
Sword of the Demon Hunter
KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ
BOOK 10
BY Motoo Nakanishi

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BOOK 10

WRITTEN BY

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Seven Seas Entertainment

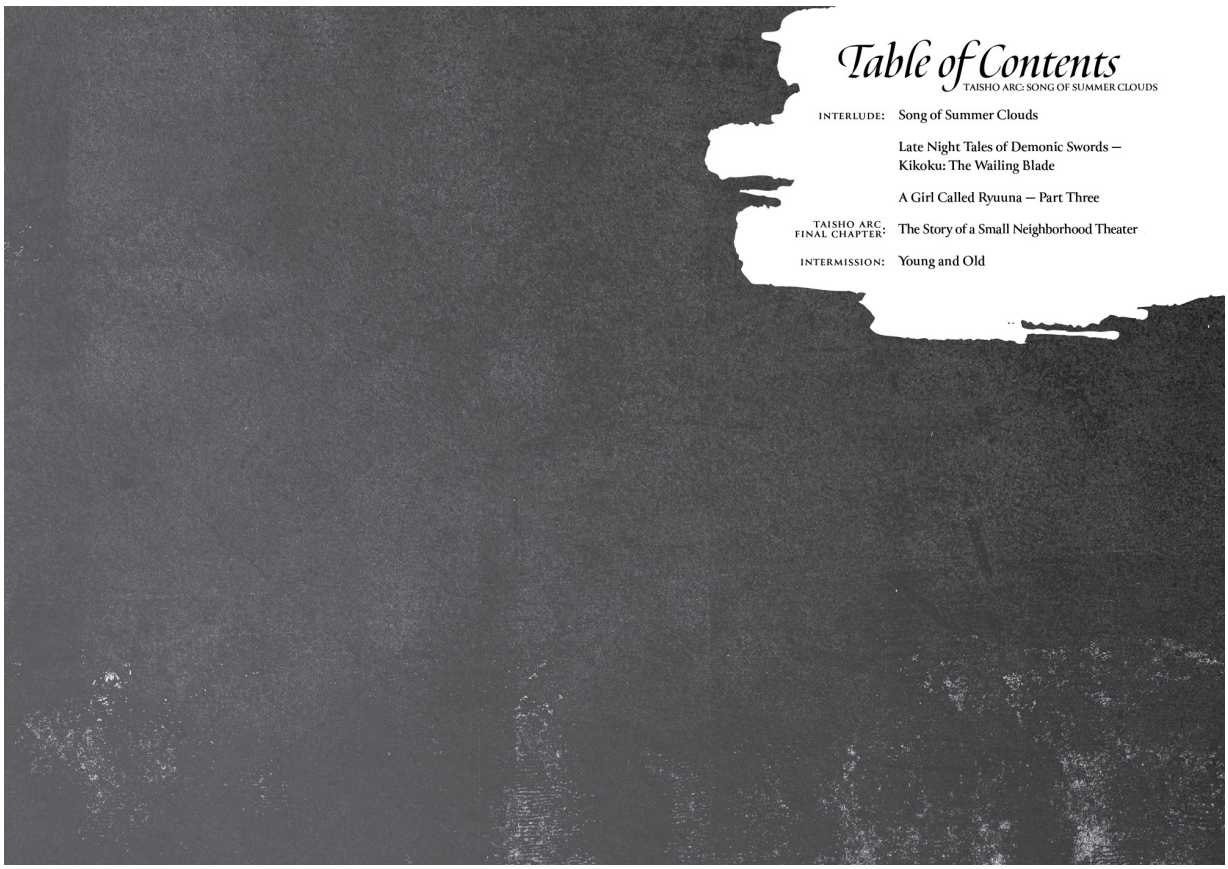


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Character List

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

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.

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.

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

Okada Kiich: A murderer and demon who lives to reach the pinnacle of the blade.

Izuchi: A demon that served Eizen. Has since become an ally of Jinya and the rest.

Yonabari: A demon that served Eizen. Intersex. Took Eizen's demonic blade of *Demon Wail* and fled.

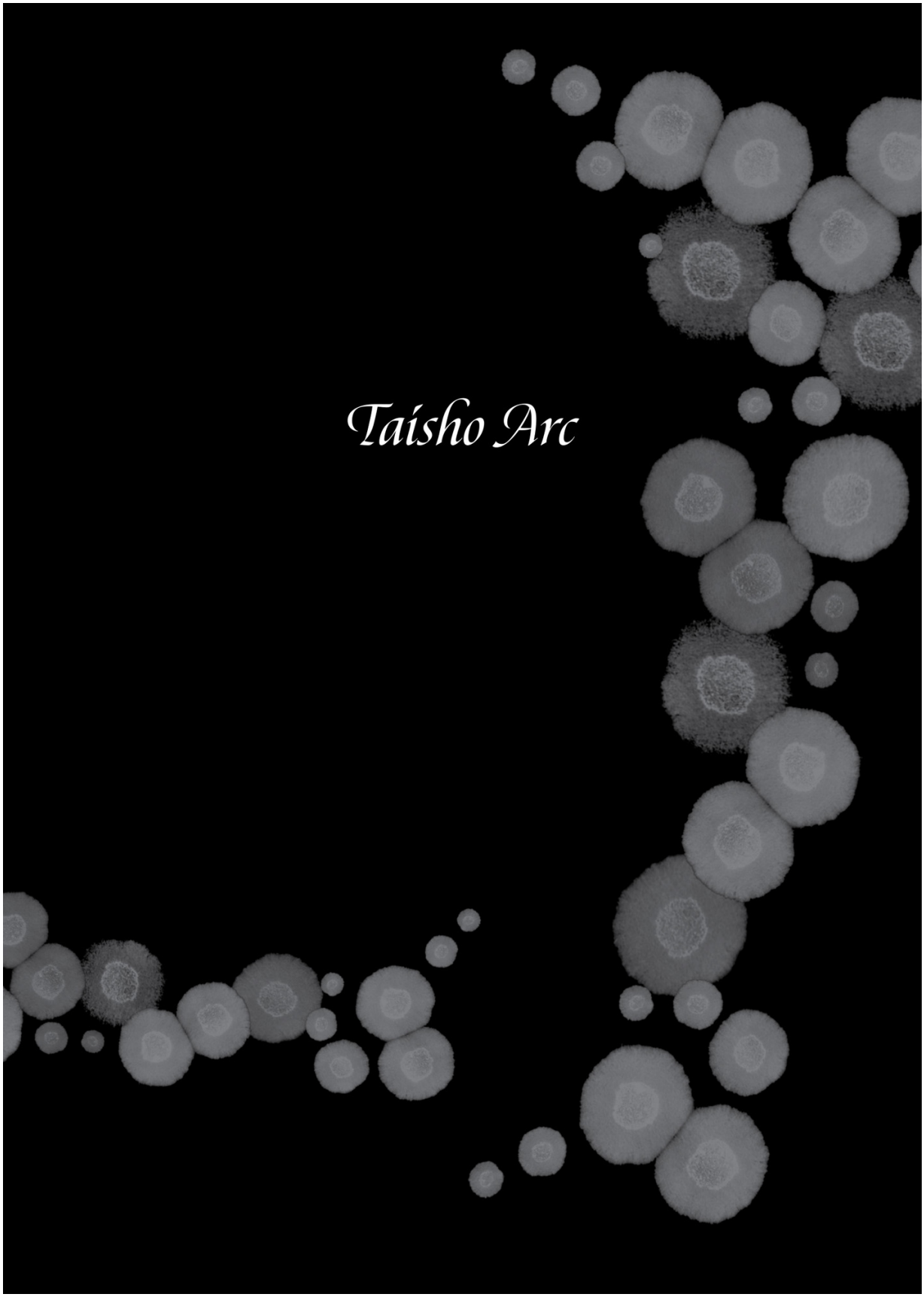
Motoharu: Jinya and Suzune's foster father and Yokaze's shrine maiden guardian. Lost his life slaying a demon that attacked Kadono.

Yokaze: Former Itsukihime and Motoharu's wife. Consumed by a demon that appeared suddenly.

Summary of the Prior Volume

WITH THE AID OF OKADA KIICHI and others, Jinya succeeded in putting a stop to Nagumo Eizen's plans, but he failed to recover the demonic sword of Demon Wail as Yonabari stole it away in the chaos.

It is now year eleven of the Taisho era (1922 AD). About two months have passed since the Nagumo Eizen incident, but little has changed in the Imperial Capital of Tokyo. Everyone is finally enjoying a peaceful life. Yonabari has made no move, leaving Jinya to live in peace as well—that is, until Akitsu Somegorou comes to him with a strange request.


Taisho Arc

Interlude:
Song of Summer Clouds
1

JULY 2009, the Sunday before summer break.

"I guess this should do?"

Miyaka stood before her room's mirror and checked her outfit. Today she was pairing a white high-neck, sleeveless top with skinny jeans. She opted for jeans because she found skirts too restricting to move in, and she wore a plain top since she didn't like frivolous things like lace or ribbons. She carefully brushed her hip-length brown-tinged hair with a comb and adjusted her bangs. Then she gave one last look at herself in the mirror and nodded.

"Oh, I should get going."

She had plans to go shopping with a classmate that day. A male classmate. This would be a first for her, so she was putting more effort into her appearance than usual.

She checked her clock, then left the house with time to spare. It was perhaps a bit *too* early, but arriving early was always better than cutting it close.

Not a single cloud lined the fair sky outside. It would be another hot day today. With the rainy season over, the rays of sun felt all the more blistering, but the true dog days of summer were yet to come. Though the early summer heat made Miyaka sweat a bit, that only made the cool breeze feel all the more refreshing.

She glanced at her watch: 10:43. Waiting for her at the fountain in front of the station they'd agreed to meet at was her classmate, even more ahead of schedule than she was. He wore denim jeans and a black undershirt with a light long-sleeved jacket on top. A surprisingly well put together outfit, for him at least.

He noticed her as well and gave a light wave. She waved back and unhurriedly approached him.

"Sorry, were you waiting long?"

"Not at all."

Neither of the two was the bubbly type, so their greetings were kept short and simple. One might think romance was in the air, since they were classmates of the opposite gender meeting outside of school, but nothing of the sort was happening. The sense of distance between them was just right, neither of them needing to say a word as they set off for their destination.

Miyaka had been acquainted with Jinya since before she started high school. Back when she and her friend Azusaya Kaoru got in trouble, he'd been the one to bail them out. It was a bit strange to think he was just an ordinary classmate now.

"Sorry to drag you along like this," he said.

"It's fine," she said curtly. "Kaoru and I brought the idea up in the first place, anyway."

She wanted to say she was only paying him back for all the times he'd helped them, but she couldn't help but be a little sharp

with her words. She wished she could be friendlier and not so brusque all the time, but alas.

The two were meeting so they could go buy him a cell phone. A few days ago, the gang had hashed out a plan to hang out over summer break with some other classmates. Naturally, Jinya was invited as well, but when they asked for his phone number it turned out he didn't have a phone. That made it difficult to plan things, so he decided he would go buy one. But since he didn't know what to look for in a cell phone, he asked Miyaka to come with him.

Jinya was nearly perfect regarding most things, but he was awful when it came to electronics—particularly things like video games, computers, and cell phones. He could use things like refrigerators, TVs, and microwaves just fine, though, so maybe he just lacked interest more than anything.

According to him, the problem was that certain kinds of technology had developed too quickly for him to keep up with. It was hard to believe there was a high schooler out there who could say stuff like that with a straight face, but then again—if his words were to be believed—he was much older than your typical high schooler.

"Are you sure you're fine with me?" she asked. "I don't exactly know much about this kind of stuff either."

"You know more than me."

"Fair."

They entered the cell phone shop, which contained a selection of cell phones in a variety of colors. Jinya stood in front of a row and grimaced, causing Miyaka to let slip a burst of laughter.

"So, which are you going with?"

"I…don't know."

He fiddled with a few of the phones on display. There wasn't much difference in function between the various brands, so it really came down to whatever suited his preferences. She recommended a few, thinking he would just pick one whose aesthetics he liked, but he instead went with a different pick entirely. He chose a cell phone with no functions whatsoever other than phoning—one specifically designed for the elderly.

"…You *are* a high schooler, right?"

"Is something wrong? This looked like the easiest to use."

"It probably is, but no. Just *no*."

She wasn't letting a high schooler be caught dead with a phone meant for grandmas and grandpas. She ignored his selection entirely and chose a design and color for him herself.

A new type of cell phone called a "smartphone" had been released the previous year, but they were still too expensive for a high schooler to afford, so she went with a standard flip phone. She didn't think Jinya could handle a touch screen anyway.

