aren't I?"

Even in the Taisho era, there was a demon of old who could make light work of firearms. The realization made Izuchi feel small, especially since he'd pledged himself to a man like Eizen. Feeling humiliated, he covered his face with his hand.

"Damn it. Weakness is a wretched thing..."

Perhaps he could've chosen a different path if he had the Demon Eater's strength. He didn't know. But at the very least, he was certain he wouldn't have stood idly by and watched Ryuuna and Kimiko be harmed for the sake of his goals. He realized that his weakness was even uglier than he'd first thought. Emotion swelled inside him, making him tremble.

"Ha ha. Yer younger than ya look, aren't ya?" Somegorou made a broad smile, his heart warmed. Though he was speaking to a demon, his tone was kind. "You're rushin' yerself too much. Jinya's gone through hell to get to where he is. A young demon like yerself obviously wouldn't compare, so don't try. Took me a while to learn that lesson myself," he added with a wry grin. "A demon can live for a thousand years. There's still plenty of time ahead of ya. So go ahead and be as weak as ya like, but keep tryin' things. You're too young to already be givin' up on yerself."

Izuchi was amazed by Somegorou. He reconsidered his evaluation of him: Somegorou was strong. Not because he was skilled in spirit-hunting techniques, but because age and experience had molded him that way. That was something Izuchi didn't have. Having discovered a form of strength he hadn't even been aware of, Izuchi gave a light sigh and smiled.

"You're as strange as the Demon Eater. This is the first time I've met a human who lectures a demon, and an enemy at that."

"Well, y'know what they say: We old folks love to preach," Somegorou said with a grin. Nonchalantly, he added, "And besides, we're not enemies anymore."

Izuchi made a face and asked, “Why’s that?”

“You’re not such an idiot that you’d keep servin’ that rotten Eizen geezer after this. Or at least, that’s what Jinya said.” Somegorou seemed proud to convey such a thing.

“…Yeah. Yeah, that’s right.”

Izuchi may have lost the battle, but that had allowed him to realize his wish had been a mistake. He was grateful to both the Demon Eater and Akitsu, one for recognizing him as a demon of old and the other for lecturing him. He would not return to Eizen, a deplorable old man who tried to use young girls. Instead, he would graciously accept defeat.

“It’s my complete loss. He really got me.”

Never had he thought defeat could make him feel so peaceful. Still on the ground, he untensed his whole body and smiled. With a pristine heart, he gazed up at the sky and thought that, just perhaps, the stars looked more beautiful than usual tonight.

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At the same time Izuchi was launching his assault on the Akase home, an attack was made on a certain residential area in Fukagawa.

A number of figures raced through the moonlit night. There were unnaturally few humans out and about, perhaps due to Furutsubaki’s ability to control people. The figures had no need to move stealthily or quietly. Like primitive beasts, they loudly and ferociously chased their prey.

Sometime after being entrusted to an acquaintance of Jinya, Ryuuna had been attacked by some of Eizen’s underlings. They were only lesser demons without abilities, but their numbers were great, and she fled while her guardian was kept busy with them. That might’ve been foolish of her, but she believed it was the correct thing to do. She did not think that irksome demon would truly protect her, even if they were an old acquaintance of Jinya.

She ran like mad through the town. She could scarcely think straight; her only thought was getting away from her pursuers. Her

sweat made her kimono cling uncomfortably to her skin. She ignored her exhaustion and ran as fast as she could toward the Akase home. Kaneomi approved of her rash actions. She felt sorry to abandon Jinya's acquaintance to their fate, but she had to focus on Jinya's request to protect Ryuuna.

"Ryuuna-san!"

"...Mm."

Kaneomi, held in Ryuuna's arms, let out an exclamation. The area of Fukagawa was already under the control of Eizen's underlings. The town was as still as death; no one would kick up a fuss no matter how much noise was made. And yet, a few figures stood in Ryuuna's way.

They inched closer, swaying like ghosts. These were ordinary humans, not lesser demons. There was no life in their eyes. They clearly weren't in control of themselves.

"Eizen-sama... You've changed."

Eizen knew a method of making demons out of people, yet he'd purposefully sent ordinary humans their way. The reason was obvious: Neither Ryuuna nor Kaneomi were heartless enough to kill innocent humans who were only under another's control. Even Jinya surely would have hesitated to kill here, and Somegorou would've looked for a way to get past without fighting at all. Sending these people at them was intended to torment the two and nothing more. Eizen was aiming to whittle away at their spirit.

"Ryuuna-san, I'll be borrowing your body."

"Kane...omi..."

Kaneomi's ability, *Spirit*, allowed her to puppet a body as she willed, even if its flesh tore and its bones broke. If Ryuuna entrusted her body to her, Kaneomi would be able to fight with it. That was why Jinya had given her to Ryuuna.

"Here goes."

Kaneomi controlled Ryuuna's body to rush forward at a speed unimaginable for her thin frame. Stepping inward, she slashed at the side of the first person blocking their way, then reversed the strike into an upward slash across another one's chest. She used the back of the sword, but even that was no different than being struck

by a metal rod. Bones likely broke and innards were surely damaged, but Kaneomi didn't have the luxury of holding back on them now.

"Ugh. What a pain."

She froze at the sound of a voice that came not from someone in front of her—*but up close behind her.*

"Wha—"

She spun around as fast as she could and saw a black demon with powerful muscles despite his short height and slender build. He had sharp fangs and an even sharper gaze.

She hurriedly distanced herself from him, but he made no move to attack. However, more and more manipulated humans continued to gather all around Ryuuna and Kaneomi.

"After babysittin' comes kidnappin', huh? I'm startin' to think that old fart's just tryin' to get a rise outta me."

The demon sighed deeply, remaining listless. Kaneomi had heard about this black demon from Akitsu Somegorou. He was Ikyuu, a superior demon with a strange ability.

"Now, be a good little girl and come along without any fuss, or I'll have to bring ya back with your legs and arms broken. Eizen says he's fine with me roughin' you up a bit so long as I bring you back alive."

Ryuuna was giving Kaneomi complete control over her body. Through the grip of the sword, she could feel Kaneomi's unrest.

Kaneomi had partaken in many fights as one of Jinya's swords. Based on her experience, she could tell at a glance that Ikyuu was far stronger than she was. He was not someone she and Ryuuna could defeat alone. Even if they fought a hundred times, she was certain he would come out on top in each and every battle.

"The folks over by the Akase place should be dead by now. There's no chance they'd survive the horde we brought, 'specially with Izuchi there to handle the Demon Eater. Sorry, but it's the end of the line."

Kaneomi didn't want to think Jinya might lose to Izuchi, but either way there was no chance he'd come running to their aid. She and Ryuuna had to get through this using their own strength—but

they were surrounded and faced by a demon they had no chance of beating.

It was checkmate. Ikyuu was right. This was the end of the line for Ryuuna.

“I’m sure you’re smart enough to understand it’s over, so do as I say. I don’t take pleasure in hurtin’ little girls. Be good for both our sakes, ya hear?”

Their one saving grace was that Ikyuu was at least a demon with a conscience. Though he was a minion of Eizen, he wasn’t out to torment Ryuuna. He was no saint, but he seemed at least able to discern right from wrong.

His words weren’t meant for Ryuuna, but for Kaneomi. Kaneomi still controlled Ryuuna’s body. It didn’t matter what Ryuuna wished for; if Kaneomi decided they would surrender, then Ryuuna would be hopeless to resist. So she used her mouth, the only part of her that remained free, to state her choice. “…No.”

“…What?”

“Ryuuna-san?”

Kaneomi was surprised to hear Ryuuna force herself to speak. Apparently not expecting his offer to be turned down, Ikyuu made a face, half disbelieving what he heard. To leave no doubt, Ryuuna gave another unmistakable refusal. “I won’t… I won’t go with you.”

“Ha. That right? What the hell’re ya gonna do, then?” Ikyuu aggressively asked, feeling as though he was being mocked.

Unafraid, Ryuuna opened her shapely lips and falteringly said, “I’ll…I’ll run.”

“And how do you expect to do that?” He gestured around them.

He was right. They were surrounded. Ryuuna knew her resistance meant nothing.

But she didn’t back down, and her gaze met his straight on.

“When…when I found things I didn’t know, the scary things got bigger. But the things important to me got bigger too. I don’t know if that’s a good thing…but…” She thought back to the conversation she’d shared that night. There was still a lot she didn’t know, but she

knew at least the warmth of his hands was real. “Jiiya said I’ll understand someday. What it all means. He believes in me.”

He’d accepted someone filthy like her, someone who couldn’t even be called a proper human. But she still hadn’t done anything for him, still hadn’t said the words she wanted to. She couldn’t give up here. There was still so much she had to tell him.

“So I won’t go back to that dark place anymore! I’m going home…to the one who believes in my future.” She hadn’t even realized her tears were falling.

Her words were an incomprehensible mess, and escape was still impossible no matter what she said. Her actions amounted to no more than the tantrum of a child; they changed nothing. But Ikyuu’s expression stiffened nonetheless, as though her shouts stirred something in him.

“I don’t understand a lick of what yer sayin’… But I get yer not some brat.” He slid his right leg back and lowered his center of gravity. He clenched his hands into fists, a declaration that he would not hold back. **“If ya got the will, then I won’t look down on ya. But I guess I can’t take ya back unharmed no more.”**

Having been forced onto a job he had no interest in, Ikyuu had lacked enthusiasm so far. But the determination Ryuuna had shown changed the look on his face. He might have been willing to let her off easy at first, but now he would break her limbs to dampen her spirit. They were worse off than before.

Ikyuu began to make an intimidating approach, but an out-of-place, carefree voice stopped him in his tracks.

“How *impure* you are, girl. But I’m sure that Yasha would be delighted.”

A man suddenly appeared, strolling blithely as he slipped through the crowd. In his hand was a sword, and behind him was a trail of corpses. Though they were only humans under the possession of another, he cut them down one by one without any hesitation whatsoever as he came up beside Ryuuna.

“This is quite the crowd you’ve gathered. Though they’re only fodder, it’s quite the treat to have this much flesh to cut. You have my gratitude, greenhorn.” He laughed in a wispy, eerie tone.

The man stood around five and a half feet tall. His shoulders were narrow, and his physique was far from impressive. With crazed eyes, he stared as though he was appraising Ikyuu.

“Who the hell’re you?”

“I am merely an acquaintance of the one you call the Demon Eater, though our only real interaction was a duel back in Edo times.”

“I see. So yer that bodyguard Eizen was talkin’ about.”

“The very one. I have been entrusted with the protection of this child. It would trouble me if you stole her away, greenhorn.”

Ikyuu didn’t like the man’s mocking tone, but he kept his senses sharp. The man remained composed despite all the bloodlust Ikyuu was directing his way. If anything, he seemed to enjoy it.

“Name yourself so I at least know what to write on your tombstone.”

“My name is hardly one worth remembering, but I suppose it would be improper not to provide it.”

Without taking up a stance, he let his arms hang at his side.

“Keh, keh keh. I am Okada Kiichi. A humble murderer from an era past.”

As he basked in Ikyuu’s bloodlust, Kiichi gave him a bloodcurdling smile.

5

HE WAS ALWAYS reaching out, but unable to grasp what he desired.

“What a drag…”

That was a pet phrase of Ikyuu’s. His story wasn’t one of all-too-common tragedy or trite happiness, but of simple boredom.

He was powerful. He had talent to begin with, as well as the earnestness to train as he needed to. He didn’t hesitate to maim others and had no problem with killing. So it was no surprise

whatsoever that he became strong, went on to fight and kill many spirit hunters, and then eventually awakened to an ability of his own after many years.

But a powerful demon who killed spirit hunters was worthless in the Taisho era. Faced with the great wave of modernization, the many demons of old had no choice but to go into hiding. Swords were outlawed and guns stole the stage as the night was illuminated by streetlamps. The people lost any reason to fear spirits. Ikyuu remained as powerful of a demon as he was before, but what did that even matter anymore?

Demons and spirit hunters didn't vanish completely. But for the common man, the battles between humans and demons were nothing more than stories. People forgot their fear of demons, but Ikyuu was too wise to mindlessly rampage and make an enemy of the police or the army. But letting his strength go to waste was also not an option, so he chose to serve Eizen instead.

Just as Izuchi couldn't stand to see demons become weak and waste away with the passage of time, Ikyuu couldn't stand to see strong demons like him lose their chance to shine. For opposite reasons, they both had the same goal: to destroy the world as it was.

That said, actually bringing an end to the current world wasn't Ikyuu's objective; it was the process leading up to it that interested him. The goal could have been anything, really, so long as it gave meaning to the strength he'd cultivated. At long last, his wish was being granted now: A powerful opponent stood in his way.

"Aha, I see."

Okada Kiichi tested the sharpness of his blade by lopping off a human's head. He then cut into the side of another, sending entrails spewing. With a slice across a chest, blood cascaded through the air. His blade was wet with blood, gleaming in the moonlight and killing with every strike. Ikyuu found himself enthralled by the massacre occurring before him.

All the humans he'd brought along were ordinary people under Furutsubaki's control. Eizen hadn't altered them in any way. They could have returned to their normal lives if Furutsubaki

released her control over them. That was to say, they were all people who could still be saved.

"So they have no sense of self. How tragic indeed."

That was, until they had the misfortune of encountering Kiichi. He killed as naturally as he breathed, the corpses around him only multiplying as he went. This wasn't murder done to protect Ryuuna but murder simply for murder's sake. He reaped no joy from his actions. Killing was simply an act of pride for him.

If he drew his sword against somebody, then he *had* to kill them—not because he was a demon, but because he pursued the path of the blade to its extremes. There could be no world in which he didn't choose to kill. Kiichi was a man who lived true to the blade even as the world changed around him.

As the last human fell to the earth, Kiichi let out a soft sigh. Ikyuu's gaze, which had followed him throughout, seemed to be challenging the man.

"I see you're not all talk."

Ikyuu had chosen to let the man finish to see what he was capable of. The mountain of corpses around them was his answer. He sized him up again, this time taking note of his strange attire. Kiichi was clad in a haori coat with hakama pants and wore tabi socks with zori straw sandals. On his hip was his sword, resting in a metal scabbard. He was, like he said, someone from an era past. Many would describe his appearance as old-fashioned, or even antiquated.

But what felt most dated about Kiichi to Ikyuu was his physique. The muscles around the man's neck showed just how much he had relentlessly trained. Though his kimono robe hid much of his frame, Ikyuu was sure his entire body was sculpted to avoid even an ounce of waste.

Kiichi had smiled earlier as though he truly enjoyed being surrounded. He appeared unguarded, but his attention was fully on his surroundings and his positioning was finely tuned. Just from that alone, Ikyuu could tell the man had been through an abnormal number of hellish battles. His lack of hesitation was worth noting as well. Ikyuu could tell because he was the same way—Kiichi was *too*

used to taking life. The two of them were equal in that they were both scum who took no issue with slaughter.

A ghastly smile rose unbidden to Ikyuu's face. He felt grateful. It was as though his opponent were tailor-made for him. This was far better than picking on a small girl, of course, but more importantly, he now had a chance to let his strength shine. Bloodlust overflowed from him as he lightly balled his fists.

"Ah, what wonderful malice you bear. But I find it odd..." Kiichi began. Even though it looked like a fight would break out any second, he did not take up a stance.

Ikyuu froze, furrowing his brow. He remained vigilant, keeping close watch on his opponent as he gave him a questioning look.

"I was under the impression you were in the service of a Nagumo Eizen, yet you waited to fight me instead of immediately fulfilling your lord's orders."

Ikyuu's task was to abduct Ryuuna. Although he could have ignored Kiichi, taken the girl, and been done with things if he so wanted, he'd waited as Kiichi dealt with the small fry. Kiichi seemed lost as to his reasoning.

"Figured fightin' ya would be the easier way of goin' 'bout things," Ikyuu said. He had no problem killing the strong. It was tormenting the weak that he didn't like, especially if his victim was a young girl. In that sense, Okada Kiichi was a much easier opponent for him than Ryuuna.

"Oh? And what do you mean by that?"

"I'm sayin' that girl will understand how hopeless resisting is once she sees ya mashed into a pulp." He had no qualms about killing, but he believed life wasn't to be toyed with. That was one of the few creeds he held himself to.

"I see. How utterly boorish." Kiichi seemed unamused by Ikyuu's answer. The air abruptly shifted, turning tense all at once.

They sharpened their senses and abandoned all excess thought. Neither one took a moment to breathe as the distance between them drew much closer.

The first to move was Ikyuu, who kicked off the ground hard enough to make it shake. Without dropping his speed as he

stepped in, he swung a fist bearing all his weight at the pit of Kiichi's stomach.

But he only struck air. Kiichi had slid his right foot far back, rotating leftward.

"Nngh?!"