She chose black for the color, a safe pick. For the model, she selected something sturdy and waterproof, since he was always leaping around, fighting, and so on.

"Thanks. You were a big help, Miyaka."

"You still gotta learn how to use it. Let me know if you can't figure anything out."

"Will do."

It was a bit unusual to get heartfelt thanks just for helping someone buy something as simple as a cell phone, but she was happy nonetheless.

Things were over more quickly than they'd expected, so they decided to get lunch somewhere. While looking for a place, Miyaka spotted a CD store and stopped.

"You mind if we take a quick look?" She wasn't after anything in particular, but she figured she might as well browse the new releases.

"Why not?"

Normally she would go over to the listening corner and listen to CDs, but that would be rude while she was with somebody, so instead she checked out the maxi singles over by the new releases corner and made small talk.

"Do you listen to music at all, Jinya?"

"Not much, to be honest."

"Not your thing?"

"I just don't have any singers I'm partial to. I don't mind what they play in shops and such, though."

It looked like he didn't mind music as background noise, but he wouldn't go out of his way to buy any. That kind of fit his image. He certainly wasn't the type to ever go gaga for bands or idol groups, at least.

"How about you?"

"Me? I kind of listen to a little of everything. Whatever catches my interest. Sometimes I get hooked on the songs they use in commercials or play on the radio. There's been too many love songs lately, though. I'm not big on those."

In fact, the current top ten songs were all love this and love that. They weren't bad songs by any means, but it made you wonder if there wasn't anything else to sing about.

Jinya dropped a small grin as she grumbled, the kind of grin one made when they watched a small child. That miffed her a bit, but at least he was enjoying himself.

They looked around the store some more until Jinya stopped by the DVD corner. He stared in fixation at the shelf, his focus beyond the level of mere curiosity. With a gravely serious expression, he reached out and grabbed a DVD with monochrome packaging.

"*Song of Summer Clouds*…" he whispered terribly softly.

"You know this movie?"

"Yeah. It's an old motion picture film." His eyes squinted with nostalgia.

Out of the many motion picture films of the Taisho era, *Song of Summer Clouds*—a short film released in year three of that era (1914 AD)—was among the most popular. The film featured a song of the same name that went on to become a hit for much of the early Taisho period. The song's lyrics were written by Honda Fuugetsu, and the composition was handled by Nitta Shinpei. It was sung by veteran

singer Kinjyou Saori and went on sale in year four of the Taisho era, selling over sixteen thousand records, an incredible amount.

Motion pictures films were considered the king of entertainment in the Taisho era, making the popularity of *Song of Summer Clouds* all the more impressive. There were still many avid fans of the film a full decade after its first screening.

The film was made when motion pictures were just taking off in Japan, so many of the techniques used were dated. Also, the film's plot—a bittersweet romance between a boy and a girl—was far from original. Even so, the film remained a beloved favorite for its orthodox plot, wonderful background music, and, of course, its title song.

"You don't say. Have you seen it before?"

"I have."

Miyaka grabbed a copy of *Song of Summer Clouds* to look at for herself. It was not the Taisho-era version Jinya knew, but a later remake that had been released on DVD.

She thought about asking if he wanted to buy it but the words wouldn't come out. Something about the distant gaze in his eyes made her think twice about saying anything just then.

Jinya stared at the DVD's packaging and sighed warmly. If he would just close his eyes, it would all return to him—all those tender memories.

Memories now distant.

But still as vivid as they once had been.

Tokyo was known as the Imperial Capital then.

And the flowers bloomed undisturbed in the evening…

***

Akase Kimiko could feel a change in herself. Ever since that fateful night at Nagumo Eizen's second residence, her heart had occasionally felt strange. It would race sometimes without warning, and at other times it would abruptly feel tight. It was as though it had a will of its own, one that contradicted hers.

She was left bewildered by this strange change in herself. She didn't know its cause, and that unnerved her.

It was now August in year eleven of the Taisho era (1922 AD).

Roughly two months had passed since the Eizen incident, but there had been little noteworthy change in Tokyo—on the surface or otherwise. Yonabari had yet to make a move since stealing Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade, and the days had gone by in peace.

Toudou Yoshihiko, after being dragged into the whole incident, had finally made a complete recovery. Done with his extended rest, he returned to his work with a new, more motivated spirit.

"Man, it's hot…" He wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead as he swept clear the front entrance of the motion picture theater Koyomiza. He might have been more motivated about work now, but that didn't take away the blistering heat. It was just past noon, and the very air of Shibuya's streets seemed to shimmer from the heat.

The whole Eizen incident hadn't changed Yoshihiko's life all that much. Though his job came with three square meals and a roof over his head, he still needed to make money to do just about anything. Encountering the supernatural didn't change that fact, and so his life went on as it had before. Today, like any other day, he was hard at work.

That wasn't to say nothing had changed, however. Another live-in employee had joined Koyomiza. He was older than Yoshihiko, but Yoshihiko was still the senpai, meaning he was senior to him in terms of work hierarchy. He was supposed to show the new employee the ropes by setting a good example, but the heat was just too unbearable today, so he swept as fast as he could to get it over with.

With many more beads of sweat now on his forehead, he finally finished. He trotted into Koyomiza, eager to get out of the sun, but as soon as he stepped inside, he heard a loud shout followed by a sharp slap.

"Leave me alone!"

Wondering what was going on, he headed for the theater and saw a young woman wearing a kimono quarreling with a gaudy-looking young man. The man—who seemed many years older than Yoshihiko—had a palm print on his cheek, red like autumn leaves.

Again? Yoshihiko thought with a sigh.

In the Taisho era, motion picture theaters were considered trendy haunts by young folk. As a simple result of that, many young men visited them to try and pick up girls. That itself was fine, but every now and then a man who didn't know how to take "no" for an

answer cropped up. Rarer yet were the scumbags who turned physical against women.

The young man before Yoshihiko was apparently one such man. Red with rage, he swung a fist at the girl, leaving Yoshihiko no option but to intervene.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we do not allow such behavior in our establishment!" A bit reluctantly, Yoshihiko stepped in and stopped the man. Unfortunately, this too was part of the job.

"The hell?" As soon as the gaudy-looking man's gaze turned to Yoshihiko, the girl whom he had been pestering ran off. The man's face twisted with rage. His attempts at picking a girl up had failed, a child had gotten in the way of his swing, and the girl he was after had fled. He only had himself to blame for all of that, of course, but he still needed an outlet for his anger, so he glared at Yoshihiko and shouted, "What was that for, you brat?!"

"Look, I can't have you causing problems for our other customers…"

There was no reasoning with the heated young man. With a demonic expression, he reached out to grab Yoshihiko.

"What's going on here?" But then a *real* demon grabbed his arm from behind.

"I-Izuchi-san…"

"Hey, Yoshihiko-senpai."

This muscular demon was Izuchi, the aforementioned new live-in employee of Koyomiza. He used to be an underling of Eizen but was

now Yoshihiko's coworker. Yoshihiko had been wary of Izuchi at first, having heard that he once aimed to overthrow the Taisho world. But Izuchi showed a good work ethic, and he politely referred to Yoshihiko as "senpai." He had earned his place in Koyomiza over the past two months.

"Wh-who the hell are you?! This has nothing to do with you! Stay out of this!" the young man shouted.

"This has everything to do with me. The guy in front of you is my senpai. You pick a fight with him, you pick a fight with me." Glaring fiercely, Izuchi squeezed the man's arm. Though he looked human now, his true nature was that of a demon. He could break an ordinary person's arm like a twig if he wanted to. He was holding back a lot now, but the young man still broke out in a cold sweat.

"O-ow. *Ow!* L-Let me go!"

"No can do. Let's talk a bit first, one-on-one." Now it was Izuchi doing the threatening. Yoshihiko felt a little sorry for the young man.

Izuchi always did his work dutifully and respected Yoshihiko as his senpai, but he went overboard when it came to protecting Yoshihiko for some reason.

"Izuchi-san?! You don't need to go that far!"

"But if we don't teach punks like this a lesson, they'll keep causing trouble," Izuchi said in all seriousness. The face of the young man he had in his grip was locked in a pained grimace, but Izuchi showed no intention of releasing him.

"Hmm. I agree on that account." Another familiar face approached then, not reading the mood. This particular man set Yoshihiko on edge a bit. It wasn't to the extent that Yoshihiko wanted to chase him out, but there was something off about him.

"Oh. Hello, Okada-san."

"Toudou. Have you been in good health?"

"Ah, yeah. More or less."

Okada Kiichi. One of the men who'd helped them in their fight against Eizen and, apparently, a murderer who had been alive since the Edo era. Though he aided Yoshihiko and the rest, Yoshihiko didn't know him well.

Yoshihiko was hesitant to open up to Kiichi, partially because Kiichi kept treating him like a child at first, but Izuchi had no such reservations. The two demons even drank together. Kiichi could be found visiting Koyomiza with a sake bottle in hand every now and then.

They did say one never knew what fellows they might find themselves among, but for Yoshihiko to grow acquainted with two demons of all things was quite the twist of fate. It seemed the gods possessed a sense of humor—and perhaps a rather mean-spirited one.

"Now then, where were we? I do believe this man tried to attack Toudou?" With crazed, bulging eyes, Kiichi stared at the gaudy-looking man.

"That he did," Izuchi said.

"Keh keh keh. Then perhaps I need to lend a hand as well." Kiichi laughed eerily. In his hands was a blade that gave off a dull glint, already drawn before anyone realized it. It wasn't a sword but a dagger he kept under the folds of his clothes. It would be lethal all the same in his hands, surely. The look of murderous glee on Kiichi's face made Yoshihiko question whether the man really just wanted to "lend a hand," as he put it.

The gaudy-looking man's face paled when he saw the blade, as did Yoshihiko's. This was all supposed to end with him giving a troublesome customer a stern warning, no more. Fighting was out of the question. If word got out that someone had drawn a dagger and hurt someone—or worse, killed someone—Koyomiza's reputation would take a hit.

Yoshihiko was panicking over what to do when a voice as stiff as steel called out.

"…What's all this commotion about?"

A wave of relief washed over Yoshihiko. There was Jinya with a look of exasperation on his face, accompanied by Kimiko—who still politely bowed despite the situation—and Ryuuna.

Though Jinya was technically another demon, he at least possessed some common sense.

"Good afternoon. Um… Are you busy right now?"

"Mm…"

The two girls, though bewildered, greeted Yoshihiko. Even their presence felt like a godsend. He gave them a quick greeting in return,

then pleaded to Jinya for help. “J-Jiiya-san! Help! If we don’t stop these guys, they might actually do it!”

In order, Jinya looked at the pale-faced, gaudy-looking man, Kiichi creeping closer to him with a blade in hand, and Izuchi who had his arm in a firm grip. Jinya looked back at Yoshihiko last and murmured in understanding. “I see… This is quite the situation.” He walked forward, patting Yoshihiko on the head as he passed by.

With all his tension suddenly gone, Yoshihiko let out a feeble cry. “Jiiya-san…”

“I know. Don’t worry.”

Yoshihiko knew he could rely on Jinya. He hadn’t been entrusted with Kimiko’s care for no reason. Though he looked to be only around eighteen, his back was that of a dependable man.

With his eyes, Jinya signaled Kimiko and Ryuuna to keep their distance, then called out to the men. “Izuchi, Kiichi. Leave it at that.”

The two demons looked back at him and furrowed their brows. Izuchi’s gaze seemed particularly stupefied by Jinya’s words, as though stopping was out of the question.

But Jinya held firm. He took a couple of steps forward and glared at the gaudy-looking man. “Killing him will only cause more trouble. Break his arms and legs at most, to make sure he never tries to hurt Yoshihiko-kun again.”

“No, no, no! How is that any better?!” Yoshihiko exclaimed. Instead of trying to stop the two demons, Jinya was offering them a more practical and savage alternative to killing.

"Acceptable."

"Good by me. You help out too, Demon Eater."

What was worse, Kiichi and Izuchi seemed on board. Yoshihiko's head started aching from the sheer absurdity of it all. From his side, Kimiko watched with a broad smile.

"Oh dear, Yoshihiko-san. It seems the security at Koyomiza is a little *too* good."

"…There's nothing funny about this, Kimiko-san."

He had to wonder just what about all this she was enjoying so much.

In the end, the arrival of Jinya and the girls had only added more fuel to the fire and more grief for Yoshihiko.

"Sorry about that, Yoshihiko-kun. We might have gone a little overboard," Jinya apologized.

"A 'little'?" Yoshihiko hung his head lifelessly.