By then, Ikyuu had already been cut. Kiichi had swung horizontally at almost the exact instant he dodged. His movements were calculated, and his strike was smooth. So smooth, in fact, that Ikyuu couldn't even respond to it, much less dodge.

Kiichi was by no means physically powerful. He was far past human limits, but his speed and strength didn't measure up to a demon like the Demon Eater. His sword skills, on the other hand, could only be described as extraordinary.

"Bastard…"

"Surely you have more to give? Even now, I still have yet to reach the heights of the blade."

Ikyuu glimpsed Kiichi's nature in the way he wielded his blade. He was a man without hesitation in his movement or wavering in his thoughts. That wasn't a result of his natural disposition, but something obtained through great obsession. Kiichi had spent his life shaving away all excess in body and mind, granting him swiftness. Ikyuu felt dizzy just from thinking how much the man must've trained and killed to get to where he was. The purity of Kiichi's being was his strength.

"Tch!"

Ikyuu clicked his tongue as Kiichi's follow-up attack came—a diagonal slash. He quickly realized he couldn't dodge it in time, so instead he allowed it to non-fatally cut him, then moved to counterattack. The fluidity of Kiichi's movements was a surprise, but so far Ikyuu's injuries were light. Though his left arm and chest blotted slightly with blood, his movements were in no way impeded. For his counterattack, Ikyuu stepped in with his right and jabbed with his closer right fist.

"How lively." Kiichi effortlessly blocked him with the hilt of his sword.

Ikyuu had aimed for the opening after Kiichi had swung. He hadn't been lacking in speed or strength, but even so, Kiichi had managed to block his fist with the minuscule area provided by his hilt. Ikyuu had been completely read. That shocked him, but he still wasn't done attacking yet. His right fist had been a feint. His real strike, his left, had already *disappeared*.

If ordinary methods were ineffective against Kiichi, then Ikyuu would have to win through supernatural means. His ability was called *Reach*. It allowed him to reach for things just beyond what he could grasp. He could also use it to move his whole body short distances, but that was nothing more than a secondary application. Its true purpose was for reaching out his hand far distances for things he couldn't grasp otherwise. On the surface it only increased the range of his attacks, but its real strength came to light when he used it outside his opponent's field of view.

His left arm reappeared behind Kiichi's back. Because his arm had passed unimpeded through a space he controlled, it still held enough force to smash Kiichi's head in from behind. Ikyuu was certain—*he had him*.

"Interesting."

But not even that was enough.

Kiichi let Ikyuu's right fist push against his hilt and force his sword away. He then took a step in reverse and slashed behind his back at Ikyuu's left arm without even looking back. Though it should have been completely in his blind spot, the strike landed true.

Ikyuu's arm fell to the ground with a thud. Pain followed a moment later, making him gasp in agony.

Kiichi put distance between them, and the fight came to a momentary stop. Not that it mattered for Ikyuu—he was no longer in a state to fight. Not because of pain or blood loss, but because of sheer shock. He had absolute confidence in the power of his ability and had used it fully believing it would kill Kiichi here.

And yet, Kiichi had defended against it.

Not even on his first time seeing it, but *without ever seeing it at all.* Ikyuu stood stock-still in disbelief.

“I can tell you have trained well from the way you move yourself. But so long as you are incapable of controlling the displacement of air, your ‘surprise’ attacks are hardly a surprise at all.”

The moment Ikyuu’s arm had manifested behind Kiichi, he’d read the slight shift in air and defended himself. In a high-stakes duel to the death, without any forewarning, that had been all it took for him to see through Ikyuu’s ability.

“...What *are* you?” Ikyuu said in disbelief. This was the first time he had met anyone with such strength.

“I believe I told you already. I am nothing more than a humble murderer from an era past.”

Frustrated by Kiichi’s placidity, Ikyuu moved without thinking. Despite losing an arm, he didn’t hesitate, ignoring his pain and attacking. Meanwhile, Kiichi gently parried Ikyuu’s do-or-die attack by sneaking his blade under his opponent’s arm and using the slightest bit of force to send it veering off wildly. Using the opening, he followed up with three lightning-quick thrusts at the forehead, the throat, and the heart.

Ikyuu forced his head aside and barely dodged the thrust at his forehead, but he couldn’t completely avoid the one at his throat, and his carotid artery was gouged. His heart was about to be a lost cause...but no, there was still a way. Moving his entire body was only a secondary application of his ability, and he lacked the experience to use it right away. But he’d used the main function of his ability thousands of times up until now.

Kiichi’s thrust stopped short right before it could pierce Ikyuu’s heart. Using *Reach*, Ikyuu had moved his arm before the blade struck and grabbed it with his bare hand. Though he held it with all his strength, he only managed to keep it in place for a second. Kiichi immediately pulled the blade away, cutting off Ikyuu’s fingers. But Ikyuu had forced him to make an awkward move. Having used all his strength to pull away his sword, Kiichi lost balance slightly, leaving the smallest of openings.

This would be the last chance Ikyuu got. He mustered the last of his strength and yelled as he put his whole body into motion. **“Grrraaaah!”**

Since his left arm was gone and his right hand was unusable, he spun off his left leg and did a full-force roundhouse kick with his right. Kiichi would simply dodge if he made too wide of an arc, so he kept his kick tight and focused, honed like a blade. He used every muscle in his body, sparing nothing as he called forth all the fruits of his labors. If this kick landed, Kiichi's head would surely be sent flying.

"You are impure."

Without showing an ounce of surprise, Kiichi touched Ikyuu's leg with the back of his fist. He slid his right leg far forward and ever so gently used his hand to change the trajectory of the kick, letting its force rush past him. He then shifted back to his former position as though nothing had happened.

Ikyuu could only stare speechless. All the strength he'd cultivated meant nothing. He was being toyed with like a child.

"You use up too much strength, waste too much movement, and your spirit is disturbed. But most of all, your way of life leaves you clouded. You are full of impurities."

"Shut it!" Ikyuu felt enraged by Kiichi's words. He had challenged him in peak condition, but he had been no match whatsoever, and his arm had been taken. He knew there was no hope of victory left, but he had kept fighting. But not even his kick could land.

Ikyuu knew he was strong, but he also wanted a chance to demonstrate his strength. He thought serving Eizen might give him the opportunity he craved, but in the end he only ever tormented the weak. He ignored his own morals and allowed himself to commit vile acts, thus losing all respect for himself. Perhaps his fate had only been a matter of time.

After effortlessly avoiding Ikyuu's attack, Kiichi closed the distance at his fastest speed yet. His step in looked absurdly quick. It wasn't a matter of leg strength; his skill in moving his weight and his core's balance simply allowed him to appear much faster than he actually moved.

His form was so beautiful that it made a chill run down Ikyuu's spine. Before he even realized it, Kiichi's sword was too close to avoid.

Ikyuu sought to give meaning to his strength and had killed many opponents for that purpose. Perhaps it was only karma for him to meet another with greater strength and be killed in turn. The world seemed to blur as his end neared.

Ah… In the end…

Kiichi's blade gleamed dully as it sped through the night and dug into Ikyuu's neck.

…I've achieved nothing. I failed to follow my orders and failed to show my strength. Just where…did I…go wrong…?

There was no one to answer him, but his last moments came all the same. The sword seemed to pass by him like the wind for a moment, then a rain of blood spewed forth and his head fell to the ground. Ikyuu's body followed a moment later, and Kiichi looked down at him with eyes full of disdain.

"You sought to give meaning to your strength, yet you did not devote yourself entirely to it. You clung to your conscience, yet you did not see it through in full. Your fate is deserved."

In the end, Ikyuu hadn't managed to injure Kiichi whatsoever, nor lay a single finger on Ryuuna.

Perhaps his mistake had been seeking to give meaning to his strength while putting himself in the service of another. There might have been better ways to validate himself without bloodying his hands. Or perhaps he should've followed the goodness of his conscience and lived justly from the start. There was no knowing what would've been best, and these possibilities were past the point of mattering already. The only truth for Ikyuu now was that he lay dead.

That was how a demon trapped by his strength met his end.

"Ah…" Witness to it all, Ryuuna let out a small noise. Ikyuu had been an underling of Eizen and consequently nothing but her enemy, yet his death still made her feel something. As she was now, she couldn't understand what it was that made her chest seem tight. She could only stand there on the dark street and hang her head.

***

Since long ago, furutsubaki—that is, old camellia—have been described as a flower tree capable of becoming a female spirit. According to Toriyama Sekien's *One Hundred Illustrated Demons from the Present and the Past*, "The souls of old camellia trees become spirits that haunt man, as many ancient trees harbor their own spirits." It was believed that even plant life would become spirits after an appropriate amount of time passed.

"Haah…haah…"

Furutsubaki, however, bore none of the grand camellia tree spirit image her name evoked as she fled in fear. She was born a daughter of Magatsume, then remade by Eizen. But perhaps because she'd taken in Saegusa Sahiro, she looked like nothing more than a young, scared woman as she desperately ran away.

"H-he's coming! I have to get away…"

Overwhelmed by the great disparity in power she saw, Furutsubaki abandoned Izuchi and fled in panic. She made for Fukagawa, hoping to meet up with Eizen's strongest underling, Ikyuu.

"N-no… Something…something's wrong…"

But along the way, she suddenly stopped.

"I am Eizen-sama's underling. I was born for Eizen-sama. I-I know I was."

Her memories were in disarray, perhaps an aftereffect of their alteration. She knew she should be a pawn of Eizen and no more, and she told herself so over and over, taking deep breaths to steady her breathing.

"I've caught you, Furutsubaki."

She heard Jinya's cold voice and shrieked, even though she'd only just managed to calm down. It was almost like he had waited for her to think she was safe. Jinya had to admit he looked like the bad guy here.

"I followed you with *Dog Spirits* and *Invisibility*. I'll bet you didn't even realize."

He had tracked her from the start with his abilities. He'd thought she would flee to where Eizen was hiding if he let her run, but she unexpectedly chose to run toward her ally instead.

Ryuuna was with Okada Kiichi. Jinya didn't think Kiichi would lose in a fight, but anything was possible. That was why he'd chosen to deal with Furutsubaki before anything unexpected could happen.

"I do sympathize with you a bit. It's a tragic thing to be denied your own self. I know how it feels."

Furutsubaki felt shaken by his words. The look on her face wasn't one of fear but an expression near tears.

"But I have no intention of letting you go free."

"A-ah..."

Slowly, he drew Yarai and took up a stance with his sword held to his side. Perhaps out of fear of death, she began to mutter deliriously. His heart ached with pity for her. Though she was a daughter of Magatsume, she looked like nothing but a victim in this moment.

"N-no, I...I'm not...I...why..."

But he wouldn't stop. Somegorou had known both Motoki Soushi and Saegusa Sahiro well, and that meant Jinya couldn't let him discover the current Furutsubaki. Only scum like Jinya needed to bloody their hands. ...Heikichi had suffered enough.

Together with the sound of wind being cut, blood danced through the air. His blade became a blur as it sliced through Furutsubaki's dainty body. But he still wasn't done. He grabbed her neck with his left hand as she fell.

He wouldn't lie and say the next part was for Heikichi's sake. This was for his own gain, for the sake of his goals and nothing else. He knew it was unnecessarily cruel to someone who would already die, but he had no choice. He had to make use of anything he could.

"Your power is now mine to devour."

He didn't have much interest in the ability to control people, but he wanted information. When he devoured Azumagiku and Jishibari, he'd gained hardly any of their memories, and he expected he would obtain little from Furutsubaki. But as luck would have it, Eizen's fiddling allowed some of her memories to flow into him.

His left arm allowed him to glimpse inside her. Most of what she felt was fear. Not fear of Jinya or even her approaching death, however. She was anguished by the fear of being changed into something not herself.

Jinya thought he recognized her anguish. It resembled Nomari's cries that she didn't want to forget him.

Next, he saw a hand. The image of an offered hand was burned into her mind. She felt salvation from it, but he could see no more.

"N-no…but maybe…this is for the best…" Leaving behind those cryptic words, she faded away completely.

He still wasn't used to cannibalizing his own kind, even after all these years. It left him feeling awful afterward. And yet he didn't regret doing so. To feel regret would be a disservice to the lives he'd taken from.

He swung the blood off his blade before returning it to its scabbard. He took a deep breath to calm his heart, then slowly exhaled the hot air in his lungs. At that moment, two figures approached him.

"Ah, there you are, O Yasha. Have you finished as well?"

Okada Kiichi. Jinya had dueled him once back in Edo times, and they'd met again by sheer coincidence.

Even after Edo had been renamed to Tokyo, Kiichi remained in the area. Jinya asked for his aid, saying there was someone he wanted his help killing. Kiichi agreed immediately, not even asking why Jinya needed someone dead. It didn't matter to him. So long as he could kill, that was enough. Such was the man known as Okada Kiichi.

Jinya gave him some money as thanks, and the two agreed to work together for a while. Kiichi was the only one other than Magatsume who had ever defeated Jinya, and he would make a reliable ally.

"I must say I am surprised. I thought you were not one to kill women, but you showed no hesitation whatsoever," Kiichi said. He had apparently seen what transpired earlier. He had a creepy grin on his face.

“I’ve never drawn a distinction between man or woman,” Jinya said. “I’ll kill whomever I must. Of course, I’d rather not kill at all if possible.”

“What pure words you speak. You are true scum, indeed.”

“I don’t need you to remind me.”

Jinya took Kiichi’s snide mockery in stride. The murderer seemed to be enjoying himself for some reason. Jinya thought about asking if any problems occurred on their end, but there clearly was no need.

“Jiiya.” Ryuuna spoke for once and clung to Jinya. She seemed too exhausted to grab him tightly, but this was a step forward from the days when she was afraid of touching others.

“I’m glad to see you’re safe.”

“Mm. Safe.”

She continued to cling to him like a child afterward, which perhaps wasn’t all that strange for her age.

Touched by her childish behavior, Jinya let slip a smile. Somegorou was looking after Kimiko and Himawari for him. There most likely wouldn’t be any more attacks tonight. Eizen had lost a significant chunk of his forces all in one go.

“It looks like we’ve gotten through the worst of it,” he said to no one in particular as he began running his fingers through Ryuuna’s hair. Her warmth and her happy smile drove home the fact that it was really over. Things had ended ideally, with no losses on their side. For now, he could breathe a sigh of relief.

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Although things ended ideally for Jinya, the same couldn’t be said for others.

Jinya failed to realize that a third party had been watching from the shadows when Furutsubaki met her end. His focus on the influx of memories from *Assimilation* made him lax to his surroundings, as did the fact that Eizen had manipulated the residents of Fukagawa into ignoring any disturbances.

A man just so happened to be wandering the night in search of a missing acquaintance. Furutsubaki's manipulation didn't affect him because he hailed from a line of spirit hunters, albeit weak ones. It was nothing more than sheer coincidence laid atop sheer coincidence that allowed Motoki Soushi of Kogetsudou to witness something unbelievable.

"Your power is now mine to devour."

A demon wearing Western attire held Saegusa Sahiro. Soushi watched as she began to be absorbed by the demon's left arm with a sickening squelch. Soushi had no knowledge of Magatsume's daughters. To him, a demon had killed the Sahiro he knew.

"N-no...but maybe...this is for the best..." With a pained murmur, she left the world.

Though he could never say it, Soushi had loved her. But he couldn't save her at this critical moment. He should've let emotion take hold and rush him forward, but he was frozen in place as he could *feel* the demon's overwhelming power through his skin. Hiding was the best he could do.

"Sahiro... Damn it, why..."

He felt weak and bitter. Tears streamed down his face as he blamed his own powerlessness.

And so a grudge was born. Though he could do nothing now, he swore he would take vengeance one day.

6

THE BLURRY LIGHT of a lamp trembled in the dark room. The silence was deafening. One could almost hear the sound of the lamp's flame flickering.

"It's sure gotten quiet..."

Kimiko gloomily looked toward the window as she hugged her knees atop her bed. She couldn't even see the stars with the curtains closed, but she felt better this way. She wondered what was going on outside, but her desire not to know was even greater. The silence at least told her the battle with Eizen was over, but she

didn’t know which side had come out ahead. She was scared that the worst had transpired.

“It’ll be fine, Kimiko-san. Uncle won’t lose,” Himawari said with a soft chuckle. Kimiko had been told Himawari was actually the eldest daughter of a very wicked demon, but she couldn’t see it. Himawari always tried to cheer up Kimiko when she was down. The young-looking demon acted more mature than one would think from her appearance.

“But, Himawari-san…”

“I understand. Even though you’re the one being targeted, you’re more worried about his safety, aren’t you?”

Kimiko hung her head without saying a word, having been read like an open book. Though she was in danger herself, Jinya was the one she was worried about. She was terrified to think that the man who’d taken care of her since she was little might lose his life. Her head was full of dark thoughts. It didn’t help that this was her problem to begin with, not his.

“There’s no need to worry. They may have the numbers, but victory is still on our side. You’d be hard pressed to find a demon that could kill Uncle in an honest fight anyway.”

Himawari’s nonchalant words were acutely distressing. Kimiko reflected that, although Himawari was kind, she was someone who lived in a world where death was the norm. Of course, Jinya was the same.

“You’re incredible, Himawari-san.”

“Pardon?”

“You’re so calm, and I’m a bundle of nerves right now.”

“Well, I am a good deal older than you…”

So Himawari said, but Kimiko didn’t feel any better. The room fell silent again before the door suddenly opened.

“She’s old ’nough to be yer *granny*, she is!” Somegorou laughed mockingly as he entered without knocking. He was protecting them for the night. The plan was that he would buy time for the two to flee if Jinya failed.

Himawari huffed. “Honestly, you can be so rude. The last Akitsu-san was far kinder. And don’t you know you’re not supposed to enter a girl’s room without permission?”

Though she was a demon, she was still a woman. The irritation of having her age mentioned made her puff out her cheeks and sulk. Somegorou brushed her off and turned to face Kimiko.

“Sorry I ain’t got my master’s good character. Anyway, it’s all over now, missy.” He was so nonchalant about it that it took Kimiko a moment to process what he had said. He smiled as if he enjoyed her blank look. “The demons that attacked have been wiped out. The one demon left alive, Izuchi, doesn’t want to fight anymore. And you-know-who is back.”

Somegorou stepped aside to reveal someone behind him. The lamplight slowly revealed their outline as they approached. It was a man, standing nearly six feet tall, holding a girl in his arms. Kimiko breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ve returned.”

“Mm…”

Jinya stood there as stony-faced as ever. His clothes were torn here and there, but he had no visible injuries. Ryuuna seemed fine as well. They didn’t even look tired. It was as though they had merely returned from a stroll.

“Jiiya…” Kimiko said.

He let Ryuuna down and softly sighed. He was relieved to see Kimiko was safe as well. Things weren’t entirely over, but he allowed himself to relax slightly. A smile appeared on his face.

“I’m glad to see you are safe, Lady Kimiko.”

“That’s what I should be saying. Truly…I’m glad you’re…” Tears welled up in her eyes as her lips began to tremble. She tottered over to him on unsteady feet, as if she were a young child again. “How can you be so reckless when you’re the one always rebuking me for the same thing?”

“You have a point. It seems I won’t have much ground to stand on when I scold you from now on.”

“Truly…” She weakly clutched the cuff of his sleeve. Her fingers trembled, not out of love but out of childish hesitation. “But

welcome back…Jiiya.”

Though she was thrilled to see him back, her heart was in disarray. Their enemies were still at large, and their long night wasn’t over. But she voiced none of this, gritting her teeth silently.

In a voice too quiet for anyone to hear, Himawari murmured, “But the true trials have yet to come…”

***

Though they had overcome Eizen’s attacks, the night wasn’t over. Himawari stayed in Kimiko’s room as extra protection, while Somegorou stayed to watch Izuchi.

Having used *Oneness* multiple times against Izuchi, Jinya was exhausted. After returning Ryuuna to her own room, he took a quick bath to wash off his sweat, then returned to his own room to rest.

“…Jiiya. Are you still awake?”

He hadn’t been in bed long before he heard a hesitant knock at his door, and he opened it to find Kimiko with a tray in hand. She trembled slightly, perhaps from the cold.

“Is something wrong, Lady Kimiko?”

“No, I just…” Bashfully and a bit sadly, she smiled. “…I just couldn’t sleep. Would it be all right if I stayed here a bit?”

He was taken aback. Normally he would scold her, saying it was improper for a young woman her age to be visiting a man’s room this late. But her eyes were full of worry—pleading, even—and he couldn’t bring himself to say no.

“Himawari-san said she wouldn’t need to guard me if I was just in your room.”

“I understand. A lot has happened tonight. I’ll make an exception and let you stay until it’s time for bed.”

“…Thank you. Oh, as a little token of appreciation, I thought I’d make you a cup of tea.”

He couldn’t keep her standing in the hallway forever, so he beckoned her to enter. She hesitantly did so, putting the tray on his

desk and starting to prepare the tea.

“What brought this on?” he asked.

“Nothing really. I just wanted to thank you for what you’ve done tonight. Mother taught me the proper way to pour black tea. I’m still practicing, but I’d be happy if you tried a cup. Give me one moment.”

The tea set clattered as she got to work. Jinya sat down on the bed and watched her back as she made the tea on his desk. She certainly lacked practice, but the sight of her reminded him of Shino.

“…You’ve grown,” he murmured emotionally.

She froze for a moment. She didn’t seem particularly pleased by his comment, acting more bashful than anything. “…Have I? No, I’m sure you’re right. Here. Your tea.”

With trembling hands, she nervously gave him a cup. The tea had the gentle smell of flowers. He looked at its clear amber color and felt at peace.

“Thank you. Ah, to think the day you’re pouring me tea has come.”

“Is it really such a surprise?”

“Indeed it is. Oh, how old I’ve grown… You used to be so small, you know.”

Perhaps he shouldn’t have said such a thing. Her eyes began to grow misty. And from that, Jinya realized something.

The important choices in life always came suddenly. At times, one must choose only one thing out of the many that are important to them. Jinya had a feeling that Kimiko had made her choice.

“Oh please, don’t tease me, Jiiya. Now, tell me what you think.”

On her urging, he sipped the tea, then froze. He wasn’t so dull as to miss the meaning behind her trembling hands and misty eyes. “You really have grown.”

She was bewildered by the softness of his tone, but before she could get a word in, he drank down the rest of the tea. With her eyes, she seemed to ask, *Why?*

“It’s the tea you’ve poured for me. I couldn’t possibly waste a single drop.” His voice was bold and firm. He was practically admitting he knew what she was up to, but he would not dare conceal his feelings. Not when his gratitude was so genuine. “It’s getting late. I think it’s about time you went back to your room.”

She made no move to get up, hanging her head sadly instead. His kindness must have felt all the more painful in this moment. She said, “I remember I once slipped into your bed as a child.”

“Ah, yes. You clung to me because you had a bad dream. You were still so small then. You’re a bit too old to sleep over now, aren’t you?”

Talking about the nostalgic memory seemed to reduce some of her tension. On the other hand, Jinya grew stiffer, his fingers feeling numb.

“If only I could have stayed a child…” she said sadly.

Her voice grew distant as his mind fogged. His limbs felt like pins and needles and his sense of touch was fading, but he fought to stay conscious so she wouldn’t notice.

“My foster father taught me that all things change, for better or worse.”

He wasn’t delusional enough to think their days of happiness could continue unabated without some cost. People must put in an equal amount of effort to maintain what they had. No matter how hard one worked to build up something, it could all crumble away so easily.

“…Is that so.”

“But I think the very fact that things must eventually change gives value to our efforts to keep things the same and our struggles to change ourselves.”

That was why he pruned the hydrangeas. He worked hard so the same sight would remain ten years from now. He’d lost a lot, but he hadn’t lost sight of the value of the things he’d gained. This belief was what allowed him to choose the path of immutability.

But that was ultimately no more than Jinya’s choice. He could not force Kimiko, who had her own life to live, to choose anything.

“But, my lady… Please do not be afraid of change, and do not be afraid of staying the same. The paths you’ve chosen should not be regretted.”

“Jiiya…”

“No matter what anybody might say, I will accept whatever decision you’ve come to. I’ll be praying for your happiness from now on, and I know I won’t be alone. Do not forget that you have many people who care for you.”

He wasn’t sure if his lesson reached her, but he wished she would at least tuck away this old man’s ramblings somewhere in her heart. Perhaps they would serve her well one day when she became an adult.

He held on for a good while, but he was nearing his limit. Slowly, his eyelids grew heavy.

“…Jiiya?” she asked.

No reply came.

Jinya had collapsed on the bed, unconscious.

***

“Well done, Kimiko-chan,” an androgynous voice called out.

A figure stepped out of the darkness, having slipped into the room at some point. It was Yonabari, the haniwari demon who served Eizen.

“You gave him the drug just like I asked. Good girl. Phew, now I don’t have to kill Yoshihiko-kun. Lucky you, huh?”

By Yonabari’s side was someone Kimiko knew well—Toudou Yoshihiko, the young man who worked at Koyomiza. He hung his head with a cold demeanor and an inscrutable face.

“I owe you as well for keeping her so obedient, Yoshihiko-kun. And don’t worry, Kimiko-chan. You did the right thing. You’ve got my seal of approval.”

It had been Yoshihiko who handed the drug to Kimiko. He’d told her to give it to Jinya and the others, saying it would only put them to sleep and incapacitate them, posing no threat to their lives.

He had likely been threatened into this. Though she knew she couldn't trust them, Kimiko had no choice—Yonabari held Yoshihiko's life in the balance.

"Yonabari-san... This drug is really safe, right? There's no way anyone could die?" Kimiko asked.

"Like I've said, I don't enjoy killing. The Demon Eater was given an extra powerful, Nagumo-special drug, but even that'll only knock him out. So don't worry." Yonabari smiled cheerfully. "He'll be out of commission all night, and by then it'll all be over. Eizen's goal will have come to fruition. Ooh, I can't wait. I wonder what kinda face the Demon Eater will make when he wakes up."

A chill ran down Kimiko's spine. Though they said they didn't enjoy killing, Yonabari seemed to delight in toying with the lives of others.

"Let's be off then, Kimiko-chan! Oh, and carry Ryuuna-chan for me, would ya, Yoshihiko-kun? Just be a gentleman about it, all right?" Yonabari said with a teasing laugh.

Yoshihiko only said a dry "Okay" in reply.

Kimiko wordlessly followed after Yonabari. Before leaving the room, she looked back at the sleeping Jinya, who had always done what he could for her. Even tonight, he'd risked his life to protect her. And yet she'd betrayed his kindness and was leaving the Akase home now.

"I'm sorry, Jiiya. Farewell."

With a heartrending thud, the door closed.

Kimiko did not choose her own safety, nor even to respect the efforts of those around her; she chose the life of Yoshihiko. Without anyone to stop them, the three left the Akase home behind.

They had failed to notice something, though.

***

"Grnngh..."

Jinya bit his lip hard enough to bleed, thereby remaining conscious. But his body was numb, leaving him unable to even lift a finger like Yonabari had said.

“Kimi…ko…”

He had sensed something was up. Still, he drank her tea anyway because he had judged it wasn’t a deadly poison and because he trusted her. She might have lied to him, but he knew she wouldn’t betray him. There was no denying she had matured a little, though.

Kimiko had decided to go to where Eizen was to save Yoshihiko. Even though so many people were trying to protect her, she had willingly sacrificed herself to save another. It was a selfish, foolish thing to do. Many would likely criticize her for it, but not Jinya. He thought her choice was a noble one.

He saw something resembling the determination Shirayuki had shown long, long ago in Kimiko as she left. He once saw beauty in Shirayuki’s own choice, and that was why he wouldn’t fault Kimiko now. He felt no regret in letting her do what she did, and he wouldn’t let her come to regret her choice either. She might have been in Eizen’s hands now, but her decision had meaning if Yoshihiko could be saved. Things were far from over. Jinya could still fulfill his promise.

He bit his lip hard and voiced a small murmur that faded into the darkness of the room.

The Night of Demise

1

A WEEK BEFORE the night Eizen's camp made their assault, Himawari met with Yoshihiko at a small theater called Koyomiza in Shibuya during one of the business's lulls while a film screened. Yoshihiko's mood was grim, his usual cheerfulness nowhere to be found.

"Are you sure of your choice?" Himawari asked. To tell the truth, she didn't care all that much about Yoshihiko's answer to the question she'd posed to him a while back. The only thing that mattered was Jinya's safety. What happened along the way wasn't important so long as she could guarantee that. Even if her good conscience ached over what might happen to Kimiko or Yoshihiko, their well-being paled in comparison to Jinya's.

"...I am." Yoshihiko's voice was strained. Yonabari had ordered him to feed the people of the Akase home a drug that would leave even demons unable to move. He should have been long dead with his innards in such a mess, but he still lived on because of Yonabari's ability. *Plaything* allowed Yonabari to prevent someone from dying, essentially making them their deathless toy. Yoshihiko's life was in Yonabari's hands. The moment they undid their ability, he would die from his heavy wounds.

"And you know what will come of it?"

"...I do." He smiled weakly, seeming close to tears. But what else could he do? He'd had no other choice from the start.

The plan was to have Kimiko drug Jinya herself. It was a sick move that clearly demonstrated Yonabari's sadism. Jinya would be betrayed by the very one he protected. By the time he awoke, everything would already be over, and there would be no recovering Ryuuna or Kimiko. Yonabari greatly enjoyed imagining the face he would make when he realized it was too late.

"I know full well what my decision will cause. That's why I'd like to ask for your help," Yoshihiko said.

“Well, that’s fine,” Himawari said, a bit perplexed. “It’s thanks to you I can avoid being drugged myself, and it’d be more convenient for me anyway if I could aid you.”

His eyes were dispirited, but a firm will could still be glimpsed in them. “And one more thing. Please, keep this a secret from Jiiya-san if you can.”

“I won’t tell him anything. I can’t. If he knew, he would only be more reckless than he already is. Besides, I’m certain he would drink the drug anyway even if I told him about it beforehand.”

Though the thought vexed her, Himawari was confident she was right on the mark here. Jinya was someone who would insist on acknowledging Kimiko’s choice, no matter how foolish it was. He would put himself in danger if it meant he could avoid tarnishing her determination. It was absolutely illogical, but he would do it anyway, because that was the way of life he held himself to.

“He would knowingly let himself be drugged, then still try to protect Kimiko and Ryuuna. And if he failed at that, he would just blame himself. He’s a complete fool of a man, honestly.” Though Himawari’s words were scathing, they were full of affection.

Yoshihiko apologetically lowered his head. “I’m sorry. It’s all because of me that—”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” Cutting Yoshihiko off, Himawari took his hands and wrapped them in her own. “Just as my uncle would respect Kimiko-san’s decision, I respect yours. Even if others might, I do not scorn your choice.”

If Kimiko’s choice was to be called wrong, then Yoshihiko’s must have been wrong as well. Humans were creatures who lived their lives committing both right and wrong actions, but demons like Himawari could not do the same. That was why she would not fault him. If anything, she was ever so slightly envious of his way of being. She felt an emotion that resembled adoration toward him.

And so, Yoshihiko’s decision became set in stone while his circumstances remained secret from Jinya.

“It’s time for me to fulfill my own purpose as well…”

Himawari’s murmur faded into the clear skies. That was the chat which transpired before the assault on the Akase home.

***

Though the Nagumo had been made irrelevant by the passage of time, Eizen swore he would make them known once more in the Taisho era. That was his unshakable goal.

His plan was to manufacture a crisis. The fall of spirit hunters was directly linked to the dwindling of spirits caused by modernization, so he planned to create a spirit capable of destroying the world that only the Nagumo could defeat. He would bring the country back to ancient times, back to the days when spirit hunters were still needed to slay the rampant spirits. And he needed both Ryuuna and his Yatonomori Kaneomi as his tools for his plot.

His Yatonomori Kaneomi blade held the ability *Demon Wail*, allowing it to seal away spirits inside its blade. By filling Ryuuna with a demon from inside the blade, the *Kodoku no Kago* would reach completion. She would embody both the kodoku ritual and kodoku fox poison. She would tempt men and birth demons as a poisonous temptress who brought ruin to the world—a second coming of Tamamo-no-Mae herself who would be heroically slain by the Nagumo.

That much Kimiko had been told, but she still didn't understand why she was a target.

"Ah, my dear Kimi. I'm so happy you've come."

That was why the sight of Eizen happily welcoming her was so off-putting. She didn't know why he wanted her, but she figured it could hardly be for anything good.

Eizen's private residence was on the outskirts of Tokyo. They were in an inner tatami-matted room lit only by shaky lamplight. Ryuuna was asleep where she had been dropped on the ground. Yonabari monitored both girls from nearby, and Yoshihiko was by their side. A number of demons were behind Eizen, perhaps serving as bodyguards.

There would be no escaping them. It didn't help that Yonabari still had Yoshihiko's life in their hands. Jinya was, of course, out of

commission because of the drug Kimiko herself had given him. Things looked hopeless. Though Kimiko had chosen this fate herself, she was scared and full of regret.

“You’ve done well, Yonabari. Consider your blunder of letting Ryuuna be stolen made up for,” Eizen said.

“Aw, dang. I was kinda hoping you’d forgotten that.”

Eizen made no response to Yonabari’s cheeky comment. He was in that good of a mood.