In the end, the young man had been released without any injuries, though he did scream in terror as he fled. Yoshihiko couldn't help but feel sorry for him, in tears as he'd been.

"Why would you go so far as to suggest breaking his arms and legs? That's just terrifying. Sheesh."

"It'd be a problem if he came back with a score to settle against you. It's better to thoroughly crush riffraff like that so they never think about baring their fangs again."

In other words, Jinya wanted to make sure Yoshihiko would be safe even when he and Izuchi weren't around. That was kind of him, but there'd been no need to be *this* thorough. Yoshihiko had heard from Himawari that Jinya was a battle-hardened demon, and it looked like she wasn't kidding. Solving issues through violence seemed to be second nature for him.

"Thank you for helping me, Jiiya-san, but going as far as almost hurting someone was a bit much."

"Don't worry. I wasn't actually going to hurt him, and neither were Izuchi or Okada Kiichi. We were just making empty threats."

"Huh? Really?"

"Of course. If that murderer really wanted to kill someone, he'd slice through their neck in a second. I'd be helpless to stop him."

Yoshihiko made a weary expression and dropped his shoulders, not exactly reassured by Jinya's words. "Say, why were you so calm the whole time anyway, Kimiko-san?"

"Me? I knew Jiiya wouldn't do anything rash," Kimiko replied. Ryuuna nodded along to what she said. They both seemed to have known from the start that Jinya wouldn't hurt anyone.

Kimiko smiled gently, her face flushed for some reason. Maybe her years with Jinya just meant she knew him better. Yoshihiko found himself a bit impressed by her unexpected nerves of steel.

"And that's when…"

"No kidding?"

"Uh-huh, and then…"

After all the commotion, Kiichi promised to drink with Izuchi later and then quickly left. Though the afternoon screening had started, Kimiko and the others didn't enter the theater; instead they sandwiched Yoshihiko and made scattered small talk. That seemed good enough for them, though. Yoshihiko had been fairly close to Kimiko before that fateful night, but he felt as though they'd grown all the closer after it. Jinya gave them space as he watched them chat, his gaze warm.

Their frivolous small talk continued even after the next film screened. Eventually, Jinya cut in and said, "I'm glad you're enjoying yourselves, but it's about time for us to go."

"I suppose you're right. Sorry for taking so long, Jiiya." Kimiko was a bit bashful, seeming to only just realize how long they had been talking. With a polite bow, she said, "Take care then, Yoshihiko-san."

It appeared their objective this time hadn't been to watch a film but only to say hello.

"Hm? Just window-shopping this time?" Izuchi teased them with a smile.

Jinya grinned back and said, "Something like that. Lady Kimiko insisted we pay Yoshihiko-kun a visit."

"J-Jiiya!" Kimiko turned red.

Back when Yoshihiko was on death's door, his health had been restored thanks to Magatsume's techniques. The others occasionally

checked in on his health to make sure he was all right, and Kimiko's visit today seemed to be something along those lines as well.

"We'll be off, then," Jiiya said.

"Jeez, Jiiya… Once again, take care, Yoshihiko." Kimiko made a light wave, and Ryuuna copied her. The sisterly air between the two brought a smile to Yoshihiko's face.

And so, the three of them left without seeing a film. Yoshihiko watched them go, feeling bashful but joyful, with the knowledge that they'd come for him and not the theater itself.

***

After taking a few steps out of Koyomiza, Kimiko murmured, "Jiiya, I think I know the cause now."

"I see." Jinya's voice was soft, carrying a fatherly tone.

One of the reasons why the three of them had visited Koyomiza was to check on Yoshihiko's condition. Their other purpose was to check on Kimiko's condition.

The previous night, Kimiko had come to Jinya in tears, saying, *"Jiiya… I think Eizen-sama might have done something to me!"*

Jinya himself couldn't remain calm at the sound of Eizen's name. But after listening some more, he understood the cause of her ailment and felt weary all at once. What she had was likely… No, *definitely* not something caused by Nagumo Eizen.

Worriedly, she had explained to Jinya that her heart had felt strange ever since that night at Eizen's residence, and that the strangeness was all the more intense when Yoshihiko was there.

"It was like you said, Jiiya…" Kimiko's face was red, and her eyes were moist with embarrassment. "Something is wrong with my heart. It feels tight whenever I look at Yoshihiko-san."

To be clear, there was no danger present. Certainly no deaths would come from this. It was nothing more than a case of a young girl starting to come of age.

2

"JINYA, WE'VE GOT TROUBLE. Trouble on the level of that old Nagumo geezer."

In the study of the Hydrangea Mansion, Michitomo sat firmly in his chair with a grim look on his face. Akase Seiichirou had stepped down entirely after the incident with Eizen. Now Michitomo was the head of the Akase family in earnest, but new problems had appeared to torment him.

"How worrying." Jinya replied without meeting Michitomo's gaze. He sat cross-legged on the study's floor with Akitsu Somegorou sitting across from him. A rhythmic clack could be heard from them, and the air was oddly tense.

"It is worrying. My Kimiko is being *seduced* by a man named Yoshihiko!"

"I've heard. I thought she was still a child, but I suppose she's starting to grow up now." Jinya felt a bit emotional. It was hard to believe that tiny little girl was now old enough to fall in love.

Under Seiichirou's orders, she had been restricted to the Akase home. Jinya had stood by and allowed that, telling himself it was

necessary to slay Eizen, but he felt guilty about it. That was why he was truly happy to see her find someone she loved. Her father Michitomo, on the other hand, felt differently.

"She's lived most of her life confined to this home. She's still ignorant of a lot about the world, like how dangerous men can be. Jinya, could you go kill that Yoshihiko bastard for me? For Kimiko's sake, of course."

"I respectfully decline. Perhaps you're overreacting a bit?"

Jinya had looked after Kimiko since she was young, and he understood the desire to dote on her. Michitomo's suggestion was a bit too much, though.

"If anything, you're *under*reacting, Jinya. You've looked after Kimiko since she was a baby. Surely you don't want to see her taken away by some random brat?" Michitomo seemed put off by Jinya's indifference.

"I don't, but Yoshihiko's not some random brat. He's a man with backbone, something rare for youths these days. Ah, *koi-koi*."

Yoshihiko had put his own life on the line to protect Kimiko and throw a wrench in Eizen's plans. He'd even used his own body to protect her from the bullet Yonabari fired. He had the will to see his stubbornness through and the strength to act. Such pluck was seldom seen in these times, and it certainly didn't hurt that he was a kind, honest man who worked hard as well.

"Yer kinda fond of 'im, eh?" Somegorou chimed in. Unrushed, he drew a card from the deck, then slammed it down on the floor with a

wide grin. “Not sayin’ I’m not myself, ’course. And that’s game! I got chaff and animals; two points.”

“Hmph. Guess I got greedy.”

“Ha ha, ye shoulda gone for a quick win ’stead of going *koi-koi*!”

Jinya was stronger when it came to fighting, but Somegorou’s tactical nature shone in Hanafuda. Jinya had lost every round so far and tried to go for a big payout to make a comeback, but he ended up crashing out.

With a big grin, Somegorou boasted about his victory.

“…Could you guys not mess around when I’m trying to have a serious talk here? And why are you playing Hanafuda in my study, anyway?” Michitomo asked.

With the whole conflict against Eizen over, Jinya and a few others had taken to simple amusements to pass the time, and today the battle-hardened demon and the legendary spirit hunter were dueling it out over a game of Hanafuda. Michitomo was amazed they could take it so easy like this.

Michitomo’s concern for his daughter was genuine, though. His request to Jinya might have been excessive, but it came from a place of real worry. With that in mind, Jinya and Somegorou’s indifferent reactions could be called somewhat crude. Feeling a bit sorry, they looked over at Michitomo as they cleaned up the cards.

“Seems like a good spot to call it,” Somegorou said.

“Yeah, I don’t think I can manage a comeback from here. It’s my loss.”

"You remember our little wager, right?"

"Sure."

They hadn't bet money this time. Instead, on Somegorou's suggestion, the loser would do any one thing the winner requested. Jinya didn't think Somegorou would ask for anything unreasonable, but the anticipation of the coming request did weigh on him. That was all for later, however. It was time to listen to Michitomo for now.

"So, what's the plan? Want me to make sure things go well between the two?" Somegorou suggested.

"No, no. Akitsu-san, was it? Just the opposite. I'll choose whom Kimiko marries when the time is right, so we've got to work out a way to make things fall flat between her and this Yoshihiko boy." There was nothing unexpected about Michitomo's words. In the Taisho era, most nobles married for political gain, and it was the duty of fathers to find a suitable partner for their daughters. Michitomo and Shino's marriage had been such a union as well; it was only by chance that they were compatible and made a good, loving couple. No one in this time period would fault Michitomo for choosing Kimiko's husband.

"Hold on now. If ya go tryin' to tear the two apart, the missy'll come to hate you."

"Urk."

Somegorou made a fair point. A good deal of Western culture entered Japan during the Meiji and Taisho eras, sending the country forward by leaps and bounds. Capitalism took root, science advanced, and new forms of entertainment were introduced. And when the surrounding environment changed, so too did the people. In a

movement that would later be known as Taisho Romanticism, Western values were adopted by many cultural icons and influenced the population at large.

One notable change was about views regarding marriage. In Japan, marriage was an affair between households, not individuals. But starting in the Taisho era, Western influence romanticized the idea of marrying out of love rather than familial obligation. While this idea was adored by the populace at large, it drove many a wedge between dreamy youths and their more conservative parents.

"That all being said…" Somegorou began. "A well-to-do noble girl marryin' a theater ticket boy *is* a bit out there, yeah? 'Specially when she's an only child."

Though Kimiko didn't make a big deal out of it, she was still a lady of high background. Normally, her future husband would need to be of comparable standing to her.

"Right? I'm being perfectly reasonable here," Michitomo said. "I've taken my duties as family head seriously so I can provide for my wife and Kimiko. Just holding a noble rank won't fill our stomachs. If we had enough savings to let Kimiko live the rest of her life happily, I would gladly let her stay unmarried for life and have the Akase line end with me, but one needs money to live. Marrying her off to a man who can't provide for her is unthinkable."

Michitomo's grand speech was *almost* befitting a family head. Somegorou seemed impressed by his words, but Jinya had known him longer and could guess what he was really thinking.

"Just to be sure, what would you do if a man who *could* provide for her appeared?" Jinya asked. "Would you let her marry him?"

"Absolutely not! It's still far too soon for her to marry!"

Jinya had had a feeling that was the case, but he still couldn't help but groan.

"Ah… Ya just can't let her go yet, eh?" Somegorou slumped his shoulders, sorry that he'd let himself feel impressed at all.

Jinya and Somegorou had both had children before, so they understood Michitomo's feelings and didn't blame him for lashing out like this—but they did think he could afford to go about things more calmly.

"Look, I'm not saying you have to be on board with her crush," Jinya said. "Noble or not, a parent is going to worry about their little girl. Hating the man who might take her away from you isn't so strange."

"Right?" Michitomo said hopefully.

"But it's her life to live."

Michitomo winced, likely because he already understood that. He made no objection and continued listening to what Jinya said.

"Kimiko is finally choosing something for herself. She finally *can* choose something for herself. And that's why I can't help but want to take her side. Sorry, Michitomo, but I can't do what you want on this one thing alone."

"…I get it. I get it, but…but… Oh, Kimikoooo…"

He might have understood, but whether his heart would accept it was a different matter. His conflicting feelings were something that plagued every father across all of time.

He sprawled forward flat on his desk. The two men couldn't help but let slip a smile. For a time thereafter, they were stuck listening to the father's grumblings.

"He's really got it bad, eh?" Somegorou said with a cackle.

After being held up for a while, he and Jinya had returned to Jinya's room. Michitomo had cold tea prepared for them, likely as a show of gratitude for hearing out his grievances. The feeling of cold tea gliding down the throat in summer was unlike any other. The ice in the glass cups shifted with a *clink*, and Jinya's gaze dropped to look at it.

"It's not his fault. All parents have such worries at some point."

"Yer not wrong… Somethin' up?"

Jinya continued to stare at the ice in his glass. The machine-cut ice-making business had gotten its start in the Meiji era. To Somegorou, who'd lived through that era, ice was seldom purchased but not wholly unusual. But the same could not be said for Jinya, who was born in the Bunsei era.

"No. I was just thinking we live in an era of luxury. That's all."

Back when Tokyo was still known as Edo, ice during summer had been a luxury only a privileged few of the upper class could enjoy, but now even a child could buy some with their allowance.

Edo, Meiji, Taisho. As someone who'd lived through all three of these eras, Jinya found the presence of ice—something now taken for granted by all—to be very strange.