“So, are we gonna start with Ryuuna-chan first?” Yonabari asked.

“No. Let’s do things in the proper order and begin with Kimi.”

With a lurch, Yoshihiko began to tremble. Noticing, Yonabari smiled kindly and leaned over to whisper, “Don’t go doing anything silly, ’kay? You wouldn’t want to miss your dear friend’s last moments, now would you?”

Yonabari’s voice was loud enough to be overheard. Their gentle threat wasn’t for Yoshihiko alone but for Kimiko as well.

It was painful to watch Yoshihiko hang his head so dejectedly. Though she was afraid, Kimiko mustered the courage to glare sharply at Eizen and say, “Wh-why are you doing all this?”

Eizen made a nonplussed face, having not expected any form of resistance from her. The character of his sacrifice never once mattered to him.

“You’ve done terrible things to Ryuuna-san and Yoshihiko-san. Why? What is this all for?”

Kimiko’s words were more of an appeal to Eizen’s emotions than a genuine question. Her fate had been sealed the moment she did what Yonabari wanted, but she still held hope for Eizen, who had shown her more love than even her real grandfather, Seiichirou.

“My goal has been the same from the very start: the revival of the Nagumo. Nothing more, nothing less.”

But even that fleeting hope was snuffed out all too easily.

“That *thing* there will become a demon god. My *Kodoku no Kago*... A demon-birthing temptress who will bring ruin to the Taisho era.”

There was no point in trying to make him reconsider. This man, who was trying to remake Ryuuna into a monster, was himself a monster in the truest of senses.

“But that’s not enough. Every wicked spirit needs its slayer, and an old man like me is not fit to fulfill that role.”

The wrinkles of his face warped as he continued to speak on and off. Perhaps he meant to smile, but the only thing that could be felt or heard from his wide-eyed expression and raspy voice was insanity.

“That’s why I need you, my little Kimi.”

His fierce, obsessive gaze made her feel sick.

“I am only human. Though I’ve gained the inhuman ability to consume life for my own, I have been unable to bring myself to abandon my humanity as Kazusa’s father. No matter how much life force I store, my aging body will continue to wither and wither until I eventually meet my end. My ability to revive would be useless to me then.”

Though he could seem otherwise, Eizen was still very much human, and he was subject to the same natural mortality that befell all people. He could come back to life if he was killed, but reviving from a natural death would only cause him to die all over again. That was why he hadn’t sought to start from scratch when Ryuuna and Kimiko were taken—he simply didn’t have the time.

“I was worried I wouldn’t make it, but things seem to have come together in the end. You turn sixteen just this year as well. Fortune must indeed be smiling upon me.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I need a new body before my own withers away, my little Kimi, so I can continue to live.”

Kimiko’s mind went blank. Though she tried to wrap her head around what he had said, it just wouldn’t process. But a chill ran down her spine regardless, and she began to tremble.

“There’s no need to be afraid. I’m just going to swap the contents of your head for mine; that’s all. With the inhuman power I’ve gained from Furutsubaki, failure should be impossible.”

A great wave of nausea washed over her. The wheels of her mind finally began to spin again, the dots connecting. It all made sense now why her grandfather Seiichirou didn't let her go to school and had her stay home, why he tacitly allowed her to sneak out so long as she had an escort watching over her, and why Eizen asked about her health every time they met.

"Th-then, the reason you always asked if I've been healthy when we met was because…"

"Well, of course, it'd be a problem if you died before things were ready. You've done well to grow up so healthy. I'm delighted, Kimi."

Her own development as a person didn't matter so long as her body was unharmed and healthy. She was nothing more than a sacrifice like Ryuuna, a body grown only as an offering to Eizen so he could extend his life.

"Th-that can't be…" She couldn't bear the truth, and tears fell from her eyes.

Back on the night of the evening party, Eizen had said he was going to introduce the new Nagumo family head to everyone. Now she understood what he meant. He had planned to take her body and introduce his new self as the next family head.

Kimiko collapsed to her knees, feeling as though the ground had disappeared underneath her. She couldn't do anything but continue to cry.

"I can't very well call myself Eizen after taking your body, so I shall assume a new name—*Kazusa*! The slayer of the *Kodoku no Kago*, the mad demon god who tried to bring ruin to the Taisho world; the great leader who will bring the Nagumo back to their former glory! Nagumo! Kazusa! Ah, how my heart pounds!"

Eizen was no longer even looking at Kimiko, instead spewing mad nonsense with a smile. Even his underling Yonabari looked put off.

"Ick, nasty. I don't want to even imagine this creepy old guy going inside Kimiko-chan's body…" Yonabari hadn't sworn loyalty to Eizen or anything like that. They had their own reasons for coming

to serve him, but Eizen's actions rubbed even them the wrong way. "This guy's sure messed up in the head, huh, Yoshihiko-kun?"

Yoshihiko watched from next to Ryuuna, but he didn't react much even when Yonabari said his name. He muttered something with his head down, looking restlessly between Ryuuna and Kimiko.

"What's up? You okay?" Yonabari examined Yoshihiko's face. Wondering what was going on, Kimiko looked over as well.

His eyes were focused and fearless, which was strange in and of itself in such a situation. His restless looking back and forth came to a halt, then he suddenly ran forward. He dashed up to Kimiko, boldly jumping between her and Eizen.

"...Yoshihiko-san?" Through eyes blurred with tears, she gazed at him from behind. His small back didn't make him look all that dependable, but he was fearless. He stood to protect her, even though Yonabari had his life in their hands. With her mind left numb by Eizen's words, she couldn't even begin to understand what he was doing.

"What's the meaning of this, young man?" Eizen couldn't understand Yoshihiko's actions either. He looked at him with the piercing stare of both a veteran spirit hunter and a mad cannibal, a gaze that would make any other man's hair stand on end, but Yoshihiko didn't cower in the slightest.

"Himawari-chan told me her ability lets her know the location of whoever she touches."

Eizen's annoyed grimace grew deeper, while Yonabari gave an impressed chuckle. Those reactions were meant to make light of Yoshihiko, though. They expected nothing from him. To them, he was nothing more than a hostage to control Kimiko.

Kidnapping Kimiko did make Himawari's ability a potential threat, but with their strongest fighter Jinya out of commission, her remote viewing ability was basically meaningless. As that was common knowledge between everyone present, Yoshihiko should have had no reason to be so confident. And yet, he sounded sure of his victory as he spoke.

"Using her ability, she managed to find this place a good while ago. After all, Yonabari-san's taken me here a number of times

already.”

The paper screens and sliding doors were smashed through as lesser demons broke into the room. A smoky smell wafted across as well. The temperature in the room began to rise slightly, and the sound of crackling filled the air.

In an instant, red-hot flames suddenly appeared. Somebody had set fire to the home, but its spread was abnormally fast—something that could only be explained by gunpowder or oil prepared in advance.

“You brat!” Eizen seethed.

“It’s your own fault for staying holed up in your room, old man. You don’t have a single servant in this place. This was all too easy to set up.” Yoshihiko grinned like a mischievous little imp, but his face was pale, and his hands were sweaty. Everyone could tell he was only holding back his fear as best he could.

“That’s strange. I thought you decided to be a good boy and obey us,” Yonabari said. They’d believed he had been too afraid of dying to go against their orders, and Kimiko assumed the same. That was why she had gone to Eizen in the first place, to save Yoshihiko.

“I did make a decision, but that wasn’t it. I figured if I’m going to die anyway, I might as well get a good hit back in first.”

A massive eight-foot-tall demon appeared at that moment and swung its beefy arm. Yonabari jumped back to dodge, but the huge demon just changed the course of its swing and scooped up Ryuuna instead.

“I got her, Yoshihiko-kun,” a cheery voice that didn’t match the tension called out. On one of the massive demon’s shoulders rode Himawari.

“Kimiko-san, let’s run!”

“Huh, Y-Yoshihiko-san? Y-you’re holding my hand?!”

While Eizen was distracted, Yoshihiko took Kimiko by the hand and pulled her away. The two of them ran as fast as they could. Though the massive demon stood in the direction they were going, Yoshihiko was fearless.

The smoothness with which everything happened made it clear this had all been planned from the start. Yoshihiko had only planned to obey Yonabari and conspired with Himawari to outwit Eizen.

“Damned braaaaat!” Eizen yelled, enraged. The demons that had been behind him began chasing Yoshihiko and Kimiko. The pair were defenseless against them.

Laying the groundwork for a fire, having Himawari’s demons save Ryuuna, and securing Kimiko had all gone as planned, but this alone wouldn’t be enough. Himawari couldn’t fight, and naturally neither could Yoshihiko. The lesser demons Himawari brought wouldn’t be sufficient to stop either Eizen or Yonabari. Their surprise attack may have worked, but it wouldn’t be enough.

“Yoshihiko-san, they’re coming!”

“Just keep running, Kimiko-san!”

They ran as hard as they could, but the demons caught up to them easily. One reached out to swing its claws down at Yoshihiko’s head.

“Keh, keh keh. Such purity you show, youngster. You’re willing to throw away your life if it means you can strike back, I see.”

Kimiko looked back and saw that the demon behind them had now been cut down. A man wearing archaic clothes and wielding a sword stood in its place, standing in Eizen’s way.

“Who—”

“Okada Kiichi. A humble murderer,” Kiichi answered before Eizen could even finish his question.

Eizen grimaced. Moments from achieving his goals, he’d been outwitted by a child he considered far beneath him. Enraged, he directed all his bloodlust at Kiichi and Yoshihiko.

“Are you certain? I doubt you have time to waste on us,” Kiichi said.

Yoshihiko looked puzzled. Everything so far was going as planned, but Kiichi’s words were unexpected.

The tension had faded slightly because there was distance between them and Eizen, but that didn’t last long. The flames

seemed to momentarily shimmer behind Eizen, when suddenly a figure appeared and closed the distance to him. No one could react to the abrupt development as Eizen's skull was split in a blink.

"Guagh?!" Eizen cried out as one of his lives was suddenly shaved away. The assailant followed up by piercing his heart, then kicking away his withered body.

"You really came after all. Honestly, what a foolish man you are," Himawari murmured warmly, as though she'd expected this.

"I owe you an apology, Yoshihiko-kun. I underestimated you." The man walked slowly even though the mansion was burning around him.

With her voice full of emotion, Kimiko exclaimed, "Jiiya!"

She had betrayed him despite his efforts to protect her, and yet he'd still come to her aid again anyway.

His reasons were obvious. Though his body shouldn't have been able to move, he was here to fulfill the promise he had made to her father.

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He'd made it in time, just barely. Though he felt full of relief, Jinya steeled himself. He couldn't let his guard down in front of the cannibal.

"J-Jiiya, I..." Kimiko's voice trembled. She tried to say something, but Jinya shook his head to stop her.

"You've done nothing wrong, my lady. You tried to protect Yoshihiko's life, and that's not something you should regret."

He accepted what she had done. He saw something precious in her decision and had no intention of either stopping or faulting her for it. He didn't think he had been betrayed. Far from it, he was happy. The once-young Kimiko had become able to make important decisions for herself. He smiled, feeling keenly how much she had grown.

"...You have no reason to regret anything, anyway."

He stood in front of Kimiko and the rest and faced Eizen. Eizen had already revived and was directing a vicious look his way. Jinya sharpened his gaze in kind, making an equally lethal look.

“Things would have ended up the same either way. There’s nothing to worry about.”

He would protect Kimiko and Ryuuna both and emerge victorious without fail. Though the process may have changed, the goal hadn’t. There was nothing Kimiko could be blamed for.

“So you’ve come, Demon Eater.”

“I couldn’t very well stay in bed when there was a man who needed killing.”

He would kill Eizen with his own hands. Not just for hurting Kimiko and Ryuuna, but for causing so much damage to the world around him. Eizen was a threat to the world of man, and for that he needed to be put down.

Jinya readied his two swords and loudly declared, “Nagumo Eizen. We’ve known each other for a while now, but it all comes to an end tonight.”

The night of demise had begun.

2

BLACK SMOKE COILED around the body and roasted the skin. Lungs charred with every breath. The fire had only grown in intensity, bathing the room in a vivid orange as objects crackled in the distance.

The flames had spread across the floor and climbed the walls, making the air shimmer from the heat. The fire had spread unnaturally quickly, as though fuel had been prepared beforehand. In less than thirty minutes, the place would be razed to the ground.

Jinya had been told nothing of the others’ plan, but he saw Yoshihiko’s courage in the face of his inevitable death and was moved by it. Himawari was working for Kimiko’s sake as well, even going as far as to rely on Kiichi’s help. Their actions gave him energy. Though he hadn’t intended to steal their thunder, he’d

arrived just in time to aid them, so he had a responsibility to see things through. He would end Eizen's life tonight before the building could completely burn down.

"Himawari, get the three of them out of here." There was no way Jinya could fight Eizen while holding back Yonabari and the lesser demons at the same time. He encouraged Himawari to flee with the others, but a different demon replied.

"Mind if I help out, Demon Eater?" Izuchi, the large demon Jinya had defeated not long ago, appeared. He stepped forward with a grimace on his face, perhaps pained by his wounds, if not something else.

"What are you doing here?" Jinya questioned.

"That Himawari girl invited me along. I've disgraced myself once already by gettin' spared. I figure a little more shame won't make a difference." He scratched his cheek as he made his excuse. He didn't seem to carry any ill will. His true intentions were unclear, but perhaps he was trying to make up for his misdeeds somehow. Unable to accept his limitations, he had served Eizen and aided in the harm of two young girls, but now that he'd come to terms with his weakness, he would no longer stand for Eizen's actions.

Izuchi's allies didn't seem to care in the slightest to learn he was alive. Eizen didn't react at all, while Yonabari only indifferently said, "Oh, so you're alive, Izuchi? What's with the sudden change of heart?"

"I've come to terms with my weakness."

Yonabari made a face but was too annoyed to bother asking any follow-up questions.

"Interesting. If this big demon here will protect the children, then I think I'll take the minions for myself." Kiichi sized up Yonabari and the lesser demons nearby. "Keh keh keh. Don't worry, I'm not so shameless as to sully your pride," he said to Jinya. "I won't lay a finger on your prey. Unless you die first, that is."

Kiichi would offer Jinya no help in his fight, but of course, that was exactly what Jinya wanted. In situations like this, Kiichi was a dependable ally. Even now, he still embodied the pure way of life Jinya had once longed to live himself.

“I appreciate it, but don’t count on getting a turn,” Jinya said.

“You talk big for the likes of a *demon*.” Eizen seethed at Jinya’s mocking comment. His eyes were clouded with a dark emotion, perhaps anger or hatred. Jinya, on the other hand, let his arms hang without taking a stance. The two glared at each other as they slid their feet slightly, adjusting their distance from one another.

Eizen didn’t attack while the others talked because Jinya showed no openings at any point. Jinya had hoped Eizen would be foolish enough to charge in, but even taunting him didn’t work.

“I’ll be counting on you, then, Izuchi.”

“Heh. Leave ’em to me.” Sounding happy, Izuchi gave a firm reply. He took Ryuuna and held her in his arms, then began to leave the room.

The place would turn into a bloodbath soon. Jinya didn’t want the younger ones around to see it.

“U-um, Jinya-san?” Yoshihiko called out.

“Yes?”

“Um, well… Could you please give that old man a solid punch for me?”

The unexpectedness of the request flummoxed Jinya. Amused by his reaction, Izuchi roared with laughter despite the tension. “Well said, kid!”

“Aha ha ha. I mean, there’s clearly no way I could get a hit in myself, but…I’m still angry, you know?” Even though it went unsaid, Jinya understood what Yoshihiko meant. Yoshihiko was angry Eizen had tried to hurt Kimiko.

Jinya was glad she had someone who cared about her so much. Without looking back, he replied, “Got it.”

“Who said you could leave?” Eizen was about to chase after them, but a single step forward from Kiichi stopped him in his tracks.

“Jiiya…” Even as Yoshihiko began to follow Izuchi, Kimiko made no move to leave. She looked worryingly at Jinya but didn’t seem to know what to say.

Jinya had always had a soft spot for such looks. Nomari and Suzune would see him off with similar faces when he left to fight.

“...I’d love to enjoy your black tea again sometime,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Some of us are a bit too young for liquor, so let’s toast with tea after this is all over. Together, with everyone.”

He spoke as though his victory was a foregone conclusion. Of course, he couldn’t truly be that confident, but he didn’t want her to look so sad.

“Yes... Yes, I would like that. So, please, come back safe.” Though her eyes were teary, she gave him a brave smile. On Himawari’s urging, she reluctantly followed the others and left. Kiichi looked away, as though to say their safety was no longer a concern of his.

“Yonabari.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

On Eizen’s orders, Yonabari left. Jinya didn’t know whether they were pursuing Kimiko and the rest or up to something else, but he had no choice but to trust Izuchi and Himawari to protect the young ones.