"Oh? Is that so?"

"Don't mind me, I'm just being sentimental. More importantly, what brings you here?"

The two of them had been playing Hanafuda up until a little while ago, but Somegorou really made his visit because he had something to discuss with Jinya. Things had been postponed a bit, but now that their tea was finished, they could get down to business.

"Right…" Somegorou smiled dryly, as though unsure where to begin. He hemmed and hawed for a bit before taking a breath and reluctantly saying, "I'll be going back to Kyoto soon."

Jinya had forgotten, but Somegorou lived in Kyoto. It only made sense he would return since he had no business left here.

"The Nagumo geezer is business done with, and none of his remnants have made a move in the past two months. It's high time I head back."

"I see. It'll be lonelier here without you."

By coincidence, the two were able to meet again and interact like they had in the past. But make no mistake—Somegorou had his own life now, elsewhere. Things were not the same as they used to be.

"Ha ha, thanks. Oh, right. Can't forget about our little wager."

Jinya had to do any one thing Somegorou asked as a penalty for losing their Hanafuda match. Looking back on it, Somegorou might have challenged Jinya to a game for this very purpose. He reached under the folds of his clothes and pulled out a letter which he languidly showed to Jinya.

"I was supposed to meet someone tomorrow, y'see, but something's come up. Could ya go meet them in my stead for me? Pass them this letter while yer at it."

For a penalty, this was rather simple. Somegorou waved the letter around, seeming a bit nervous for some reason. Trying to hide that fact, he prattled on. "The other party's someone I know from Kyoto who'll be arrivin' in Tokyo tonight. The plan was for them to rest a night, then meet me at the station tomorrow. Think you can sub for me?"

His eyes seemed desperate for Jinya to say yes. Jinya found that strange, but the request itself was no more than an errand, and he had no reason not to accept. "That's fine, but are you sure I should be the one to go?"

"Why not? You'll be meeting a woman. I've already told her what you look like, so she should be able to find you. Well, I don't think you'd miss each other anyway."

"Got it." Jinya nodded and took the letter.

Somegorou let out a sigh of relief. With a faint smile, he lowered his head slightly. "Thanks. Well, that's all from me, so I'll be headin' back to my hotel."

"All right. Take care."

The two shared modest parting words, then Somegorou left the room. Seen from behind, something about his figure felt gentler than usual.

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Though Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth wouldn't directly say it, he felt grateful to Jinya. In his youth, Utsugi Heikichi had been a cheeky brat. The moment he learned the man who ran the soba restaurant—his master's friend—was a demon, he started picking fights with him. The man always took Heikichi's comments in stride, which, of course, only frustrated Heikichi even more in turn.

But no matter how much abuse Heikichi hurled, the man always looked out for him. He helped him train and gave him advice in difficult moments.

"Work hard, Utsugi. I won't accept anyone but you as the fourth Akitsu Somegorou."

He even acknowledged the cheeky brat.

Somegorou respected his master, Akitsu the Third, more than anyone else. But the man he respected the second most was undoubtedly Kadono Jinya. That's why it was his goal to one day repay the debt he owed him.

"I've done what I can. The rest is out of my hands."

He left the Hydrangea Mansion and walked for a while before stopping. The scorching heat of the sun made sweat drip down his

brow. He wiped his forehead, then looked behind him. He'd walked a fair distance already, and the Akase home was already out of view.

"This is all I can do for ya."

It was a small gesture that didn't even chip away at the debt he owed Jinya. But Somegorou prayed it would do something to heal the man's wounds, even if it was only a little.

With no one to hear his words, Somegorou faced forward again. His skin was balmy with sweat, and his lungs felt like they would burn up. But he didn't hate the heat just now, because it brought that summer day at the festival back to his mind. Just how long ago had that been?

With a nostalgic smile on his lips, he leisurely walked back to his hotel.

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At the same time, Kimiko was in her room agonizing over her thoughts. She still couldn't decide whether her feelings for Yoshihiko were ones of love or of friendship, so she gathered her only two female acquaintances to discuss the issue.

Kimiko, Himawari, Ryuuna. One might think a gathering of girls should be a noisy affair, but none of them were much for things like squealing.

"I really doubt the two of us will be any help here."

"…Mm."

Himawari and Ryuuna seemed bewildered that Kimiko had come to them for help. Ryuuna hardly ever talked, Himawari wasn't as

young as her appearance suggested, and neither had experience in love, so they were rather strange choices to consult with.

"But I have no one else I can turn to."

Having lived a sheltered life up until now, Kimiko had no friends she could ask for help. The only similarly aged person she was close with was Yoshihiko, but she couldn't very well talk to *him* about this. She'd tried talking to her father, but that had turned messy, and her mother was busy consoling him. That left only Himawari and Ryuuna.

"…Not Jiiya?" Ryuuna asked with a tilt of her head.

"I've already gone to him, but…"

Kimiko went to Jinya first because she assumed a century-old demon like him would have a plethora of romantic experience. Plus, she knew he was somebody who would listen to what she had to say without writing her off. However, this was the one time he did not wind up being much help.

When she asked him about his past romances, he turned evasive. He admitted he'd had a first love in the past, but that was all he would give up. He wouldn't say her name and only gave away the fact that they were raised like family in the same village. Kimiko had pressed further, hoping for something exciting along the lines of a romance film, but he just returned her a wry smile. *"Unfortunately, I've been single all my life. I'm sorry I couldn't be a better reference."*

It sounded like something had happened, but the conversation ended before Kimiko could ask any further.

"Men tend to be a bit bashful when it comes to talk of romance," Himawari said somewhat stiffly.

Kimiko nodded in understanding, but she was soon left stumped by the question Himawari posed next.

"Anyway, what is it that *you* want, Kimiko-san?"

Kimiko undoubtedly had some special feelings for Yoshihiko, but she did not know whether those feelings were ones of love. What's more, she was a noble girl raised to be a sacrifice. Forget love, she hadn't even experienced marriage talks. Thoughts of romance were foreign to her, but the idea of starting something with a man was even more foreign yet.

She was full of thankfulness toward Yoshihiko and wanted to put her gratitude into words. But she had since been unable to share with him even a fraction of how thankful she was, because she could only manage meaningless small talk every time they came face-to-face. She couldn't act the way she wanted, and that left her frustrated.

Clumsily, Kimiko shared her thoughts with the others.

"Just hold his hand," Ryuuna said boldly.

Kimiko and Himawari both looked at her, wide-eyed. Ryuuna sat up proudly and puffed her chest out.

"His…hand?" Kimiko parroted back.

"Mm-hmm." Ryuuna nodded repeatedly. The childish gesture was in contrast with her mature smile. "When I was in the dark, Jiiya held my hand. Even if he wasn't saying anything, I could feel his warmth."

She thought back to a memory foundational to her. A memory from back when she spent her days in a cold cage. She was locked away in darkness and had given up on everything beyond feeling despair. But a hand was offered out to her, and she, who knew nothing of love, could feel its warmth. There wasn't a shred of kindness in his words—*you can die here, or you can come with me*—but he reached her heart regardless.

"He gave me his warmth," she said. "The heart must be something that's felt through the hands." There may not have been any logic to what she said, but to her, it was the truth.

"His hand…" Kimiko could not pick up on the subtleties of what Ryuuna wanted to say. Ryuuna lacked the proper words, and Kimiko didn't have enough experience in interacting with others, so she simply interpreted Ryuuna's words to mean her feelings would get across if she held Yoshihiko's hand. And perhaps she was right. "Thank you, Ryuuna-san. I'll try my best."

"Mm."

With this, Kimiko's next move was decided. She would hold Yoshihiko's hand to get across the feelings of her heart that she couldn't put into words.

With her indecision gone, she felt at peace. For now, she decided to hold Ryuuna's hand tightly.

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And so the next day came. Jinya headed for Tokyo Station and Kimiko for Koyomiza. Yonabari was still on the loose, so Kimiko was

joined by Himawari. Izuchi was at Koyomiza, so there were unlikely to be any issues over there.

Jinya reached Tokyo Station and looked blankly out at all the people. The station was built out of red brick and was of an elegant Western design. It hadn't even been ten years since it was built, and yet it was as busy as ever even though it was still before noon. People now used steam trains to reach Tokyo from all over. The Land of the Rising Sun felt smaller than it was before.

Kyoto and Edo were once a great distance away, but now the journey could be made in but a single day. Modernization was an incredible thing, but Jinya was saddened by the knowledge that he would never again rest under the shade of those pagoda trees that stood on the mounds marking every ri[1] of distance along the highways.

But that's what it means to grow old, Jinya thought with a sigh. "…They're late."

The other party was supposed to have arrived in Tokyo the previous day, then meet him here at the station before noon. But the sun was almost at its peak.

Jinya scanned the area and saw a woman walking his way. He figured she must have been the one Somegorou was supposed to meet. He strained his eyes as she came into view. Without thinking, he swallowed."

Um, excuse me."

She was an elderly woman wearing a fine, light-purple kimono. Her face was full of wrinkles, but her old self could still be recognized. Jinya stiffened. He felt like something had seized his heart.

"Are you Kadono-sama?" the old lady asked with a gentle smile.

Jinya gave a curt "Yes." She seemed to interpret his stiffness as nerves and spoke even more softly.

"Oh, thank goodness. Heikichi-san told me what you looked like, but I wasn't so sure. I apologize for being late."

A stream, no, a flood of memories surfaced to mind, but he didn't let it show on his face. His stubborn pride wouldn't let him appear weak.

"It's no problem at all."

"You're too kind. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself, didn't I?"

She didn't need to introduce herself. No matter how old she grew, he would always recognize her. After all, what kind of parent didn't recognize their own child?

"My name is Utsugi Nomari."

For a moment, Jinya felt his heart stop.

3

TIME FLOWED WITHOUT PAUSE, but there remained moments in life that were never forgotten.

For Jinya, there was that time they had walked hand in hand along the streets of Kyoto, beneath the sky of the evening lull.

"Then I'll become your mother!"

"You became my father, so I'll become your mother when I get older and pamper you all you want."

The warmth he felt from her tiny palm made the familiar streets seem all the more lovely. She smiled blithely, and he couldn't help but be pulled into a smile as well.

"I won't be able to live as long as you, and one day I'll leave you behind in this world…"

"…But will you still be my family anyway?"

Her wish didn't change, even after she grew up. Her feelings, illuminated by the evening sun at the shrine they often visited in her youth, remained the same. Even as an adult, she wished to be his family.

"No…"

"I don't want to forget…"

The events of that distant rainy night remained as a wound in him. He loved her and wanted to protect her, but their happiness slipped away from him. At times, he would reflect back on these moments, but it was all just an unreachable dream now, transient like bubbles on the surface of water.

"My name is Utsugi Nomari."

She bowed politely, giving him a greeting for a stranger much younger than herself. There was no familial love there, but her gentleness brought Jinya back to his senses.

"A pleasure. I am Kadono Jinya, and I've been asked to receive you in Heikichi-dono's place."

Jinya treated her politely as well, making a fairly deep bow one would give to an elder. He had grown skilled at hiding his emotions over his long life, and it would take much more than this to visibly fluster him.

His stopped heart began to beat again. He halted his recollection of nostalgic memories and took a deep breath to calm himself. A part of him was a bit sad he could be so collected.

"Yes, my husband informed me beforehand."

"I see. Here. Heikichi-dono asked me to give this to you." Jinya took out the letter and handed it to her. She thanked him and read through it. She smiled gently after finishing, causing more memories to surface.

"Thank you for waiting. It seems I'll be in your care for today." She bowed once more.

Jinya looked at her in confusion, causing her to glance back at him with similar puzzlement. He asked, "I'm sorry, could I see that letter?"

"Of course."

Jinya saw the sprawl of messy writing and knit his brow.

Sorry, but something's come up. I'll meet you at the station this evening, but I'm afraid you might get lost waiting in Tokyo alone. Have the stony-faced guy in front of you guide you around until I arrive. Don't worry about imposing on him; it was his idea in the first

place. He owes me big-time, so this is a good chance for him to pay me back a little. Let him show you around, for his own sake too.

…Jinya had been fooled. Somegorou had intended from the start to force Jinya and Nomari together and create an opportunity for them to talk. Nothing would change between them because of this. No memories would resurface for Nomari. What was lost could not return. But Nomari's memory was still a wound in Jinya, and Somegorou—no, Utsugi Heikichi was telling him to find closure once and for all without running away.

"Apologies. As the letter says, I will show you around until evening comes. Is there anything in particular you wanted to see?" Jinya spoke calmly so as not to let Heikichi's consideration go to waste. The reason he could speak calmly at all was because his memories with Nomari were so distant now.

His days with her had been full of happiness, but they were in the distant past. Now he could live without constantly remembering those times. The pain he felt was light, allowing him to speak freely.

"Not particularly. I don't know Tokyo that well. Could I leave where we go up to you, Kadono-sama?"

"Of course. Let us be off."

He kept their discussion surface-level, determined to pretend he didn't know her. Just as he had played the role of her father before, he would play the role of a stranger now. It was a poor excuse for a farce, but that was fine.

But he needed to find closure at some point. The farce would have to end. And when it did, what would its punchline be?

Unsure, Jinya allowed himself to go with the flow and walked with Nomari.

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Uncharacteristically nervous, Kimiko stood frozen in front of Koyomiza. She had hoped Jinya would come with her, but he had other business to take care of. He'd mentioned he was probably better off not tagging along anyway, and Kimiko had to admit he might be right.

Her objective today was to make clear what her feelings for Yoshihiko were. Bringing another man along for that didn't quite make sense. Jinya might have been a hundred years old, but physically he appeared to be around eighteen. He would only be in the way.

"Ryuuna-san, you can hide better than that."

"Mm…"

In Jinya's place, Himawari accompanied her as protection with Ryuuna tagging along to watch. The truth, though, was that the two of them were both worried for Kimiko's sake. As proof of that, they hid and watched from a distance so as not to get in her way.

Kimiko hadn't made any female friends her age before. She appreciated the two girls' kindness and wanted to make sure it wasn't for nothing. "All right. Let's do this."

She wasn't looking for any sort of drastic change with Yoshihiko. She didn't even know if her feelings were ones of friendship or love yet, and she knew there was a gap in social status between them. Still, she wanted to dispel the doubts in herself. She had all the

clumsiness of a child, but she wanted to hold these brand-new feelings of hers dear.

"But…maybe not today. Next time, for sure."

But it was precisely because these feelings were so new to her that she couldn't take that first step. In films, characters risked life and limb for love. Kimiko adored them for it, but she was too embarrassed now that it was her turn to press forward. With her face flushed red, she paced back and forth in front of Koyomiza, looking very strange indeed.

The peanut gallery—Himawari and Ryuuna—watched her with warm smiles, whispering about how oh-so-innocent but gutless she was. Their whispers didn't reach Kimiko, who had bigger things on her mind. She pressed forward again, then faltered just before the entrance and cowered back once more. This made five times already.

"A woman must be brave," she murmured to herself. "Er, but maybe I should be wearing something more stylish first. Perhaps another day…"

"Hey. Are you coming in or not?"

"Eek!"

With a surprised shriek, she spun around and saw Izuchi, Koyomiza's latest employee. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow, wondering why she wouldn't enter.

"S-salutations, Izuchi-san."

"'Salutations'? What's with the fancy rich-lady talk? Not that I mind." He laughed heartily. "Should you be out alone? I thought it was

too dangerous.”

“Is it? Wasn’t the Eizen-sama thing finished?”

“There are worse things in the world than that creepy old man, you know.”

A young lady had to worry about everything from boys trying to hit on her to kidnappers aiming for ransom. Izuchi tossed out a few examples like those, but they didn’t really connect with Kimiko. She had no experience with being targeted by men in such a way, and though she was from a noble family, her grandfather only saw her as a tool. That meant her appraisal of her own self was low. She didn’t see what someone with ulterior motives might want with her.

“But I guess it’s fine if you have them keeping watch.” Izuchi glanced toward Himawari and Ryuuna. He seemed to think the two of them were more reliable than Kimiko herself. That rubbed her the wrong way a bit, but he smiled and quickly changed the subject. “So, what’ll it be? You coming in or not? The next screening’s already started.”

It was a normal question considering his job, but Kimiko was jolted. Suddenly too self-conscious, she turned stiff like a metal rod had been fitted in her from head to toe.

“No, er, today I was actually, uh, hoping to talk to Yoshihiko-san.” She barely managed to string the words together, though her voice did crack. At least she was making some progress now, or so she thought.

Izuchi apologetically closed one eye and said, “Ah. Sorry, but Yoshihiko-senpai ain’t here right now.”

"Huh?"

"The manager sent him over to Akitsu the Fourth for an errand, and he'll be taking the day off after that. He's only just recovered from his injuries, so the manager's half making up reasons to get him to take it easy."

Kimiko lost all tension in her body at once. She felt like a fool for being so nervous. There was nothing to be done if Yoshihiko weren't here. She would retreat for today, then prepare herself mentally to visit Yoshihiko another time.

But before she realized it, Himawari was standing next to her. "Let's be off then, Kimiko-san. I shall lead the way."

She grabbed Kimiko's hand and started dragging her away. Bewildered, Kimiko said, "U-uh, Himawari-san? Lead the way where? Didn't you hear what Izuchi-san said? Yoshihiko-san isn't around."

"Don't worry. My ability lets me remotely view targets I've set, so I'll know Yoshihiko's location no matter where he goes." There was a light smile on Himawari's face, but it didn't reach her eyes. Watching Kimiko hem and haw so long must have made her a bit impatient.

"But wouldn't it just be better to try again another day?"

"Absolutely not. If you don't commit yourself for good, you'll keep dawdling forever."

Kimiko found she couldn't shake off Himawari's grip. Her strength was unexpected, but then again, Himawari *was* a demon.

Himawari, who was surprisingly invested in Kimiko's situation, moved at a brisk pace. Kimiko found herself pulled along into a trot.

She didn’t feel emotionally ready to meet Yoshihiko, though, so she panickily called out for help.

“Ryuuna-san, h-help me!”

“Kimiko, good luck.” Ryuuna raised tightened fists into the air to cheer Kimiko on. She’d been talking a lot more lately, but she didn’t seem on the exact same wavelength as everyone else. In this moment, at least, she certainly didn’t grasp Kimiko’s shy, maidenly heart.

“Come, come. Let’s be off, Kimiko-san.”

“Wait! Please, waaait!” Kimiko’s eyes moistened. She let out a sad plea, feeling like she was being hauled off by kidnappers.

And just like that, the three girls left Koyomiza behind.

“…What the hell?”

Left alone, Izuchi could only manage a confused murmur.

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Toudou Yoshihiko’s eyes widened at the strange sight before him. He was on his way back from delivering Somegorou another boxed meal. Since he’d been given the day off work, he decided to stroll around and was taking a detour when he just so happened to spot a familiar face at a café.

“May I ask how you know my husband?”

“I’ve lived in Kyoto before, and he was very helpful to me then.”

“Oh, I see. It’s a shame we didn’t meet while you were there.”

“…A shame, indeed.”

Sitting at a row of tables along the road were an old woman and a young man chatting over coffee. That alone was nothing abnormal; the two looked like a grandmother with her grandchild. But Yoshihiko knew that the young man was actually a demon around a hundred years old. Could one blame him for being so flustered?

"Jiiya-san…?"

Yoshihiko was not particularly close to Jinya, so there was a lot he didn't know about the man. He knew he was a swordmaster who could slay fiends in a single strike, and that he was the uncle of Himawari and Ryuuna. He knew he had looked after Kimiko since she was born, and that he was the gardener for the Akase home. He also knew he was more aged than his youthful appearance let on, and that he was a complete softy when it came to Kimiko and Ryuuna, no matter how inexpressive his face was or how stiffly he usually spoke. Last but not least, Yoshihiko knew he was kind in their own interactions as well.

All in all, Jinya left a strong impression as a stern but gentle man.

"I'm sorry to make you waste your day off like this. I'm sure you'd rather have spent it with a woman much younger than myself."

"Not at all. A date with a lady as lovely as you is all I could ask for."

"Oho ho, you tease."

The Jinya whom Yoshihiko knew would never in a million years give such cheap flattery. Yoshihiko was in such disbelief of what he

saw that he thought he might be hallucinating.

"…Uncle, so this is what you meant when you said you were busy."

Yoshihiko suddenly heard a familiar voice from behind him. Surprised, he spun around and saw Himawari staring hard at the elderly woman.

"H-Himawari-chan?! Wh-when'd you…?"

"I'm here too."

"And Ryuuna-chan?"

Ryuuna had her glamorous black hair braided for once and wore a white one-piece dress. The expression on her face resembled that of a furious Yasha demon. Kimiko was behind her. She hung her head, looking near tears for some reason, and fidgeted restlessly.

"Is something wrong, Kimiko-san?"

"O-oh, no! What fine weather we have!"

"Huh?"

"Apologies. I was a bit flustered. It's nice to see you, Yoshihiko-san."

Just when Yoshihiko thought something was wrong with Kimiko, she calmed down. Ryuuna quickly chided her, which was quite the rare sight.

Only Himawari seemed to be keeping quiet. She kept her gaze fixed on the café, the air growing tense. "Silence, everyone, or Uncle will notice us."

“Y-yes ma’am. Wait, why am I apologizing?” Yoshihiko said. He couldn’t see what was so wrong with them being noticed, but he shut his mouth anyway because Himawari seemed as tense as could be. Her whole body was rigid, like she would shatter if she got prodded.

“Nomari-san…” she murmured.

“Himawari-chan, do you know that woman?”

“I can’t go into much detail, but yes.”

Apparently the elderly woman was known as Nomari. Himawari’s strange actions indicated that there was history between the two, but she didn’t seem to hate the woman. If anything, the look in her eyes resembled something like guilt.

“Could she be…” Having calmed down some more, Kimiko distanced herself from Yoshihiko and looked at Jinya. She seemed to have realized something. Her eyes went wide as a smile appeared on her face.

“Kimiko-san, do you know her too?” Yoshihiko asked.

“No, but they’re on date at a café, and Jiiya seems to be having fun… She might be his first love.”

Kimiko’s words came out of the blue for Yoshihiko. “H-his first love?”

“Indeed. Jiiya turns a hundred this year, so it wouldn’t be strange if she were his first love, right?”

“You’re right…”

“Plus, I heard he once had a woman he pined for, but things didn’t work out. Yes, of course it must be her. Jiiya was a demon, and

she was a human. That's why they couldn't be together." Kimiko seemed to be envisioning a dramatic love story between spirit and woman. "Unable to age together, they could not be one. But their love wouldn't fade, so they meet in secret, just like in a film!"

Kimiko had always been fairly into romantic talk, but she seemed all the more feverish about it lately. Of course, Yoshihiko himself wasn't without interest in what was going on. He turned his eyes toward the café again but found that Jinya and the elderly woman were gone.

"…Could you not make a commotion on the street?"

From directly behind him, Yoshihiko heard a voice as cold as steel. He slowly turned around like a rusted machine, his body creaking, and saw a massive man nearly six feet tall standing right there.

Jinya, having already paid and left the café, stood next to the four and sighed.

"Aha, ha ha…"

"Um… It's nice to see you, Jiiya…?"

Caught peeping, they all smiled awkwardly. Jinya's expression remained stony, while the elderly woman seemed to be enjoying everyone's reactions.

Yoshihiko, Kimiko, Himawari, and Ryuuna had all been caught spying on Jinya and the elderly woman's tryst. This was beyond awkward. Jinya didn't seem angry, but he did have a terribly weary

look on his face. His exasperation was so palpable that it probably would have been easier if he were just angry with them.

"We're sorry!" The four bowed their heads vigorously and apologized.

Jinya just knit his brows, not saying a word. From his side, Nomari watched with a smile.

***

Edo had changed greatly over the years. Now known as Tokyo, the Imperial Capital, it contained modern buildings standing side by side with old Japanese-style ones, giving the city a disorganized impression.

It was simply how things were for old buildings to give way to new. Jinya had to wonder, though, whether Mizuho Temple was still around. It had already been derelict by the Edo era. There were even rumors that a man-eating demon had appeared there, not to mention that there had been a wave of anti-Buddhism in the Meiji era. Chances were high that the place had since been destroyed.

Mizuho Temple was where Jinya had met both Yuunagi and Nomari. To others it was no more than an eerie, abandoned temple, but to him it was a place of memories. But it too was lost to time. The Edo he'd once lived in with Nomari was nowhere to be found.

The townscape changed as modernization advanced, but progress didn't care for the attachments of the heart. Perhaps what had become of the world was the very thing Nagumo Eizen was trying to stop. Jinya gazed at the brand-new Western buildings and felt he understood a small part of the old man's fears.

"You're Akitsu-san's wife?"

"Yes. My name's Nomari."