The only ones left in the room were Jinya, Eizen, Kiichi, and several lesser demons. There was no need for further talk. An end would be reached here.

The flames stirred like rough waves. Amid it all, Eizen stood perfectly still. His murderous malice, even more intense than the blaze, was directed entirely at Jinya. The very tension in the air seemed to burn from his fury.

Something crackled in the distance with a sharp pop. At the same instant, Eizen began to move. Though he beelined straight for Jinya, his steps were silent throughout with no wasted movement, making him almost seem to be sneaking closer.

“Ssshyah!”

His hands held the Yatonomori Kaneomi demonic sword of *Demon Wail*. Its elegant blade curved like a whip and glowed amber with flame as he swung it at Jinya’s neck.

Jinya blocked with Kaneomi and swept the strike aside with sheer strength. Then he slashed diagonally with Yarai, but Eizen was faster and dodged. Jinya tried to make a second strike, but Eizen evaded that as well with footwork, stepping in at the same time and cutting skin with a blow of his own.

“What’s the matter, Demon Eater? You seem sluggish.”

Eizen didn’t let up. A black miasma rose from his sword as he forcibly drew out the ability of a demon sealed inside his blade. The miasma veiled the blade and made it twice, then thrice as long. Eizen held it aloft and swung it down at such speed that it became a blur. It was a crude attack, all strength and no technique.

“Ngh!”

And yet the blow was heavy. Eizen had strength unthinkable for his withered body. Unable to dodge in time, Jinya was forced to block, but he couldn’t do so fully. The blade of miasma dug into his flesh and made blood spray forth. But it didn’t reach the bone. He had stopped the sword blade itself; only the miasma had cut into him.

Eizen had many lives stored up, but in terms of pure fighting power Jinya should have been greater. The two had been an equal match for one another in their last encounter, but Jinya was on the back foot this time.

“Ha ha ha. I see. I thought it strange you could move after drinking my drug, but that’s not it at all, is it?” Eizen laughed maliciously. Jinya had made far too many crude moves. What had been only a suspicion was turned into conviction after only a few brief exchanges. “Demon Eater... You *can’t* move, can you?”

Jinya knew firsthand that the world wasn’t such a kind place as to favor the determined. Even if one vowed to emerge victorious, fought for the sake of others, or carried the wishes of many with them into battle—one could lose all the same. It didn’t matter how much heart one fought with; there were unreasonable monsters out there who could render it all in vain anyway. Jinya himself had found many new things to treasure along his journey and found strength in things other than power, but he’d still tasted defeat all the same at the raw power of Magatsume.

There were things determination alone could not hope to best. Eizen had surmised Jinya's state correctly. His body was numb from the drugs, and he could hardly lift a finger.

"Kadono-dono..." Kaneomi worriedly said.

"It's fine." Jinya smiled wryly. The cat had gotten out of the bag quicker than he'd expected.

It would be one thing if he could make his body move through sheer force of will alone, but no, the drug he drank had left even his mind addled. It took all he had to even hold a thought. The only reason why he wasn't unconscious now was because he had slit his own belly to stay awake from the pain, and his numb body only fought because the ability *Spirit* was forcibly manipulating him.

Eizen attacked recklessly, having realized Jinya posed little threat as he was. Jinya tried his best to dodge, but his wounds only increased. Forced to focus on defense, Jinya was driven further and further into a corner.

"How pathetic," Eizen said. "It looks like all the life I've gorged on will go to waste."

The situation was unfavorable. Jinya was fighting at less than half his usual strength. Still, he would have died ages ago if something like this were enough to kill him.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

It wasn't his way to stay on the receiving end. Since he was so physically numb, abilities that used his body like *Superhuman Strength* and *Dart* were essentially meaningless.

But he had other ways to fight.

Jinya closed the distance himself and swung. Eizen dodged, then aimed a swing of his own at Jinya's neck. Just then, Jinya activated *Jishibari* to try and coil chains around Eizen's sword, but it failed. The miasma around the blade shattered *Jishibari*'s chains. However, Jinya had succeeded in diverting the strike ever so slightly, and he used the opening to take a big step in and thrust through Eizen's throat.

"Grngh?!"

"Let your guard down all you like. I'll gladly shave off some of your lives for free."

Jinya pulled his sword out, then instantly bounded forward again and leapt. Such movement should have been impossible, but *Spirit* allowed him to move in unnatural ways.

He stabbed Yarai into Eizen's shoulder from above to hold him in place, then crushed his head with a knee strike using his full momentum. Gray matter splattered out from the mashed skull. With this, Jinya had shaved off a life.

Though this would have ended any ordinary foe, Eizen was hardly fazed and had already started preparing his own attack as he died.

"Hrmph. How careless of me. You remain a nuisance yet," Eizen said condescendingly. The black miasma solidified into the shape of spears, and not even *Indomitable* would fully defend against them.

Jinya's moves were limited. He used *Dog Spirits*, summoning black hounds to stave off Eizen's strikes and the black miasma. One dog, two dogs, three—the *Dog Spirits* acted as a shield against the spears. In the gaps, he used *Spirit* to make his body dodge in unnatural ways.

But there were simply too many spears.

"Damn."

Two of the black spears struck him cleanly, one in his left foot and the other in his abdomen. The pain felt more like burning than being cut. As he had slit his own belly earlier, the bleeding intensified.

Jinya wasn't about to stay on the receiving end, though. He wove his way through the flurry of spears and struck, his blade cutting through Eizen's abdomen.

"Damned thieving demon..."

As luck would have it, *Spirit* allowed Jinya to keep moving no matter how much pain he felt. He continued his strikes, stepping forward with his left foot and swinging both blades. Yarai dug into Eizen's lungs, but Kaneomi was stopped.

Jinya's expression didn't change, but he was shocked by what he saw. Eizen had caught Kaneomi's blade with his bare hand.

"Is this all, Demon Eater?"

Eizen had many lives to spare and was unconcerned with being injured, but this had nothing to do with that. He caught the blade with his bare hand—yet his skin remained uncut. Eizen's whole arm had turned black.

Eizen took the sword and flung it, tossing Jinya along with it. This was not the strength of an old man in his eighties.

"He transformed...? No, maybe corruption."

The black miasma was the ability of the demon sealed in the demonic sword of *Demon Wail*. By using it continuously, Eizen's body had grown accustomed to its power. In other words, he was drawing closer to becoming a monster.

Given his hatred for demons, it was hard to think he had planned this, but it was troubling nonetheless. Eizen already posed a problem with his life-storing ability alone. If he obtained the body of a demon as well, Jinya would have no chance of winning. He needed to end this quickly.

The moment Jinya landed on the ground, he closed the distance once more and found an opening to cut Eizen's left arm off with Yarai. But that wouldn't stop the old man, who fired off the same spears of miasma from before. Jinya calmly gazed at the approaching spears and used *Jishibari*.

"Ha ha ha."

A chill ran down Jinya's spine. He froze at the eerie look of joy on Eizen's face. His earlier intensity was gone, replaced with mockery in his eyes.

Jinya had aimed *Jishibari* at both the spears and Eizen, but the demonic sword of *Demon Wail* moaned fiercer than ever before. Black miasma gushed forth from it all at once like a geyser. It brimmed with power as though determined to end things in only one more strike. Jinya could not take this blow or even allow it to graze him.

Jinya immediately abandoned his attack. He swatted aside the miasma spears with Kaneomi and leapt back. The moment his feet hit the ground, he dropped his center of gravity low, leaving himself free to react whenever he needed to.

That was his first mistake.

The Nagumo were a family of famous spirit hunters, so they certainly knew how to kill a demon: crush the head, slice the neck, or pierce the heart. Jinya assumed the strike would come for one of these vital points.

That was his second mistake.

Eizen's strike did not aim for any of Jinya's vitals. The strike came slow, but Jinya knew that even a graze would be lethal, so he took a step back. The instant he did so, Eizen's speed multiplied like a spring-loaded toy.

"Wha—"

The black miasma veiled not just Eizen's blade, but his arm as well. His advancing corruption made his body faster too. This was far beyond Jinya's expectations.

The strike's drastic increase in speed left Jinya surprised. If it had been aimed for one of his vitals, he might still have been able to react in time. But its true aim was elsewhere.

"You're too slow."

Jinya realized all too late that Eizen was a user of demonic blades as well as a previous owner of Kaneomi. It was only natural to assume he knew about the ability *Spirit*. His target was not Jinya's head, neck, or even heart—but the very Yatonomori Kaneomi blade that controlled him.

Since he had focused on evasion, Jinya's stance was weak and Kaneomi was defenseless. With a shrill snap, she broke into pieces. Jinya couldn't help but be reminded of fine glass shattering.

That was the end. With Yatonomori Kaneomi broken, *Spirit* lost its effect and Jinya immediately crumpled to his knees.

"Begone, foul pest upon this world." Eizen wouldn't even wait for Jinya to fall. He aimed a follow-up strike at his heart.

Kaneomi reacted with the last of her strength, trying to move Jinya away from the approaching miasma. Jinya himself hadn't given up. Though he knew it was meaningless, he used *Indomitable* and wove a net of chains in front of himself with *Jishibari*.

The chains were destroyed with ease, and his body burned with agony unlike anything he had felt before. He was sent flying back, crashing into the wall behind him.

“Keh… Keh. Ka ha ha ha ha! Know your place, demon! You were conceited to think you could stand against the Nagumo!” Eizen began to laugh like a madman.

The effects of the drug lingered on. Jinya couldn’t even stand up again without the aid of *Spirit*.

“I’ve defeated the Demon Eater. You’re next!” Eizen glared at Kiichi, who was watching their fight. Perhaps he was wary that Kiichi would attack the moment he went for the kill on Jinya. All Eizen had left to do was deal the finishing blow, but he made no move to go near him.

“A fight between a man unable to draw out his full power and a man unable to die. What a dull spectacle this was,” Kiichi said, sounding disappointed. “Nonetheless, I promised not to lay a finger on you until he was dead, and I am a man of my word.”

Indifferently, Kiichi told Eizen to finish off Jinya before they fought.

“You would let him die?”

“To help him would only cast mud on his will.”

Kiichi meant it. He was happy to forsake Jinya and then duel with the undying monster himself. If Jinya died here, then that was all he was worth. For Kiichi, to cross swords with another was to stake one’s life.

Jinya was grateful Kiichi was such a man. He had challenged Eizen of his own free will, and he did not want the shame of leaving his fight to another.

He felt something change with Eizen. Though the old man didn’t seem to fully trust Kiichi, he decided he was telling the truth about not interfering and began to approach Jinya. He picked up the arm Jinya had cut off, then connected it to the fleshy wound left on his shoulder. Just like that, Eizen’s arm was back to normal.

In stark contrast, Jinya was riddled with wounds. His heart and lungs were unharmed, but his skin and flesh were cut up, and the bones of his arms and some ribs were broken. The only silver lining was that the pain kept his consciousness sharp.

“Are you all right?”

“Still alive, for the time being.” If anything, Kaneomi might have been in worse shape than Jinya now that her blade had shattered. The sword was Kaneomi herself. Her spirit would fade in time with her blade broken.

“Kadono-dono… It appears that trying to interpret your will and moving you myself was not enough to defeat Eizen. However, I have an idea.”

“No.” He didn’t even wait to hear her out. They’d known each other long enough for him to realize what she might come up with, and he wouldn’t have it. His voice was as soft as it was curt.

“Thank you, Kadono-dono. I’ve truly been blessed to have such a considerate master.”

He had appreciated her, not as a sword with an ability of its own but as a person. And his feelings were reciprocated. Unhesitatingly, she made her will clear.

“With my blade broken, it is only a matter of time before I fade away. Please, allow me to live on as well.”

Jinya knew, objectively, that her decision was correct. It was his only option to break out of this dilemma. Not a single other way forward was left on the table.

It was simple, really. He just had to devour her. By doing so, he could take charge of himself instead of being controlled by her. If he could move as he willed, then he wouldn’t make mistakes like he had earlier. But he refused her, not out of reason but out of simple emotion. He couldn’t stand the thought of parting with the sword that had been by his side for so many years.

Kaneomi’s voice softened. She couldn’t hide the warm emotion that bled into her voice. *“Akitsu Somegorou once said my place to be was with you. I think there was truth in his words.”*

Objects passed through the hands of man not by chance but because they themselves wished to go somewhere. Those were the words of Akitsu Somegorou the Third. In this moment, Jinya could appreciate their meaning.

The sword that had failed to protect Nagumo Kazusa drifted aimlessly until it met a swordmaster said to slay demons in a single strike. Through their chance encounter, they formed a strange bond

over a long time. Not quite that of master and servant, nor husband and wife. He was not a replacement for Kazusa. Kaneomi herself wished to stay by his side, and he wished the same. That was what allowed them to sustain their bond.

"...I think it might all have been for this moment today. I've existed until now to become your strength."

If not fate, then perhaps this was a conclusion reached through their shared will.

The depth of her affection could be heard in her voice, and Jinya could refuse her no longer. To do so would be to sully her will.

"Kaneomi, lend me your strength. I need you."

"Gladly. I am your wife, after all," she joked in a bright voice.

"I'm surprised you can still be so cheerful at a time like this," he said, a little flummoxed.

Happily, she replied, *"What's to be surprised about? This proves that I'm number one among all the women you've met."* Before he could ask what she meant, she continued, *"Till death do us part. Could there be any greater honor for a woman?"*

The two of them would quite literally be one until his death, and she seemed overjoyed by that fact.

With this, the last of Jinya's hesitation faded. He put strength into his left arm. Warm memories flowed into him, and his consciousness faded into white.

3

EIZEN CASUALLY STEPPED forward as the building went up in flames around them. The undying man's indifferent behavior came more out of pride than carelessness and more out of arrogance than pride. He saw the battle as over and was wary of nothing. That meant he was full of openings for an attack.

"Gack?!"

Jinya leaped up and thrust without a moment's delay. His surprise attack pierced Eizen's heart, taking yet another life from

him.

Though they had fallen from grace, the Nagumo were still a famous line of spirit hunters. By all logic, Eizen should have been able to react to any mediocre surprise attack. He certainly had the techniques to back up his arrogance. And yet, he couldn't dodge. Jinya was too fast, stepping in like a speeding bullet and taking Eizen's heart without hesitation.

The clumsy movements Jinya had shown earlier were gone and his usual smooth ones had returned.

"...How?"

"You should already know."

It didn't matter that Jinya was covered in wounds. He had his "wife" supporting him from the inside.

"*Spirit*... The ability to puppet a body even if its bones break, its organs are crushed, or its tendons are cut. With this, I can finally properly fight."

Just as Eizen fed on the lives of humans, Jinya devoured demons. By consuming Kaneomi, he had gained her *Spirit* and could now use it as he pleased.

"Wretched demon... You would devour even the demonic blade of *Spirit*?"

"I would. And now I have even more reason to defeat you."

The strength Jinya had now was far from the unadulterated power he'd once longed for. He had burdened himself with excess and clouded the purity of his sword. His blade was heavy, its edge was dull, and it had grown far too important for him to let go of it.

"I will shave away all your lives here and now."

The mansion continued to be engulfed in an unrelenting conflagration. Intuitively, the two of them both understood that demise was near.

"Rubbish. The likes of you cannot defeat me." Eizen seemed to find Jinya's bold words laughable. He glared as his pierced heart regenerated. "Let us find out: Which of us will be the one to fall dead?"

Either way, it would all end here, and so there was no need to hold back.

There was a sharp inhale. Who could say who it came from?

The two of them both drew back slightly at the same time. Not to create distance from their foe but to adjust the range and ensure their strike would be lethal.

Jinya slashed diagonally with Yarai, cutting from Eizen's shoulder to his opposite hip. Eizen's withered body was sliced apart, but he didn't let it stop him. He'd been planning from the start to use his amassed lives to his advantage and aim to trade blows. Before Jinya could move into his second attack, black miasma formed into a spear and pierced him.

"Despite all your talk, it ends so disappointingly." Eizen grinned triumphantly, but Jinya remained calm.

"What're you saying? I was the one aiming to trade blows."

The area of flesh where Jinya had been struck festered and began to melt. Normally this would have dulled his movements, but now he had Kaneomi supporting him. Jinya ignored the pain and used *Spirit* to step in, aiming for Eizen's right arm, which wielded the demonic sword of *Demon Wail*.

"Naive!" Eizen rotated his wrist and cleanly met Jinya's blade. With fluid motions, he began to exchange strikes with Jinya.

The Nagumo were worthy of their epithet. Eizen truly possessed great skill with the sword. Despite being human, he deftly handled Jinya's strikes.

"What's the matter? Weren't you going to kill me completely?" The old man smirked.

Jinya watched him calmly and continued to focus on his swings. He took several of Eizen's lives in the process, but Eizen continued to protect his right arm.

As a veteran fighter, Eizen knew well where his own weakness lay. Though he had plenty of lives with which he could keep reviving, without his demonic blade he would lack a good means to fight.

"I see no reason to rush," Jinya said calmly as they traded blows. Having devoured Kaneomi, he swore to himself that he

would win. But determination alone didn't win battles. Though he could move again, he was only back to his usual self. He lacked the pressure he needed to completely overwhelm Eizen.

To win, Jinya would need to prepare some elements. The battle from this point on would be something like a shogi problem. He would need to lay out the necessary elements one by one and create an insurmountable board position.

"There are a few things I've come to know about you, Eizen. One, it takes a fair amount of time for your blade to create miasma. You can't use it to make other attacks while you're using it as a sword, for example."

Eizen's brow twitched briefly. It seemed Jinya's hypothesis was right. He required time to veil his sword in miasma, and he couldn't suddenly create spears while focusing on trading blows like they currently were doing. Of course, Jinya had begun this exchange of blows on that assumption.

"And what of—" Eizen tried to say something, but he suddenly lost balance.

Jinya watched as his opponent was taken by surprise. Calmly and expressionlessly, he said, "*Invisibility* and *Jishibari*. You couldn't spare any attention to your surroundings, could you?"

He had made Eizen focus on his blade while his real intention was to make use of the hidden chains prepared around them—a trap he had set up while he was downed.

Eizen staggered, trying to regain his balance. Such a simple trap would only work once, so Jinya had to make it count.

"While I'm at it, let me fulfill Yoshihiko-kun's request and give you a solid punch here."

Jinya drew his left arm back. With *Oneness*, he used *Spirit* and *Superhuman Strength* together. His left arm swelled as an abnormal strength carried his fist forward and into Eizen's face. Eizen's skull was mercilessly crushed, but Jinya didn't let up. He struck a second time, swinging Yarai with a backhand grip to cleanly take Eizen's right arm. His Yatonomori Kaneomi blade flew into the air.

"Ngrrh, you…damned…demon!" Eizen seethed.

“Two, your *Assimilation* lets you store the lives of humans you devour.”

It wasn’t over yet. Eizen reached for his demonic blade, but Jinya snared him with chains and yanked him away. They would be right back where they started if Eizen could reclaim his sword, and Jinya wasn’t so careless as to squander his opportunity.

“Three, the limit to the number of lives you can store is unknown. Four, you revive automatically when you die. As you do so, even important organs like your brain and heart are restored. You always return to your normal state. Seeing as you revive even with your brain smashed, the revival must occur whether you will it or not.”

Eizen struggled through the chains, tearing them apart. His strength had increased, likely due to the corruption of *Demon Wail*. Jinya had originally planned to continue with Eizen held in place by *Jishibari*, but no matter.

“However, I couldn’t help but notice that you picked your head up after I cut it off and reattached it yourself. You picked up and attached your arm earlier as well. But when I smashed your skull in, it regenerated in no time at all.”

Things were fine. The plan wasn’t set in stone, even with Eizen free from the chains.

Jinya thought the old man would dash for the sword now that he was free, but instead Eizen rushed at Jinya. As he did so, he pulled out a short sword from the folds of his clothes. Even the most proficient of fighters had to have a plan B in case things went south, so this much was to be expected.

“Perish, you vermin!” Eizen spat. He aimed a thrust at Jinya’s heart. In contrast with his rage, his strike was well honed and controlled.

Jinya thought about dodging but ultimately decided against it. He’d needed too many lucky breaks to get to this point. If he dodged, Eizen would take the opportunity to make distance and put them back at square one. It would be better for Jinya to let himself be stabbed. So long as it wasn’t his heart, neck, or head, he would be fine. He dropped his center of gravity low and thrust his own right shoulder at the approaching blade tip.

“Gngh…”

The blade pierced skin and flesh, reaching through to the bone. He didn’t let the pain show on his face, though. Without halting his momentum, he slammed his body into Eizen. He could feel it was a good hit. Bones cracked with ease as the old man’s withered body was sent flying back.

But Jinya didn’t let up there. Using *Spirit* and *Dart* in tandem, he followed up with a full-force punch, adjusting the direction Eizen went flying. He wanted to take him toward the doma, an interior space of the home with a dirt floor that connected outside, used as both kitchen, workshop, and storage. An impressive mansion like this had a fittingly spacious doma. With this, half his plan was complete.

Eizen flew through the air and crashed into a large earthenware pot situated in the doma. Inside wasn’t water but viscous oil. “Ngh, you cheeky little…”

Even after Jinya had killed Eizen so many times, it still wasn’t enough. It was impossible to guess just how many lives he had stockpiled.

“Ngh…” Jinya drew near, his arm still wounded. “Where was I… Right. In other words, non-critical parts that are separated from your body regenerate slowly, except when they’re crushed entirely.”

While Eizen moved to get up, Jinya made a spear hand with his left and pierced Eizen’s chest. *Finally*, Jinya thought, smiling boldly.

“That is to say: Five—there’s a priority to what is regenerated, and you can’t change it!”

Jinya clenched part of Eizen’s lung and windpipe as he wrapped his fist around the heart and pulled outward with all his strength. The heart sickeningly pulsated in Jinya’s hand. A gaping red maw was left in Eizen’s torn rib cage, robbed of its contents.

The cannibal, Eizen, coughed up blood and sneered. “And…? What of it?”

Jinya couldn’t actually make out Eizen’s words after his lungs and windpipe had been taken, but he guessed it was something like that. Though only a raspy, breathless noise left Eizen’s lips, his eyes

looked down on Jinya, mocking him for acting so victorious when he would only soon revive once more.

"You said your power was called *Assimilation*... I'm sure it's only a coincidence, but I can't help but feel like it's some kind of fate." Jinya paid Eizen's eyes no mind and put strength into his left arm. They'd reached the final moves of their shogi problem. "My own ability is similar in that it lets me take from those I devour. But there's another use to it. I can use it to assimilate my flesh into another."

Jinya's left arm had actually been given to him through such means. After many years of experience, he could now mimic what the demon of *Superhuman Strength* had done.

Eizen smirked when he heard Jinya's explanation. His heart was already regenerating. Once it had fully recovered, he could counterattack right away...or so he thought. Just before his heart fully regained shape, he was pierced by a blade once more.

"Guagh?!"

He didn't understand what had happened, and confusion filled his face. Jinya looked at him and let out a sigh of relief.

"My blood is a part of me...and now it's a part of you. My *Blood Blade* will never leave your body."

It had taken a while, but this was the checkmate.

"If I crush your heart, you'll just regenerate it. But your body prioritizes regenerating some things before others, and I'm willing to bet the things more critical to survival, such as your heart, are prioritized first."

Eizen floundered and writhed, making a noise too raspy to call a shriek. He looked pitiful, but Jinya showed no mercy. He cut off the old man's arms, then his legs. This time Jinya was the one looking down on him.

"Since you don't consciously control your revival, you shouldn't be able to change the order you regenerate in. Hence, so long as your heart hasn't finished regenerating, things like your lungs and windpipe can't regenerate either. But my blood is a part of you now. It won't be removed as you regenerate, meaning my *Blood Blade* will stay in your heart."

This meant Eizen's heart would be shredded by the blade of blood every time he regenerated. Simply by keeping one part from healing fully, Eizen's whole revival ability was rendered useless.

"I owe Yoshihiko-kun my thanks. I can save myself some effort with this."

The Nagumo family stood in opposition to everything that represented the Taisho era. Their home used no electricity, instead still relying on paper lanterns and candles for lighting. The doma's large earthenware pot was full of oil for the lamps and had been there for a long while. But it was topped off more than it should have been, likely thanks to Yoshihiko's preparations.

Jinya generously splashed some oil onto Eizen, then casually tossed a flame his way. "This is checkmate."

Eizen's eyes spread wide. He understood what was happening but lacked the arms or legs to escape with. The flame struck his doused body, and he was immediately ablaze, his skin scorching. The smell of burning flesh assaulted Jinya's nose.

The oil set aside in the home was likely tsubaki abura, also known as camellia oil. It was used in Shinto rituals as well as for lamps. It wouldn't burn hot enough to melt away blood, but of course that was the point.

"Nothing will regenerate until your heart does. I wonder, how many times will you be able to die? Unable to breathe, you'll suffocate. You'll burn to death. Oh, and I suppose you'll bleed out too. And every time you revive, your heart will immediately be pierced. Perfect. Just keep reviving and dying again and again until you exhaust all your lives."

...Don't worry. I will be here to see things through to the end.

Eizen flailed from the agony of burning alive and inability to breathe, but he couldn't escape it. Unable to control the conditions of his revival, he died, revived, had his heart pierced, and then died again. The torturous cycle repeated, and he couldn't even lose consciousness throughout it all.

"Impossible... I...was bested by the likes of a demon?!"

Jinya grasped Eizen's voiceless shouts, probably because they were kindred in some ways. Jinya did not agree with or approve of

the old man's actions, but he did understand the grief he held. He comprehended Eizen's heart more than he cared to admit.

After learning many things from Furutsubaki, Eizen had Seiichirou raise Kimiko for him. He altered Ryuuna's body, obtained the demonic sword of *Demon Wail*, then assembled useful pawns. He wanted to achieve his goal even if it meant relying on inhuman powers. But he failed and was leaving the world with his wish unfulfilled.

Committing such evil deeds was likely never his aim. He just wanted to restore honor to his once-revered line of spirit hunters. It wasn't that they had failed to keep up with the times; the times had gone and left them behind of their own accord.

Why is it that we, the spirit hunters who fought for the people, are being forgotten...?

Eizen saw the current world itself as his enemy. Modernization brought many new things, but they all came at the price of the old. If the Taisho era was trying to do away with them, then he would simply fight back and do away with the Taisho era.

It was the spirit hunters who protected the populace all these years, and so he had a right to use the lives of the people as he pleased. He didn't wish for ruin, he simply wanted to take back what had been stolen from him and return things to the way they should've been.

But over time, Eizen came to feel nothing but spite. What did people see in the Taisho era, anyway? Were the conveniences of the new world truly worth trampling over the things that had come before? He questioned the meaning of the new era over and over.

"I... I... Ah..."

The wailings of a man discarded by the world echoed. Though he couldn't make out his voice, Eizen's emotions reached Jinya.

"I know your grief. I've had many things taken from me by the changing times as well. It would be a lie to say I don't have my own grievances."

Jinya was a demon who had lived for over a hundred years. He'd lamented the changes of the world more times than he could count. There were the Sword Abolishment and Vengeance

Prohibition Edicts, for example. He, who had lived by the sword, was denied something crucial to his being. The rapid passage of time left him and his heart behind. The things he cherished were denied by the new world at every turn.

“But no matter how much the world tries to change, something always remains, whether by design or through stubbornness. If only you had found just one such thing, then perhaps you would’ve met a different end.”

Jinya cast his gaze down. He felt pity, perhaps more for them both than for Eizen alone. The two were birds of a feather. Did such a fiery death in obscurity await Jinya as well?

“For the Nagumo… I… Why… Kazu…sa…”

Jinya could not hear Eizen’s hoarse voice anymore. His heart was no longer properly regenerating. His final moments approached.

“Though I may sympathize, I have no mercy for you. Fade away here, wraith of the old world.”

With a deafening noise, the mansion crumbled.

Thus ended the Nagumo family, which had persisted since Heian times.

4

THE ANCIENT Japanese-style home was a shadow of what it had once been. It collapsed on itself with a tumultuous thud, wrapped in amber flames and plumes of black smoke. Though he knew there wasn’t much time left, Jinya lingered within the burning building. He had confirmed Eizen’s complete death, and so his promise to Michitomo had been fulfilled. All that remained was his other, completely personal objective.

He planned to steal back the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade of *Demon Wail*. He had no real interest in the abilities of the demons sealed within the blade, though; he simply wanted the sword for sentimental reasons. But that was reason enough. Truth be told, he

wouldn't have come to oppose Eizen in the first place if not for this sword.

He returned to the inner room where he had fought Eizen and found that even the traces of their battle had been swallowed by the flames. Jinya had lopped off Eizen's arm together with the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade earlier. Though he may have fit the definition only narrowly, Eizen was a human, so his arm shouldn't have faded away after death. Sure enough, it could be seen where it had fallen, burnt to a black crisp like charcoal.

But the demonic blade of *Demon Wail* itself was nowhere to be found. Somebody had almost certainly taken it.

"...But why?" Jinya glared past the flickering flames. His murmur was erased by the constant crackling. Time was up. As even the building's frames began to melt away, Jinya turned and left the room behind.

An unease continued to smolder inside him.

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Sometime earlier, around the time Jinya and Eizen began exchanging sword blows, the others ran through the burning corridors to escape the home, led by Izuchi. Himawari had no fighting ability of her own, and the demons she'd received from Magatsume had already been lost to the sheer number of Eizen's demons. The only one who could properly fight was Izuchi.

"Damn it, I didn't think they'd make it this hard to reach the courtyard!" Izuchi cursed as he mowed down the demons blocking their way. The home was an old samurai mansion; based on its design, he figured they could just pick any random direction and escape through the veranda without bothering to find the entrance. However, Eizen seemed to have planned for a potential escape attempt as they were attacked by demons they hadn't encountered on the way in.

"These numbers seem about right to me since this is Eizen's base of operations. Didn't you know about these demons, Izuchi-san?" Himawari asked.

“I knew he had some, but not this many!”

“I see. It seems Eizen never trusted anyone, not even his own allies.” Himawari murmured sadly. But Izuchi had no time to waste on sympathizing, as he was focused completely on not dying. He haphazardly scattered the demons, then charged for the spot where their numbers seemed thinnest. Coincidentally enough, that happened to be the entrance to the place.

“Kimiko-san, we’re almost there!”

“R-right!”

Though she left her home occasionally, Kimiko had lived a sheltered, indoor life. Running while breathing lung-scorching hot air was difficult for her, so Yoshihiko kept a firm grip on her hand and frequently checked if she was doing okay.

“Only a little left to go, everyone. Keep it up!” Himawari said.

“...You know, you’re not really that encouraging when you’re taking a relaxing ride on my shoulder.”

“What do you want me to do? The demons I received from Mother are all used up.”

Izuchi moved with Ryuuna in his arms and Himawari on his shoulder. Ryuuna still hadn’t regained consciousness, and Himawari was no different from a child without her underlings. Izuchi didn’t particularly mind being ridden, and it wasn’t much of a burden, but it did feel strange to be used like this by a daughter of Magatsume.

“So this is the role I’m saddled with, huh?”

“The role of the unsung hero, you mean?”

“...Thanks.”

Yoshihiko’s positive spin on things made Izuchi feel a bit better. Fired up again, they all dashed like mad through the burning building.

“All right!” Izuchi yelled. “Let’s get outta here!”

Finally, they reached the entrance. After one last, heavy step, they were out.

With this, they no longer had to worry about fire enveloping them. Izuchi let out a big sigh, then turned around to make sure everyone was okay. Himawari and Ryuuna were clearly all right.

Kimiko seemed short of breath but otherwise largely unharmed. Yoshihiko was fine as well. They had made it out without losing anyone.

“We…we made it?” Yoshihiko hesitantly said.

“Looks like it. But it’s a bit strange that no one’s pursuing us,” Himawari replied.

The number of demons chasing them had visibly dwindled midway through their escape. Perhaps Eizen needed them for something. It would be good if he was struggling in his fight against Jinya, but the opposite might also be true. They couldn’t get their hopes up just yet.

“Do you think Jiiya will be okay?” Worried, Kimiko stared fixedly at the burning building.

With a warm smile, Himawari said, “Let’s believe in him. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

“But…”

“It’ll be all right,” Himawari chuckled. “The only thing you need to worry about is making that black tea you’ll serve us all for our celebration.” Her tone, combined with her youthful appearance, made her seem like a mischievous child. She had to be worried about Jinya too, but she pretended otherwise. Yoshihiko saw this and followed suit.

“Yeah, didn’t Jiiya-san ask you himself to make black tea for him after this is all over? He’ll be fine. Definitely.”

Though her eyes still showed some unease, Kimiko smiled slightly. Some of her doubts were quelled now.

“No point frettin’ over it either way. Only thing we can do is wait and—” Izuchi tried to bring the topic to a satisfying close with that, but he turned pale before he could finish. Someone had been waiting for the moment he let himself relax. From beyond the flickering flames, a demon smiled broadly.

Izuchi heard the sharp crack of gunpowder being ignited. Immediately, he knew what it was and who it came from.

He felt a chill in the direction of the gun barrel. Yonabari had aimed for Kimiko’s head without any hesitation.

“Yonabari, you bastard!”