After being lightly told off by Jinya, the four joined Jinya and Nomari on their stroll at her request. They all introduced themselves to her and gave a short greeting as they made their way along and chatted. It came up at some point that Nomari was Akitsu Somegorou's wife, which surprised everyone. Everyone but Himawari nodded to themselves, finally understanding how Jinya knew her. Kimiko felt embarrassed for having thought the two were somehow star-crossed lovers and blushed.

Yoshihiko seemed to recall hearing the name "Nomari" before. "Oh, right. Red bean bread."

Keeping a slight distance from him, Kimiko said, "Sorry?"

"Akitsu-san brought over a gift from Kyoto before, something called 'Nomari red bean bread.'"

"Ah, that. It's a bit embarrassing to admit, but that sweet is named after me," Nomari said.

"I had a feeling."

Nomari smiled bashfully and narrowed her eyes with a wistful look. "My father was the one who named me. My foster father, that is."

Even at that, Jinya's expression didn't change, nor did his stride shift in the slightest. His heart rate, however, leapt.

Nobody noticed the change in him as they were focused on what Nomari was saying. Jinya focused as well, waiting with bated

breath for her next words.

"I was abandoned as a child and found by a couple who ran a confectionery store called Mihashiya. My foster father is the one who invented Nomari red bean bread."

"Ah, so he named it after you?"

"He did. Honestly, Toyoshige-san doted on me far too much."

To her, that was the truth. The one who found her after she was abandoned was Mihashi Toyoshige, the owner of Mihashiya, the confectionery next door to Demon Soba. Nomari adored the late Toyoshige like a father and felt indebted for all the kindness he had shown her. Apparently he even helped prepare many things when she was to be wed to Somegorou. After her memories were erased and rewritten by Azumagiku, the phrase "foster father" referred to Toyoshige for her, and there was no room for anybody to tell her otherwise.

That was why Jinya disappeared from her life. He would only be a stranger if he stayed, and he fled because he couldn't bear that fact.

"That's wonderful," Kimiko said, her cheeks red with adoration.

"Ah ha ha. Thank you… Oh." Distracted from talking, Nomari stumbled over a pebble on the side of the road. However, Jinya quickly supported her thin body before she could fall.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-yes. Sorry for the trouble, Kadono-sama."

"Not at all. I'm just glad you're not hurt."

She was lighter than he had expected, which drove home just how much she had aged.

Himawari watched silently as everything unfolded. The one who stole Nomari's memories had been her sister, Azumagiku. Himawari herself was partly responsible for what happened and believed it would only be fair for her to be hated.

Kimiko gave Jinya a look. Something about his behavior felt off.

The two girls gradually grew quieter and quieter. Eventually only Jinya, Nomari, and Yoshihiko were talking, with Ryuuna saying a word or two here and there.

"Oh, that's Koyomiza right over there."

After some walking, Yoshihiko pointed at a stylish Western-style building. He suggested watching a motion picture film, saying if Nomari was there for sightseeing, she couldn't pass up an opportunity to experience the king of entertainment. Though Jinya was tasked with being her guide, he didn't actually know many places worth seeing. He had no issues with the idea, and Nomari seemed enthusiastic because she'd never been to a motion picture theater before, so it was decided they would go to Koyomiza for the afternoon.

"Hey, welcome back, Yoshihiko-senpai. Whoa, what's with the huge party?"

They bought tickets, went inside, and were met by a surprised Izuchi. There was a little bit of wariness mixed into his reaction, since he didn't know Nomari.

"One film for six," Jinya said.

"Oh, you're all watching? Fair enough." Izuchi took the tickets, tore off the sides, and then returned them. His gaze remained on Nomari all along.

Before he could ask anything, Jinya whispered into his ear. "Somegorou's wife."

"Akitsu the Fourth's? That changes things." Izuchi relaxed and didn't pursue the topic any further.

"Today's film is *Song of Summer Clouds*," Yoshihiko explained, since it was Nomari's first time at a theater. "It's one of the earliest motion picture films, and it's still a beloved masterpiece to this day."

"Is that so? I look forward to it."

The six entered the theater room. Most of the seats were already filled because business had been good at Koyomiza lately. While they were looking for spots, Kimiko tugged at the hems of Jinya's clothes.

"Yes?"

"Um, well, it doesn't seem like everyone can sit together. The four of us will go sit over there, so why don't you and Nomari-san sit in those open seats there?"

If they sat in the far back right they should just barely have been able to sit as a group of six, but Kimiko suggested they split into two groups anyway. Jinya gave her a questioning look which she answered with a smile. She seemed somehow more mature than usual.

Without waiting for Jinya to reply, Kimiko took Yoshihiko by the hand. “Come on, let’s sit over there, Yoshihiko-san.”

“Huh? Um, but I think we could all fit over there.”

“No, no. This way. You guys too, Himawari-san and Ryuuna-san.”

Though she’d been too embarrassed to even stand close to him before, she held his hand like it was nothing now. She simply wasn’t conscious of what she was doing in the moment; she would surely look back on it later and go red-faced. Why she went out of her way to sit apart from Jinya and Nomari was lost on Yoshihiko, but Himawari seemed to understand.

“…Right. We’ll see you later, then, Uncle.”

“Mm.”

Himawari and Ryuuna both went along with Kimiko’s suggestion, leaving Jinya and Nomari alone. Jinya couldn’t help but grin wryly at the obviousness of Kimiko’s intentions.

“Is here fine?”

“Of course.”

The short wait before the film began was equally awkward and relaxing. Something Jinya thought he had lost forever had returned to him.

***

“I’m sorry, Yoshihiko-san, for deciding things on my own.”

“No, it’s fine, but…is something up?”

The first thing Kimiko did after separating from Jinya and Nomari was to lower her head in apology. Yoshihiko didn't seem to mind what had happened, but it bothered her. She had forced him along with her wishes, so it was only right for her to apologize. But she still wanted to prioritize Jinya's happiness right now.

"I think I understand what Jiiya was trying to tell me now. There are some things one can just understand, not because they've lived a long life but because they've spent time with someone else, even if it's just a short amount of time. This must be one of those things."

Kimiko had believed that if a hundred-year-old demon like Jinya couldn't read the hearts of others, then there was no way a girl still in her teens like herself could do it either. And yet she could feel the kindness in each of his ordinary actions toward Nomari, and she could see the slight distance he tried to keep between them.

The others wouldn't understand, but she could as someone who had been in his care since she was born. His actions went beyond just looking after someone. There was something special between Jinya and Nomari, and that realization made Kimiko feel embarrassed for blindly suspecting there was something romantic going on. She felt a need to get them alone together.

"Honored guests, thank you for visiting Koyomiza on this day. Today we will be screening *Song of Summer Clouds*. I, Tachikawa Tsuguji, will be your live narrator."

A loud ding which signaled the start of the screening interrupted Kimiko's thoughts.

Motion picture films were silent in the early Taisho era. The sound effects and music were handled by a band of on-site theater musicians with a live narrator to explain the scenes. As the films themselves had no sounds or lines built in, one could say the enjoyment of the film hinged entirely on the skill of the live narrator, making their role the most important one. At Koyomiza, the theater manager's second son Tsuguji handled the live narration.

Kimiko had never visited any theater other than Koyomiza, so she didn't know how good or bad Tsuguji was. However, she was used to hearing his voice and would always feel set at ease by his narration. But not today.

"Jiiya…" She murmured uneasily and glanced sideways at Jinya, but it was too dark in the theater for her to make him out.

She had no idea how things would go between him and Nomari now that they were alone, but she prayed. *Please, let their conclusion be a happy one for him.*

A black and white image appeared on the screen, and the band began to play a sorrowful song, *Song of Summer Clouds*.

4

EVEN JINYA, as ignorant of entertainment as he was, knew of *Song of Summer Clouds*. It was one of those romance films that Kimiko adored and had experienced a boom among the younger generation when it came out. It premiered in year three of the Taisho era, but it was still a beloved favorite of many people now, eight years

later. Koyomiza's theater manager was one such fan, and he would screen it again sometimes when the thought occurred to him.

But Jinya had never actually watched the film himself. The fault lay with Nagumo Eizen. Jinya didn't have the opportunity to let his guard down when the man was alive, never knowing when he might act. Still, he'd always had some interest in it.

The live narrator began:

There were once a boy and a girl born in a mountain village.

They were close in their youth and spent every moment together.

At the height of summer, light would filter through the gaps in the leaves of trees, making the two squint as they ran around the hills blinded by brilliant sunlight.

The village was without entertainment, leaving them few places to play. But that didn't matter. They only needed each other.

A great, expansive sky hung overhead. The two held hands and gazed. They would likely never forget those summer clouds.

But the girl came from a poor home, and her family struggled to buy food. Her father always worried, and her mother would often give the girl her own portions to eat. So when the girl turned fifteen, she made a decision: She would go to Tokyo to earn money for her parents' sake.

The boy couldn't follow her. He had his own responsibilities to his family. His family were farmers, and he had to work in place of his

father who struggled with back pain. Though he loved the girl, he could not abandon his family to follow her. Such a choice was impossible for him.

They recounted memories from their youth, like how they'd once promised to marry one day. As they parted, they made another promise.

Let us gaze up at summer clouds together again, like we used to.

But the two were not as childish as they once were.

They knew their promise would never become reality.

The boy, unable to say a word to stop her, watched the girl go and understood it was over.

Ah, what a distasteful story this was. There was a bitterness in Jinya's mouth.

Two people who loved one another, separated. It was a story he was not unfamiliar with himself. There was the woman he had loved with all his heart and the daughter he had sworn to protect. He'd wanted more than anything to stay with them both, but it wasn't meant to be. His chest felt tight as a soft tune played and the scene changed.

By his side, Nomari watched her first motion picture film with pure fascination. Even though she was older, her face in profile still bore a trace of her former self. But her eyes did not see Jinya now. No matter how much lingering attachment he had, he could not be her family again.

"Unable to be together, they felt the days passing them by," the live narrator somberly continued.

The story progressed with time flying by.

The girl began working at a cotton mill. Though dormitory life left her bewildered, she labored hard.

Every few months she would send her family a sum of money, and every month she would write several letters to the boy.

Have you been well?

I'm doing all right.

I'm so lonely. I wish I could see you.

The skies of Tokyo are so dark. I long for the summer skies I saw with you.

Her life was busy. She spent every day working, only left with enough energy to sleep, but eventually she got used to city life. She made new connections, new friends. And as she found others who would listen to her woes, she gradually started writing less and less.

The boy, unable to leave his hometown, began to notice her change.

The promise to marry they'd made in their youth was still up in the air and would likely end that way.

That thought saddened him, but he accepted it.

Six years had already passed since they separated. He had grown taller, his voice deeper. He was accustomed to life without her

and thought back on the summer skies less and less. The boy from back then had disappeared long ago.

The girl from back then was similarly gone as well. She wrote to him once a year now. Her letters included many things, but the words "I wish I could see you" hadn't been written in years.

And so they understood. No matter how long they waited, they would never gaze up at the summer clouds together again.

The girl's letters had been meant for the boy, and the boy had loved the girl from back then. As children, they could dream. But they had since become adults, and before they knew it, they'd woken up from their dream.

There's a woman in the village who says she has feelings for me. They were hitting that age. They had to begin thinking about starting a family. *It might be time.*

A man I've come to know here in Tokyo has proposed to me. Though she was past her prime, she found a kind man who courted her. *It might be time.*

Unable to forget one another, they had held out until now. But the time had come to bring their summer days to a close.

Though they lived far apart, they both shivered at the wind's chill.

Winter had arrived, and the sky looked distant and uncaring.

"…How sad."

The soft-spoken words of an elderly woman could faintly be heard.

Jinya more or less understood what Nomari meant to say, but he couldn't understand how she felt. They'd been apart for far too long. He could read Kimiko like an open book, but Nomari's heart was unreadable to him now.

The music accompanying the film began changing to a heartrending tune. As though running from the sight of Nomari's unfamiliar face, Jinya let himself be immersed in the world of *Song of Summer Clouds*.

The story was approaching its end.

"And so, he headed for Tokyo," the live narrator said firmly.

The last of his lingering attachments still remained.

Now no longer a boy, the man made for Tokyo one winter day.

Several years had passed since they separated. She could very well have forgotten all about him, living in the glitzy imperial capital.

But he still wanted to see her again, just once. Then he could finally let her go.

So he murmured out a wish.

The scene changed.

Now no longer a girl, the woman walked along the street one winter day.

Several years had passed since they parted. She wondered how he was doing back in their hometown.

Only after he was gone from her life did she realize how much she relied on him, but it was too late to send him letters anymore.

The cold winter winds seemed to blow right through her. She hung her head.

No matter how tough she acted, the solitude remained.

So she murmured out a wish.