None of the demons working with Eizen were loyal to him; they all only reluctantly worked with him to fulfill their own objectives. That included Yonabari, of course. With Eizen defeated, they had no obligation to follow his orders and no reason to care whether Kimiko and Ryuuna lived or died. That meant they could shoot without a second thought.

Since he was holding Ryuuna, Izuchi was a second late to react. He could only watch helplessly as the bullet cruelly pierced flesh. Vivid red blood scattered forth. Everyone froze in place, not believing what had happened.

“O-ouch, heh heh. That kinda hurts.”

Blood trickled down from the top of Yoshihiko’s shoulder. The bullet had reached bone and he grimaced from the pain, but he seemed happy nevertheless. Kimiko, the intended target, fell to the ground in shock. The only one to react in time had been Yoshihiko, who took the bullet in her stead.

“Huh…?” Kimiko was stuck in a daze, unable to process what had happened. She quickly gathered herself and checked her surroundings, then saw Yoshihiko’s wound and realized he had protected her. “Yoshihiko-san, y-you’re bleeding!”

“I’m fine, Kimiko-san. This much is nothing.” Yoshihiko acted calmly to avoid worrying her. He’d only been hit on the shoulder, and the wound was far from lethal. Of course, he wouldn’t die even if he were hit in the heart or head, at least not as long as *Plaything* was affecting him. But Izuchi was surprised nonetheless that a normal human would act as a shield for another.

“Whoooa now. You shouldn’t be so reckless, Yoshihiko-kun!” Wide-eyed, Yonabari expressed greatly exaggerated surprise. They’d definitely expected Izuchi or Himawari to be the ones who’d react to their surprise attack.

“What do you mean? It’s not like I can die. If anything, it would’ve been more reckless of me to have done nothing.” Yoshihiko spoke as though what he said was common sense. He’d come to understand Yonabari well, perhaps even better than Izuchi. “The whole time we were fleeing, I knew you would come. And I

knew you would wait for the moment we finally thought we were safe so you could make us despair as much as possible."

He hadn't read Yonabari's thoughts but rather their personality. Yonabari didn't act based on reason or personal gain; they simply did what would cause the most anguish. That was the kind of demon Yoshihiko knew Yonabari to be, and why he knew to be wary of them.

"Mm, how brave. You're a real man, huh?" Though their surprise attack had been anticipated, Yonabari seemed to be enjoying themselves. They acted with simple-minded joy, like a child playing with a favorite toy. "But darn, today's just not my day, huh? You've gotten the better of me twice now." They theatrically slumped their shoulders and made an exaggerated sigh. No one could tell just how much of their disappointment was genuine and how much of it was theatrics. With light steps, they pranced forward as though dancing on a stage. "But I guess it's whatever. I had fun, and I got what I was after. All's well that ends well."

In their hands was an unadorned metal scabbard containing a sword. It was of almost the exact same make as Jinya's own Yatonomori Kaneomi blade, being the demonic sword of *Demon Wail*.

"Huh? How did you get your hands on that?" Himawari asked. But she was ignored by Yonabari, who skipped away from the entrance of the home. A figure could be seen beyond the shimmering hot air.

"Looks like I've overstayed my welcome; the scary one's - arrived. Later!" Yonabari said. They'd failed to kill Kimiko, but they didn't really care. They had only attacked her to stir the pot, and they had no reason to stick around now that their actual goal was completed.

Okada Kiichi exited the building, his pace slow and unbothered. He'd most likely been the one who thinned out Eizen's demons. The sword in his hand was wet with blood and glistened bewitchingly. With crazed eyes, he looked intently at Yonabari. "Why're you so eager to leave? Come cross blades with me for a while."

"Aha ha, hell no."

“A shame. You’d best leave quickly, then. Here comes a man even more unrelenting than I.”

Yonabari turned around to look and grimaced.

“How rude.” Jinya appeared from the burning mansion, looking ready for a fight. “How about handing me back that sword?”

“Why should I? It doesn’t belong to you, does it?” Yonabari scoffed, but they weren’t foolish enough to try and fight. If even Eizen couldn’t beat Jinya, then Yonabari’s own chances were slim.

Yonabari acted quickly. Having made up their mind to flee, they were out of sight in no time.

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“Well done, Uncle.”

“I could say the same to you. Thanks for all the help, Himawari.”

“Anything for you. But I wouldn’t say no to a reward if you’re offering one.”

Himawari welcomed Jinya back with a smile. Jinya wasn’t totally satisfied with this result, though. While he’d defeated Eizen, he had failed in his original objective: taking back Eizen’s Yatonomori Kaneomi blade. It was a big blunder to let it be stolen right under his nose.

Kiichi, who seemed to have lost interest in Yonabari, didn’t give chase. Only Izuchi stared in the direction Yonabari had fled. “That bastard…”

“Don’t, Izuchi-san,” Himawari said, trying to dissuade him from pursuing Yonabari.

“I know, I won’t do anything stupid. But damn…” Izuchi had known Yonabari the longest of anyone there. Seeing them cause trouble only to scamper away angered him. He glared in the direction they’d run off in, but eventually relented and gave a heavy sigh. “Sorry. I’m calm. I see you got out fine, Demon Eater.”

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind that I killed your master.”

“Nah, that’s fine. Not like I was loyal to that damn geezer or anything.” Izuchi gave off a completely different impression now than he had during their fight. He spoke a bit roughly, but it resembled the way a cheerful youth might talk.

Things seemed to have settled down for the time being.

“Y-Yoshihiko-san, we need to tend to your wound! Oh, but how do I…?” Once Kimiko’s gears finally began to turn again, the first thing she did was fret over Yoshihiko. She was so worked up she didn’t even seem to realize Jinya had appeared. She hemmed and hawed, not knowing how to give first-aid treatment.

In contrast with her, Yoshihiko was calm. He should have been long dead, so a small gunshot wound wasn’t going to panic him at this point. “I’m fine, Kimiko-san. Really.”

“B-but you got hurt because you had to protect me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was just trying to be a man, that’s all.” He made a point of acting cheerful, but he couldn’t hide the slight tremble of pain in his lips.

Izuchi teased Yoshihiko, knowing full well who the young man was putting on a brave front for. “Heh. You’ve got guts. Taking a bullet for a woman is nothing if you’re a real man, huh?”

Yoshihiko shook his head. “Well, no, that’s not quite it… We all have something we wouldn’t give up for the world, right? I think protecting that thing, even with your life, is what it means to be a man.”

He looked no different from his usual good-natured self, but he somehow felt a bit more mature now.

He hadn’t taken a bullet for Kimiko because that was something a “real man” would have done, and he hadn’t done it to try and impress her either. It was simple stubbornness that spurred him to action. Having already died once, he wanted to at least protect what pride he had by making sure the wicked didn’t have their way. He was being rebellious and nothing more—his rebelliousness just happened to manifest through protecting Kimiko.

Yoshihiko would rather struggle with what cheap pride he had than kowtow to someone just because they held his life in their

hands.

“Incredible.” Izuchi was left speechless by Yoshihiko’s reply. He had seen Yoshihiko as just some ordinary ticket collector who’d had the misfortune of becoming Yonabari’s victim, but Yoshihiko was strong. His way of being was far greater than Izuchi’s own.

Kimiko reached out and wrapped her small hands around one of Yoshihiko’s. She seemed close to tears.

“Kimiko-san?”

“I’m so sorry. I’ve caused you so much trouble, Yoshihiko-san…” Her apology was heartfelt.

Yoshihiko was visibly flustered, unsure what to do. “H-hey, there’s nothing you need to apologize for.”

Kimiko had been made to obey Eizen because Yoshihiko’s life was held hostage, but at the same time, Yoshihiko had used the opportunity to drag Eizen out of hiding. Yoshihiko had hoped that his circumstances would help slay Eizen, but his plan ultimately involved using Kimiko as bait. Though things had gone well, the truth of the matter was that he had used her. Yoshihiko felt she shouldn’t be the one apologizing to him—if anything, she should be criticizing him.

He stood there stock-still, unable to give a single word of comfort as Kimiko continued to apologize over and over. “…Kimiko, I—”

“Leave it at that,” Jinya interrupted, suspecting what Yoshihiko wanted to say.

“Jiiya…” Kimiko finally noticed Jinya’s presence and stared at him in a daze. She had betrayed him, the one who had looked after her well-being for as long as she could remember. And it was because of her that Yoshihiko got hurt. She was overwhelmed with emotions that she couldn’t process.

He walked up to her while she was still lost in a daze, then patted her head like one might comfort a young child.

“Uuh, aah, aaaah!”

That was when she reached her limit, and the floodgates broke. Unable even to lift her face, she continued to cry.

Yoshihiko grew flustered and thought about saying something, but Jinya brought a finger up to his own lips to tell him it was all right.

“We managed to end things without losing a single person. Thank you, Yoshihiko-kun, for protecting Kimiko.” Jinya felt just a bit embarrassed. He was well aware comforting others like this wasn’t his usual style. He couldn’t help but recall Akitsu the Third’s nostalgic face and think he would’ve had something better to say here.

There was no need for Yoshihiko to go out of his way and burden himself by revealing the truth. He had tried his best to help. No matter how that worked out, he deserved praise for it, not blame. What’s more, Jinya respected Yoshihiko’s willingness to put his life on the line just to resist his tormentors.

Yoshihiko gave Jinya a small nod, seemingly catching his intent.

“Jiiya…”

“That’s no good, Kimiko-san. You can’t just cry forever. If you want to say something, you need to put it into words.” With a wry smile, Himawari chided Kimiko. Her words were like those of an older sister.

Even with that push, Kimiko kept her head down, struggling to find her words. “Jiiya, I…”

“Yes?”

She was stricken with regret and too full of things she wanted to express. Jinya himself had felt like that before. He waited, not pressuring her to speak, and a long time passed before she eventually lifted her face. Though it was covered in tears, she did her best to smile.

“Thank you. For protecting me.” She kept her gratitude as concise as possible. Her pure, unembellished feelings reached him in full.

“Likewise. Thank you. For letting me protect you.” Jinya smiled softly. He knew she wouldn’t grasp the meaning behind his reply, but that was all right.

Despite his desperate efforts, Jinya had failed to protect many things over the course of his life. And yet, he'd managed to protect Kimiko today. That fact redeemed something in him. Perhaps the one who'd truly been saved was him, not Kimiko.

Though her eyes were swollen from tears, she smiled. The end result may not have been perfect, but Jinya's heart felt light.

"So, I guess that's it?"

"Izuchi-san, please read the mood a little."

Himawari chided Izuchi's lack of tact, but even their out-of-place exchange felt pleasant just then.

"Shall we return home then, my lady? I would love to try some of your black tea like you promised."

"Yes, let's. I'll try my best."

The distant days of his past still hadn't lost their color. What was lost grew ever more loved in memory, but that didn't mean he couldn't see the beauty of the sight before him now.

In that moment, Jinya felt proud of how much he'd come to grow.

Far away from Eizen's mansion, Yonabari suddenly remembered something and murmured to themselves, "Oh, I almost forgot. I gotta take care of Yoshihiko-kun's thing."

With a snap of the fingers, *Plaything* came undone, and the night reached its end.

5

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since the night of demise. Jinya looked out on the flowers he tended as he drank black tea in the garden of the Hydrangea Mansion. Michitomo and Shino sat with him around the table.

"Well done, Jinya. With this, the promise you swore to me long ago is fulfilled."

The people of the Akase home had been bedridden for a while due to the effects of the drug, but they were better now. Jinya had handled affairs while they were out of commission. Perhaps feeling some guilt, Kimiko had tended to everyone, and it was thanks to her efforts that they all made a full recovery.

The Akase couple, overjoyed that their daughter had returned safely, were holding a small gathering to thank Jinya for fulfilling his promise.

“Things turned out just like I said they would, right?”

“That they did.”

Michitomo had known Jinya for a long time now, and he could tell no one was happier about this outcome than him. After experiencing plenty of failure throughout his life, Jinya could now say he had succeeded in protecting someone.

“What happened to Kaneomi was unfortunate, though,” said Michitomo, who knew about the talking sword’s existence.

Kaneomi had been Jinya’s partner for a long time. Losing her was the one thing that had ruined this otherwise ideal outcome.

“It’s all right. She’s still right here with me.” Jinya put his fist over his chest. Kaneomi’s spirit resided within him, and not just in the figurative sense.

Understanding what he meant, Michitomo nodded silently and smiled.

“So, what’s happened to Seiichirou?” Jinya asked.

“My father-in-law has grown terribly depressed because of this incident here…” Michitomo showed Jinya a newspaper from a few days earlier—the day after the night of demise, to be exact. He flipped through a few pages and reached an article with the tagline: *Home of the Nagumo, Viscounts, Met with Fire*.

In the Taisho era, the slightest incident involving nobility was enough to make the newspaper. Eizen’s death was reported promptly, so Seiichirou had to have read about it already. The very man who’d promised him eternal life had died, meaning Eizen wasn’t really immortal to begin with. Believing he had been tricked from the start, Seiichirou was overcome with grief.

“Chances are he’ll retire for real now, making me the genuine head of the family. I’d say this calls for celebration,” Michitomo said.

“I suppose…” Shino agreed, sounding conflicted. She couldn’t bring herself to hate her father, but he had also actually tried to offer Kimiko up as a sacrifice to Eizen. That made her feel conflicted. Her gratitude toward Jinya was still genuine, though. “Thank you, Jiiya. For always being there to help us.”

She smiled softly, her mature, graceful look overlapping with the tomboyish smile he remembered. Shino was just as sincere with her feelings as Kimiko. The apple hadn’t fallen far from the tree.

“You’re very welcome,” Jinya said, feeling a bit bashful to receive her gratitude.

“Oh my. Are you embarrassed?”

“I was hoping you’d be kind enough to pretend not to notice.”

The eyes of the small girl he used to look after now carried the grace of a mother, and he felt moved by her growth.

“Heh. You’ve always been kind of soft when it came to Shino, huh?”

“As if you’re one to talk.”

“Ha ha, you got me there.”

Michitomo and Jinya had both been run in circles by Shino when she was a child, and in a way, she still had a hold on them both; a single smile from her was enough to make them emotional. The power dynamic between them hadn’t changed at all over the years, and their acceptance of that fact suggested that things would probably remain that way forever. With wry, knowing smiles, the men shared a look.

“You must be tired after all that, though. You should take it easy for a while,” Michitomo said.

“Sadly, I’m much too busy to take a break. I have plans to go out with Kimiko this afternoon, in fact.”

Michitomo’s brow furrowed slightly. After all the danger his daughter had been in, he wanted her to settle down for the time being. Jinya felt the same way, but Kimiko herself wanted to go out.

“My daughter sure is energetic. Where will you be going?”

Jinya hesitated for a moment, then softly sighed. With a slight grimace, he said, “As pained as I am to say it, to see a motion picture.”

Kimiko hummed as they walked the path to Koyomiza. Up until now, she’d always had to sneak out of the house to get out. Never had she thought she would be able to leave normally like today. Ryuuna seemed in somewhat high spirits as well, holding Jinya’s hand without a second thought as they walked.

“Ryuuna, you need to look where you’re going.”

“Mm.”

Occasionally she would lean against him or try to walk backward, acting like a child might.

Her eyes had been so lifeless when he first found her. She’d held no hope, nor even any fear. She was content with living and dying in her dark cell. But she had since turned expressive and could trust others. What really made Jinya happy, though, was the way she had come to occasionally seek attention every now and then.

“Ryuuna-san’s gotten cheerful, hasn’t she?” Kimiko said.

“Indeed. It’s quite the change for the better,” Jinya replied.

“...Um, I know it’s a bit late to ask this after all this time, but why do you talk to me so formally but speak freely with Mother and Ryuuna-san?”

Jinya had known the Akase couple long enough, and his bond with Ryuuna wasn’t one that demanded respect. But Kimiko had a precarious standing in the house due to Seiichirou’s treatment of her. That was why he made an effort to speak respectfully toward her, so the other servants would know not to look down on her.

“It would reflect poorly on you if I were to be so insolent,” he replied.

“You act pretty insolent toward my father, though.”

“Only when the other servants aren’t around.”

“Then can’t you talk freely with me when it’s just us?”

As a general rule, it wasn't good for a servant to act overly familiar with the ones they served. But it probably didn't matter at this point, considering the way he behaved with Michitomo and Shino.

He cleared his throat and said, "I suppose so. Sure."

"Very good," she said with a bright smile. "Hee hee. We should've done this sooner."

"Did it bother you that much?"

"It did. It feels like we've gotten closer now." Her steps seemed lighter, and her mood had visibly improved. She hummed as she walked in front of him.

They soon reached their destination: Koyomiza—a familiar, small motion picture theater located in Shibuya, Tokyo.

"Shall we head in then, Jiiya?" Kimiko led the way in, since she was the most familiar with the process.