I wish I could see you.

Their voices overlapped. The two of them spun around at the same time.

The man and the woman's gazes met. They recognized one another instantly but could not call out. Though there was a resemblance, so many things were unfamiliar.

She was the first to move. Embarrassed that her hands had become so rough from constant work, she reflexively tried to run away.

He caught her arm to stop her. He wanted to put his forgotten feelings into words. Now that he was face-to-face with her after so long, even her rough hands seemed lovely.

The man, the once-a-boy, smiled without a care in the world like he used to.

The two had overcome the years to meet once more.

Up above, a distant wintry sky could be seen.

A freezing wind blew by, and their breaths formed clouds of white vapor.

Their old promise came to life, just in a different shape than they'd expected.

"It's just like summer clouds."

When they saw the vapor of their breaths overlap, they couldn't help but smile as one.

Song of Summer Clouds played at the end of the film. As the last note lingered, the story came to a close.

There was no knowing what would become of the two. But they had seen the summer clouds of winter as the boy and girl they used to be, so surely they would find a way to remain together like they once had.

With those last words, the live narrator brought things to a close, and *Song of Summer Clouds* reached its end.

Applause broke out in the theater and continued for a while.

***

"Ah… There really is nothing quite like a good film."

The screening and the music were already long over. Most of the theatergoers had cleared out a while ago, but Kimiko was still basking in the afterglow. She'd gotten into films because they showed the freedom she once longed to have, but they still struck a chord with her even now.

"You really like love stories, huh, Kimiko-san?"

"I had given up on any hope of love myself before, but yes, I do. I long to experience such a romance myself one day…"

The more engrossed in the film she got, the closer and closer she had moved toward Yoshihiko. Realizing that, she suddenly blushed. "I-I'm sorry!"

She quickly put distance between them. Having seen everything from start to finish, Himawari teased her. "Don't you think it's a bit late to get embarrassed? You were even holding his hand earlier."

Kimiko had been too distracted by Jinya's situation to realize, but she had led Yoshihiko over to their seats by the hand. Having it pointed out made her blush harder and hang her head.

"Um… Did I do something wrong?" Yoshihiko asked worriedly.

Kimiko knew she had been acting strangely around him, so it was only natural that he started to be a bit put off. She wanted to exclaim he hadn't done a single thing wrong, but she couldn't bring herself to say a word. She felt deflated that she'd been so pathetic.

"Ryuuna, Himawari."

She lifted her head at the sound of Jinya's voice. The two girls ran over to him, but he just waved lightly to Kimiko and said, "We'll head out first. Good luck."

Without waiting for a reply, he left the theater.

She watched him go, a bit flummoxed. The roles had been completely reversed. Now *he* was the one giving Kimiko space with Yoshihiko. Izuchi didn't come to clean the theater no matter how much time went by, meaning he must have been in on this as well.

"Kimiko-san?" Yoshihiko said a bit sadly.

Her heart pounded almost annoyingly loudly, and her head was so hot that she thought she might collapse. But the others had gone out of their way to set the stage for her. If she was ever going to be courageous, it had to be now.

She reached out and grabbed his hand.

"H-huh?"

"Yoshihiko-san, I'm sorry for today. I've been rude to you."

Her heart should reach him through their hands. He should feel all her warmth, all the fever in her heart right now. That thought made her heart race even harder.

"I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me…?"

"Yes. You've helped me in so many ways up until now. Not just in what happened with Eizen-sama, but before that. You've always been there to talk to me."

Since she was instructed to stay home, she couldn't go to school and had no close friends. She felt closed off from the world. Her love of entertainment was really just the result of a desire to escape from her reality. But whenever she visited this theater, Yoshihiko would talk to her. That made her immeasurably happy, more than anyone could possibly understand.

She finally understood the feelings she was having. She thought she had fallen in love with him after he saved her life, but that wasn't it. Her feelings had been there all along. She had simply grown a little

more mature, able to look around herself and notice what was already there.

"So, thank you, Yoshihiko-san. Thank you for so many things."

The Eizen incident had taught her she didn't need to dress up her feelings in fancy words to get them across. Instead, she made her gratitude clear, by smiling as hard as she could. She couldn't show her affection just yet, but she wouldn't waver anymore. She knew without a doubt now that she loved Yoshihiko.

When she saw how he blushed and grew flustered at her words, she felt ticklish inside too. Her face was, of course, still just as red as before.

The two of them stared silently at one another for a while. Embarrassed, they both eventually broke into laughter.

Ah… This must be it, she thought. *This. This must be what I was after.*

"It's just like a motion picture film."

Their voices overlapped, and they broke out into smiles once more.

Kimiko had managed to grow a little closer to the person she loved, just like the characters in *Song of Summer Clouds*.

***

And now for the family that couldn't be.

By the time Jinya and the rest left Koyomiza, the sky had changed color. The sun was on its way down to the horizon. Evening

wasn't far off. There were no winds or clouds to be found, and once the sky finished turning orange, the evening lull would be fully here.

"That was my first time seeing a film, but I quite enjoyed it." Nomari sighed softly, her eyes moist with emotion.

"I'm glad to hear that," Jinya said.

"It was surprisingly moving. Perhaps it's because I've been with my husband since I was young that I can relate to the characters so much."

"I've heard. He talks about you every chance he gets."

"Oh, that goof."

Jinya's heart no longer ached as much, since he had grown slightly accustomed to talking to this Nomari who didn't know him. An eternity had passed since the two of them parted. Much had been lost, but a small something still remained. In fact, he had repeated this cycle of loss and discovery many times up until now, and the place it had brought him to was not a terrible one.

He smiled, thinking back to the times when the whims of Michitomo and Shino ran him in circles. He recalled the genuine joy he felt when Kimiko was born. Even Ryuuna and Yoshihiko were people he could call dear to him now. He did not regret the path he had taken. But the days he spent with Nomari still hadn't lost their color in his heart yet.

"It's about time, isn't it?" she said.

"Indeed. Let us return to the station," Jinya replied without emotion.

In the evening, she would leave Tokyo together with Somegorou, and that would be it. Jinya was not her father but a guide she had met for the first time today. She had no reason to be reluctant to part with him, and so she smiled back.

"We'll head back first, then, Uncle. Please stay with Nomari-san until the end."

"…Mm."

Himawari made an unreadable expression, then turned to walk away as though to hide her face. Was this out of kindness toward Jinya or a sense of guilt toward Nomari? He figured the events of the past must have left a small scar in her too, and so he didn't stop her. Sensing that something was off with Himawari, Ryuuna obediently followed her.

And so, Jinya and Nomari were left alone. Together they made for Tokyo Station.

"I've known Kimiko since she was born. That's probably why she calls me Jiiya."

"If you ever come to Kyoto, please let me know. I'd love to show you around so I can repay the favor."

"The season for hydrangea is over, huh? Maybe I'll try working with some new flowers."

"My husband doesn't drink in the slightest, you see…"

Their conversation was lively, covering an endless number of topics. Or perhaps he was just afraid to let the conversation die out.

This would probably be the last of it. He was no more than a stranger to begin with. After today was over, he would never again have a chance to walk through town with Nomari like this. That thought scared him, so he kept forcing the conversation along, walking as slowly as he could manage. Still, time cruelly continued to pass on by.

Eventually, they reached Tokyo Station once more.

They looked around, but Somegorou couldn't be seen. However, the evening sky was already slowly changing from orange to indigo. This was goodbye.

"Thank you for today, Kadono-sama. I was able to enjoy myself thanks to you." Nomari bowed deeply, making it clear this was the end.

"Not at all. If anything, I should be thanking you. I had fun walking through town with you." He meant it. Though he was surprised to see her at first, he'd been able to walk with his daughter again. He was happy.

She took his words as nothing more than flattery and said, "Oh my. You shouldn't tease this old lady too much." To her, he was a young man around eighteen or so. He accepted that, but he was saddened to know she wouldn't think his comment was sincere.

Nomari gazed with a broad smile at Tokyo Station, made out of red brick. Something about her expression seemed impish, reminding him of her younger self.

"To think I'll be riding a train after watching that movie. Strange,

don’t you think?”

The girl in *Song of Summer Clouds* came to Tokyo from her hometown by train, and now Nomari would take the train from Tokyo to return to her home. Something about all that must have felt funny to her, because she wore a happy grin.

She looked so childish, bathed in the evening sun.

But will you still be my family anyway?

The image of her from that day overlapped with her now in his mind.

He had known she would leave him one day. They were human and demon, bearing different life spans, so he’d braced himself for the day they could no longer be father and daughter. But outside forces caused things to end even sooner than he had anticipated.

That was why he had to make sure he ended things properly now. If this would be their last moment together, then he needed to ensure it gave him proper closure. Somegorou, Kimiko, and even Himawari had gone out of their way to give him this opportunity. It probably wouldn’t go as well as it did in the motion picture film from earlier, but he couldn’t let himself stand in place forever.

He took a small breath. Hot summer air filled his lungs, and then he exhaled it all at once. With determination, he faced Nomari directly.

“…Nomari-san. There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you. May I?”

The sudden tone shift surprised her, but she felt how serious he was and didn’t make a joke of it. “Of course.”

"Thank you." He let slip a smile, then asked the question he had been holding on to for a while now. "Have you…led a happy life?"

He did not know what life she had led since that day she lost her memories, nor whether it had culminated in happiness. But he had to ask, all the more so because he knew they couldn't return to what they once had.

"Yes. I married Heikichi-san and was blessed with children and even grandchildren. I've lived a life full of happiness," she answered unhesitatingly with a gentle smile. She seemed so genuinely happy that Jinya truly believed she had been all right in his absence.

"I see. I see…" He felt so joyful he could cry. Full of relief, he let out a deep sigh. Without his usual stony look, he made an expression caught somewhere between tears and a smile and laid bare the emotions of his heart. "That was my only lingering worry. I'm glad… I'm glad I got to meet you and hear you lived a good life."

He was joyful beyond measure for her happiness. The knowledge that it wasn't brought about by his own hand was a little saddening, but he could be happy for her, plain and simple, and he was proud of that. They could never be family again, but he was proud to know that he was still her father.

And that was enough.

Knowing she had been happy was enough for him.

"Kadono-sama…?"

"Sorry. That was a strange question I asked you, wasn't it? Ah, here your husband comes now. Farewell, then… I was truly happy to

have met you."

"Huh?"

She didn't seem to understand, but he had no intention of elaborating. There was no need for a man as unseemly as him in her life, all the more so if she were happy the way she was.

With firm steps, he walked past her side, past his past. Somegorou casually approached him head-on.

"So? How'd things go?"

"Not sure, but I think I've found some closure."

"Is that right? Good." Then Somegorou seemed to remember something and thrust his arm out. He hit Jinya's cheek lightly with a fist, lacking the force of a punch, but that seemed to be enough for him. "I swore I'd knock some sense into that thick skull of yers one day. Looks like I finally got the chance."

There was no need for any further parting words between the two. Somegorou walked along to Nomari's side, and Jinya continued forward. They passed by one another and gradually moved farther apart.

"…We named him Jinya."

But a soft murmur made Jinya stop in his tracks. He turned around to see Nomari flustered, as though she didn't understand her own words.

"Our son… We named him Jinya!"

She trembled almost frightfully but didn't avert her gaze. The drops streaming down her cheek were golden-orange in the evening

sunlight.

Azumagiku's power erased memories with no way for them to return. And yet, for some reason, she was crying. She did not know why, but some emotion in her chest forced her to speak now.

"We…I decided to name our child 'Yuunagi' if they were a girl and 'Jinya' if they were a boy. I don't know why, but…I just thought I had to tell you that for some reason."

"Then I'll become your mother!"

The nostalgic, inarticulate voice of a child tickled his ears.

"You became my father, so I'll become your mother when I get older and pamper you all you want."

A younger Nomari had made that promise to him. It was the absurd promise of a child, and yet she had kept it. Her memory was erased, and they could no longer be family, but she still became a mother to a Jinya.

"…Thank you. Let me repay the favor."

With a small murmur, an impossible sight began to unfurl. The cluttered visage of Tokyo Station was painted over with illusions, showing a meadow underneath an evening sky.

"*Falsehood*… Your mother's power."

Small, dainty flowers were blooming in all kinds of colors: red, yellow, white. It was an illusionary meadow of white powder flowers—also known by another name, "nomari." These flowers bloomed in the evening, and so the evening belonged to Nomari.

"Oh my…"

She was bewildered by the sight, but the soft colors of the flowers made her chest feel tight. She closed her eyes to push out the tears that had welled in them. When she opened them again, both the meadow and Jinya were gone.