They bought tickets at the entrance, then went inside and soon found the door to the theater. There was a desk right in front of it where the ticket collector sat. None of this procedure was strange at all to them since they'd been to screenings before, but the identity of the ticket collector did give them mixed feelings.

"Oh, if it isn't the Demon Eater and the girls." Greeting them was a large man with a stern look—Izuchi, the demon who had previously served Eizen.

"How's business?"

"Busy as ever. I swear, there's no end to these customers." Izuchi let out a hearty laugh. After Eizen died, he came to work at Koyomiza. As motion picture films were considered the king of entertainment, theaters like Koyomiza were busy day in and day out. With so much work to be done, the theater couldn't wait long to fill the vacant ticket-collecting position.

"To think you of all people would become a ticket collector," Jinya mused.

"Is it that weird? I mean, you're a gardener, aren't ya?"

"Fair point. Guess I'm not one to talk."

Izuchi had previously been provided for by Eizen, but he needed to earn money for himself now. Apparently Koyomiza was the first thing that came to mind when he was looking for a job.

“I know I’m no replacement, but I couldn’t help but want to lend a hand.”

His reasons were purely emotional. He wanted to pay respects to the man who possessed a strength he himself lacked.

“Uncle, what a coincidence. And I see everyone is with you.”

While they were chatting, more theatergoers appeared. Himawari was among them, likely for the same reason as everyone else. They were here out of respect for Toudou Yoshihiko, the young man who had been Koyomiza’s ticket collector.

Through no fault of his own, Yoshihiko had met with misfortune. He’d been used as a hostage by Yonabari, stabbed in the gut, and forcibly kept alive with *Plaything* until the end of that fateful night.

“Oh, welcome to Koyomiza, everyone!”

And yet, he still lived. He wasn’t completely unharmed, but he had recovered enough to walk on his own.

“Yoshihiko-san, you should be resting!” Kimiko exclaimed.

He approached them with his left arm firmly wrapped in a bandage and a broom in his free hand. It looked like he was about to start cleaning, but Kimiko would have none of it.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I can help out a little bit.”

“*Absolutely* not. Please go back to your room right this instant. Your gunshot wound still hasn’t healed yet, right?”

“Well, no, but it doesn’t hurt that much anymore.”

“I don’t care! No means no!”

Kimiko scolded Yoshihiko for slipping out of his room. Yoshihiko couldn’t really protest, since he knew she was just looking out for him. One had to wonder where the pluck he had shown against Eizen had gone. He weakly tried to argue back but was eventually overwhelmed, unable to get a further word in.

“You seem to be doing well, Yoshihiko-kun.” Himawari watched the two and giggled with a boastful look on her face. It was her

efforts, not Jinya's, that had made this outcome possible.

"Hey, Demon Eater. It just me, or is she actin' kinda full of herself?" Izuchi said.

"Let her. She's earned herself the right to boast a little."

Himawari's smile grew even wider. "Hee hee. You can praise me more if you'd like, Uncle. I'll even let you pat my head if you want to."

She offered her head forward, but Ryuuna grabbed Jinya's arm and stared her down like a wild cat.

"None of that now," he chided.

"Mm..."

Ryuuna pouted as Jinya gave Himawari's head a few light pats, which seemed to be enough to delight her.

She'd earned her reward. She had supported his efforts to protect Kimiko in many ways, and it was all thanks to her that Yoshihiko was alive right now.

Yoshihiko was stabbed by Yonabari, who left his innards gouged but kept him alive with their ability *Plaything*. By all logic, he should've died from his heavy wounds the moment *Plaything* came undone. And yet he lived.

If this had been the Edo era, such an outcome would've been impossible, but in the Taisho period, this couldn't even be considered a miracle.

In 1902 (year thirty-five of the Meiji era), an experiment conducted by Viennese surgeon Emerich Ullmann shocked the world. He had succeeded in transplanting the kidney of a dog to the neck of that same animal, and the transplanted kidney functioned normally. News of his success caused a sensation in the medical community.

Three years later, French surgeon Alexis Carrel experimented with the transplantation of hearts and kidneys between different animals and discovered that bodies could reject transplanted organs. Carrel would later go on to win the Nobel Prize in

Physiology or Medicine in recognition of his research on vascular sutures and the transplantation of blood vessels and organs.

News of these experiments reached Japan, and in year forty-three of the Meiji era, Yamauchi Hansaku performed organ transplantation experiments of his own and reported the findings to the medical community. Later, Japan entered the Taisho era and the field of medicine advanced further. Knowledge and techniques from other countries also continued to find their way to Japan.

All this was to say that the concept of organ transplantation began around the late Meiji and early Taisho periods.

“Magatsume’s got some crazy techniques up her sleeve,” Izuchi said.

“This much is nothing for her. My mother can turn people into demons and make demons out of corpses. She can even shape the demons she creates however she pleases, and she learned to do all this back in the Meiji era. Making replacement organs is child’s play for her.” Himawari proudly listed off her mother’s achievements.

Jinya recalled the events of Snow’s Memory, the Night Parade of a Hundred Demons, and how Naotsugu had been turned into a demon while on death’s door. Magatsume had gained the ability to freely shape flesh as an incidental benefit of her research into creating hearts. A few organs created through her techniques, along with the knowledge of transplantation that came to Japan from overseas, were what saved Yoshihiko.

It was a strange feeling for Jinya to have his most hated enemy become Yoshihiko’s savior. There was a saying that went “yesterday’s enemy is today’s friend,” but surely that was a reach here.

“Replacing destroyed organs and connecting the blood vessels… This would’ve been unthinkable in Edo times,” Jinya said.

“Make no mistake, though, Uncle. I may have been the one to make his new organs, but the technique to transplant them is something developed entirely by man. Something like this isn’t even considered all that unusual anymore.”

The very fact that this was the new normal astonished Jinya. The passage of time was a frightening thing indeed.

But in truth, organ transplantation in the Meiji and Taisho eras was crude, still in the animal-testing stage, and failure was a far likelier outcome than success. However, in Yoshihiko's case, the chance of failure had been slim to none. Magatsume's techniques allowed their user to freely shape life. Just as she could create demons from corpses, someone with her techniques could effortlessly create new organs from Yoshihiko's destroyed flesh. And since his new organs were made with him in mind, there was no possibility of transplant rejection.

Of course, there was also Yonabari's ability *Plaything* to keep in mind. Until it was undone, Yoshihiko would be forcibly kept alive. In other words, he wouldn't die during or after his operation. By the time Yonabari released their ability, he was already in sound health thanks to the new organs Himawari had given him.

And so, Yoshihiko managed to survive—not solely thanks to the unnatural abilities of demons, nor the techniques of Magatsume, but also because of the many experiments mankind had conducted. That was why this was no miracle but a natural outcome. If there was anything at all notable about this, it was that a demon had once again been defeated by the advancing world.

"Playing doctor is nothing for a daughter of Magatsume, of course. Toying with the flesh, whether human or demon, is our specialty. But I'm sure you already knew that, Uncle." Himawari said these disturbing words with a wide smile on her face, but seeing as he was in her debt this time, Jinya just let her comment slide by. He didn't really know how to respond to it anyway.

"Hmm. Still, it feels weird," Izuchi said.

"What's wrong?"

"Well... I'm glad Yoshihiko-senpai's all right and everything, but the thought that a demon's ability lost to human medicine rubs me the wrong way..."

It was Izuchi's sense of inferiority that made him try to rebel against the world. Though he was happy Yoshihiko survived, the fact that a demon's ability had been trumped by human science bothered him.

"Yoshihiko was only saved because we had my mother's techniques, as well as that can't-die-no-matter-what ability—the

latter being particularly important. I doubt we could achieve the same result again if something similar happened."

The operation was only possible because of *Plaything*. In fact, without *Plaything*, Yoshihiko would've been dead the moment his innards were ruined.

"Yeah, I get that. But don'tcha think there's gonna be a day when demons are really no match for humans? They might develop technology that'll make demons' abilities seem laughable, like with the Gatling guns."

Izuchi's worry would become reality in the distant future. In the Showa era (1926–1989 AD), organ transplantation techniques reached further heights. Successful kidney, liver, and heart transplants were made, and thanks to immunosuppressant drugs, cases of transplant rejection dropped as well. The medical community had to fight society's biases against organ transplantation for a time, but slowly it became a firmly entrenched part of medicine.

Even without Magatsume's aid, humanity would eventually surpass the power of demons on their own.

"...You might be right." Jinya shared Izuchi's worry. Swords had been outlawed, vengeance prohibited, the witching hour illuminated, guns had made a mockery of demons, and the advances of medicine would someday make even the abilities of demons look like nothing.

When that time came, would there be any reason at all for demons to exist?

"But it's not all bad."

Jinya sighed softly, as though exhaling the lump he felt in his throat. His gaze fell on Kimiko and Yoshihiko. Their quarrel seemed more like a game now, with Kimiko insisting he return to his room and Yoshihiko protesting in kind that he was well enough to work for a bit.

"We'll lose our place in the world one day, and I'm sure we'll lose our purpose as demons and maybe be persecuted as well. But you know what? I don't hate the sight I see right now."

The demon of *Farsight* had once told Jinya that demons would one day become a thing of folktales. He hadn't been able to wrap his head around that back then, but after seeing how terrifyingly fast the world of man developed in the Meiji and Taisho eras, he could understand how such a thing might actually be possible.

But in this moment, Kimiko seemed happy despite her anger, and Yoshihiko grinned wryly despite being hounded. If the relationship the two shared now had been made possible by the new era they lived in, then perhaps there was no reason to mourn the world's changes. At the very least, Jinya was sure the sight he saw now was nothing to be sad about.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Izuchi's words came smoothly. He took a deep breath in and out. He still had doubts about the future, but for the time being, he decided to just let himself be happy that Yoshihiko was safe.

"C'mon now, back to your room you go."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Kimiko and Yoshihiko seemed to finish up their argument around that time. Defeated and dejected, Yoshihiko was dragged by his hand to his room in the building. His face had a slight red tint to it.

"Rough. Looks like Yoshihiko-senpai lost."

"Bravo, bravo. Keeping your man on a tight leash is the secret to a healthy marriage."

"Ha! Indeed it is!"

Izuchi roared with laughter at Himawari's joke. Swept along by the mood, Jinya couldn't help but smile slightly as well. Himawari looked at Ryuuna and said something about her being Jinya's real niece to try and keep her in check; Ryuuna answered by glaring back at her.

Their original goal of seeing a motion picture was eventually abandoned, but they had a pleasant afternoon regardless. For the time being, they were content enough to simply enjoy their moment of peace.

Outside was a blue sky as far as the eye could see, under which people scurried to and fro. Even the hustle and bustle of the

city sounded pleasant in the moment.

Ah… This really isn’t so bad after all.

In a soft voice no one could hear, Jinya murmured that to himself.

Intermission:
Demonic Sword

BACK IN THE WARRING STATES PERIOD, there was a swordsmith by the name of Kaneomi who married a demon called Yato and used her blood to forge artificial demonic swords. He named all four of the demonic swords he made "Yatonomori Kaneomi," and each blade came to bear its own demonic ability. Of them, the demonic sword of *Demon Wail* had a special legend associated with it. It was said that a guardian from the Harima province had used it to slay a wild, giant demon in only a single strike. Perhaps it was only fate that this demon-slaying demonic blade ended up in the Nagumo's hands.

Jinya wasn't the only one to hear rumors of this blade reaching the Nagumo. Okada Kiichi had heard the same thing and was in Tokyo for that very reason. After parting from his master Hatakeyama Yasuhide's side, Kiichi had failed to adapt to the world around him. He refused to follow the Sword Abolishment Edict and wandered the land as a vagabond.

To live by the blade was the only creed Kiichi held himself to. The Taisho world had no place for his narrow and dated way of life, but he stayed true to himself nevertheless and was entranced by the idea of this demon-felling demonic blade. He figured it might be worthwhile to fight the Nagumo, spirit hunters who still clung to their identity in this era. In other words, Kiichi wandered the dark streets of Asakusa in search of nothing more than simple amusement.

"Hm? You're…"

By sheer chance, he encountered a familiar face. Walking along was Jinya, the demon-slaying Yasha guardian whom Kiichi had once dueled back in Edo times. Kiichi saw he wore Western-style attire and carried no sword on his body, so in lieu of a greeting, he stepped in close.

He drew his sword and aimed for Jinya's neck in one flowing motion. He was disappointed to see that Jinya had lost to the changing world and abandoned the blade.

Jinya responded quickly to the surprise attack, taking a step back as he bit the palm of his hand and formed a red blade. His reflexes were those of someone accustomed to fighting, leaving little opening.

Jinya's red blade blocked the strike aimed at his neck before it could connect. Kiichi moved in toward Jinya's left side and swung once more. As if he'd read the move in advance, Jinya twisted his body for a horizontal slash.

"Keh, keh keh." Kiichi let slip a laugh. He slid his sword against the flat of Jinya's own and gently changed its course. Then he stabbed at Jinya's heart, holding nothing back. If Jinya died here, well, that would be amusing in its own right.

Jinya responded with a red short sword held in his left hand. This wasn't some shoddy, hastily done dual-wielding stance. He was decently familiar with using two swords, and his movements were smooth.

The aim of Kiichi's sword diverted slightly, piercing Jinya's left shoulder instead of his heart. Jinya counterattacked by slashing at Kiichi's eyes with the short sword. The design of the short sword was rough, likely because it had been made in the middle of a fight.

There was room for improvement, no doubt. But Jinya's movements were sharper and his means of attack more diverse than they had been back in Edo times. Though he wasn't wholly satisfied, Kiichi had enjoyed himself. He sidestepped the short sword, finished the conflict with one light slash across Jinya's chest, then breathed a sigh.

"Well, if it isn't the Yasha."

"Did you attack me just to say that?" Wounded, Jinya glared bitterly at Kiichi.

Kiichi took all of Jinya's bloodlust in stride and sheathed his blade. Jinya let his red blades fade away in response, but he maintained the distance between them. He kept his weight on a drawn-back left leg, leaving himself ready to move.

"Okada Kiichi... What are you doing here?"

"I am merely enjoying a stroll, that's all. I heard a certain family of demonic sword-wielders in the area have come into possession

of a demon-slaying sword."

A change overcame Jinya. The anger in his demeanor lessened. "What are you planning?"

"Planning? My mind thinks of naught but killing."

If he'd been capable of deeper thought in the first place, then he would surely have come up with a way to adjust to the times. But he hadn't, and he remained a simple murderer without a place in the world, pursuing nothing but the path of the sword wherever he went.

"Right. That's the kind of man you are." Jinya murmured softly, understanding that Kiichi was telling the truth. The two were similar, both having a talent for killing and nothing else. Jinya thought for a bit as his animosity decreased further. "Hey. I've got a proposition for you…"

He began to tell Kiichi of Nagumo Eizen's evil acts. He told him how Eizen used young girls and innocents for his plans to try and topple the current world, and then he asked for his help in stopping him.

Kiichi had no particular interest in the fate of demons, nor in a spirit hunter's efforts to try and return their family to glory. But he understood there were those who needed to be killed, and that was enough for him.

"I can pay you. All you'll need to do is kill."

"Ah, how perfect for me. Very well, I accept." Kiichi took the job without even asking what the pay would be.

He understood there was some personal animosity between Jinya and Eizen and had no interest in stealing another's target. But it had been a long while since someone had asked him to kill, and he couldn't help but feel intrigued.

Okada Kiichi had merely been curious about the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade held by the Nagumo, but now a simple bid to kill time had turned into something far more amusing.

A deal was struck. No trust existed at all between the two demons, and yet each was certain the other wouldn't betray them.

Teasingly, Kiichi asked, "Tell me, O Yasha. Why does the demonic blade bewitch your heart so?"

Jinya had reacted earlier when Kiichi first mentioned the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade. Jinya wasn't a man free of impurities to begin with, but Kiichi found it interesting to see how he let himself be clouded further by the blade.

"Because it's something I must get back no matter what," Jinya spat. There was an emotion in his voice different from the one he expressed for Eizen.

He didn't elaborate on what he meant, and Kiichi made no effort to pursue the topic.

Jinya was, as before, fraught with and drowning in excess burdens. His unsightliness was comical to Kiichi, and yet he did not hate the way Jinya tried to trudge forward despite all his baggage.

That all took place a month before the evening party hosted by the Nagumo. Jinya's fateful battle against Eizen eventually came to an end, but the demonic blade in question was stolen away by a demon known as Yonabari.

Though he had the opportunity to kill Yonabari, Kiichi showed no interest in doing so and allowed them to escape.

"Keh, keh keh."

He had a feeling that demonic blade would bring ruin to the Taisho world.

As he amused himself with thoughts of the not-so-distant future, the murderer from an era past smiled eerily.



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