Jinya walked leisurely through town. His parting with Nomari left him a little sad, but a warmth inside him overflowed into a smile. He did not hate the feeling.

"Jiiya."

A youthful voice called out to him, making him stop. He turned to look and saw Ryuuna waiting for him by the side of the road. She regarded him unhappily.

"What are you doing here, Ryuuna?"

"I wait here." She trotted over to his side and hugged his arm, then looked up and sulkily puffed out her cheeks. "Where did the woman go?"

"Home."

"Who is she?"

Ryuuna didn't talk often, but it seemed Nomari had caught her attention. Her behavior reminded him of the way Nomari sulked back when Kaneomi was living with them. Unable to stop himself from grinning wryly, he patted Ryuuna's head as he answered her.

"My daughter."

Seeming a bit relieved, she repeated back, "Your daughter?"

"Yeah. My precious daughter. It's been a while since I've met her, so I think I can have a nice dream tonight."

"…Mm."

The two walked along arm in arm.

Ryuuna still ended up sulking. Jinya wasn't sure how to fix her mood, but at least her warmth was comforting.

None can say which was more precious—things that were lost or those that were gained. But at least Jinya had now moved a little past that fateful night. No matter what he might lose from here on out, he would never again lose sight of the things he gained thereafter. No longer would he be so blinded by the brilliance of the past as to overlook the present.

That's why this is goodbye, Nomari.

He would not forget her, but he had no lingering regrets left either.

Lifting his head, he saw a sky of indigo above him.

As he watched the stars twinkle, he bid farewell to the days of his past.

***

"Good grief, he just had to get flashy with it, eh? Ah shoot, I forgot to pass on Master's message. Oh well. Doesn't necessarily have to be me." Despite his grumbling, Somegorou seemed happy. "Shall we be off then, Nomari?"

Nomari didn't budge. With a sad look, she stared blankly off in the direction the man had gone. "Heikichi-san… Just who was that man?"

Nomari's memory would never return. There would be no miracle where she suddenly recalled Jinya. Somegorou knew that for sure, having been on close terms with Azumagiku. It was strange at all that Nomari was so hung up on Jinya now.

That was why Somegorou would not tell her the truth that Jinya was her father. Doing so would only confuse her, and it wouldn't make Jinya happy. That clumsy, way-too-doting father wouldn't want to see her so disturbed.

So instead, Somegorou relaxed his shoulders and smiled. "Who knows? Why don't ya ask him yourself sometime?"

Part of him knew the two would never meet again, but there was nothing wrong with that. Jinya would remain in her memory as a strange young man she met in Tokyo, and that was enough.

"The steam train's here. We should hurry."

"Right. Let's go then, dear."

Just like that, the elderly couple left Tokyo behind.

Somegorou's prediction proved right. Neither of them ever met Jinya again. Still, the strange young man would come up in conversation from time to time.

"Oh, right, I saw a motion picture film with some friends a while back. Isn't it a shame you missed out?"

She would tease him, and he would smile wryly back.

It was no more than pointless banter, but that was exactly why it made Somegorou so happy.

He felt as though the boisterous days at that soba restaurant had come back.

These days in the Heisei era, there was nothing special at all about movies. But in the Taisho era, motion picture films were the king of entertainment.

Some watched the films and proudly boasted of the strides in modernization the Japanese Empire was taking. Others watched and had their hearts moved by the beauty of the films, relating the love stories to their own lives. There were still others who watched the films with another person and reflected on the past. The silver screen was for a wide spectrum of experiences, and the people loved it.

There might have even been a demon who hid among people watching *Song of Summer Clouds* and could confront his past as a result, or even a noble girl who managed to realize her own feelings of love. Who knew?

This is all to simply say that motion picture films were popular in the Taisho era.

***

July 2009. Back to the present.

Jinya picked out the *Song of Summer Clouds* DVD and thought back on the past.

"Hey? Something up?" He had suddenly gone quiet, and Miyaka gave him a worried look. He'd apparently been basking in the nostalgia a bit too deeply.

"No, sorry. I was just thinking about the past."

"That so? Is that movie any good?"

"Not at all. It's terribly clichéd. But I watched it together with someone dear to me. I guess that's why this particular film leaps to my mind whenever the topic of movies comes up."

Movies were only one of many forms of entertainment now, but in the past they were beloved by many. Kimiko herself was a fan of *Song of Summer Clouds* and had gone to Koyomiza to watch it a number of times. The idea that you could now buy it for a few thousand yen and watch it at home really showed how frighteningly far technology had progressed.

"So, you gonna buy it?"

"…I guess. Yeah, why not?"

"Wait, but do you have a DVD player?"

"No, but I have a video cassette recorder."

"…You're not going to be able to watch DVDs on VCR. Don't give me that shocked look, it's not going to change anything."

Apparently DVDs and video cassettes were different things. Jinya's knowledge of these kinds of appliances wasn't very deep. He only knew how to use his microwave to warm up food, for example. The oven bake and defrost settings were beyond his grasp.

"All right, let's go to an electronics store after lunch. I'm sure we can find a cheap DVD player."

"…Thank you," Jinya said.

Miyaka giggled. “But let’s eat first, ’kay?”

“Sure. Let me treat you as thanks.”

“Really? Then I’ll have a gyuudon beef bowl, with a burdock root salad on the side. Oh, you good with Yoshidaya?”

Perhaps under the influence of *Song of Summer Clouds*, Jinya recalled a nostalgic conversation.

The massive gyuudon beef bowl chain Yoshidaya was founded in Meiji 33 (1900 AD), and its first shop was in Nihonbashi, Tokyo. Back when Jinya was a servant for the Akase family, Kimiko’s mother Shino badgered him into taking her there many times—Shino had the same propensity to jump on trends as Kimiko did. The moment she heard gyuudon beef bowls were the talk of the town, she made Jinya bring her there. It was a bit of a problem because she didn’t care whether he was in the middle of work or not, but he didn’t mind letting her ride on his shoulders and spoiling her every now and then.

“Sure. I haven’t been there for a while.”

“That so? Then it’s settled.”

Under the blazing sun, the two casually walked through town. Miyaka hummed to herself and walked in front, apparently enjoying herself. Jinya watched her and recalled the trivial memory of seeing a motion picture film with several other people. Much had changed, but some things always remained the same. He was sure to look back fondly on this day as well at some point in the future.

It was an ordinary Sunday before summer break, and the sky was blue and clear.

Jinya blocked the sun from his eyes and looked up, thinking it would only get hotter yet.

The next day, during lunch break, Miyaka ate her lunch in the classroom and told her best friend Azusaya Kaoru what had happened the previous day.

"…Miyaka-chan. Isn't that a date?"

"Bwah?!"

That observation led to a bit of a kerfuffle, but that's a story for another time.

Late Night Tales of Demonic Swords —
Kikoku: The Wailing Blade
1

BACK BEFORE MOTION PICTURE theaters were around, there was only a single place one could see motion pictures: a freak show. While motion picture theaters could trace their roots back to traditional theater, the roots of freak shows lay in show tents. As the name suggested, freak shows specialized in showcasing freaks of nature—like women who were part snake or octopus—as well as performing the kinds of acrobatic tricks with animals that could be found in a circus and showcasing mummified remains of things such as demons and kappa. It was an ancient form of entertainment where one paid to see the unusual.

Freak shows had a wide variety of oddities on display, and with modernization and the arrival of foreign culture, the showcasing of foreign beasts only added to the list. Early motion pictures were another thing adopted from the West and shown at freak shows. Their popularity was great enough that establishments specifically for motion picture films began to spring up. In that sense, freak shows could be considered one of motion picture theaters' predecessors as well.

Motion picture theaters enjoyed great success in the Taisho era. But at the same time, the number of freak shows dwindled as people started to criticize their unethical nature. Freak shows would make a show of anything they could, from deformities and sexual acts to the live slaughter of beasts. As society modernized, the industry came

under scrutiny and eventually met ruin. Only a few freak shows remained in the modern Heisei era.

It is a fact of life that fortune comes and goes. For every victor that comes out ahead, there is a loser that is relegated to the shadows. But even if the losers are trampled over and forgotten, the resentment they bear lingers.

***

It was now August in year twelve of the Taisho era (1923 AD).

"Can you grab the spray bottle for me, Ryuuna?"

"Mm."

"Thank you." Jinya took the pesticide spray from Ryuuna and thanked her, then resumed his work tending to the garden's hydrangeas. The flowers this year looked the same as they did twenty years ago. He felt proud of his work, even if no one understood its significance. With his expression flat, he gave a satisfied nod.

It had been a year since that parting at the train station. The imperial capital was as busy as ever and new culture continued to excite the populace every day, but the area around the Akase home had been unusually calm for a time.

Yoshihiko and Kimiko were closer than before and even occasionally went out on dates. Michitomo would always complain when he heard about them, leaving Shino to console him. Magatsume had made no big moves even after Nagumo Eizen was slain, and Jinya spent his days diligently training and working. Ryuuna—currently trotting after him—still didn't talk much, but she did behave more like

a child should. Himawari still visited the Akase home, claiming her mother had no intentions of making a move. She wouldn't go into detail about why that was, but for the time being, it seemed things would be safe.

They finally had peace. But Jinya wasn't entirely unworried.

Yonabari and the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade of *Demon Wail* had remained unseen since their disappearance a year ago. The whole reason Jinya had agreed to help fight against Eizen in the first place was to take back that demonic sword, and his failure to do so bothered him.

He didn't know what Yonabari was after or why they stole the demonic sword, but he wanted to believe they wouldn't target Kimiko or Ryuuna anymore now that Eizen was gone. He couldn't even be sure of that, however. There was just too much up in the air.

A lukewarm breeze blew through, giving Jinya an unpleasant sensation. He glared up in the direction the wind went and saw the low-hanging summer clouds. The summer sun was blazing, and yet a chill ran up his spine.

"I'd say it's about time for a break." Trying to shake off his bad feeling, he patted Ryuuna's head a few times, which made her smile. She'd become a great deal more expressive over this past year. She only needed to talk more, and then she'd be perfect.

Jinya felt her warmth through the palm of his hand and prayed for this momentary peace to continue.

***

"Sheesh… How can it still be so hot?" Izuchi complained. Though it was nighttime at the tail end of August, it remained humid out.

His work at Koyomiza was over for the day, so he'd stopped for a drink at some random establishment and was now on his way home. He hummed to himself as he went, in high spirits thanks to the liquor. His favorite drink lately was beer. The carbonation made it go down smoothly, causing him to drink perhaps more than he should every time. Though he had opposed the Taisho era before, he did not hate things like beer and ice pops, all brought on by modernization.

"Drinkin' alone every time is a bit of a drag, though. Maybe I'll invite the Demon Eater along next time."

And have him foot the bill if possible, of course. Izuchi was merely a humble ticket collector who also handled cleaning, whereas Jinya was the gardener for a noble family. He had to be raking it in a lot better.

Izuchi smiled at the thought, then looked up at the great starry sky, which bore the lingering vestiges of summer. He continued along the weakly lit street path. Even after the sun went down, Shibuya was still decently bright thanks to the street lamps and businesses that were open late. Unlike the twilight hours of the past, one could still make out the faces of the people passing by.

"Heya, Izuchi. It's been a while."

Naturally, that meant one could also see the faces of the demons mixed in among those people. Appearing before Izuchi was a familiar, androgynous face. They could easily have passed for a stylish,

tomboyish woman or a slender, effeminate man. They wore a straw boater hat, slacks, and leather shoes. Their top was a white Western-style shirt that seemed to glow in the night. All in all, they looked like a young high school-age boy wearing all the latest trends and out to pick up women. Izuchi knew what they really were, though. They were a superior demon with whom he had served Eizen about a year ago. They waved nonchalantly and greeted Izuchi with a grin.

"…Yonabari." Izuchi glared.

"It sure is hot, huh? I ate two ice pops just today." Yonabari paid his look no mind and fanned themselves with a hand. Their forced, nonchalant act only increased Izuchi's wariness.

Though he was only a lesser demon, Izuchi still had a demon's strength, and he also knew martial arts. He could fight, even after losing his gatling gun. But Yonabari was scrawny, and their ability wasn't suited for combat. Izuchi didn't think he would lose if it came to a fight.

"Whoa, whoa, what's with the look? Meanie. Is that any way to treat an old ally?"

"After the way you tried to hurt the Akase girl and Yoshihiko-senpai, I'd say it's only fair to be a little wary of you."

"So you're totally on their side now, huh? I guess that does kinda suit you."

Yonabari acted no different than the way they did back when Izuchi was a drinking partner and fellow underling of Eizen. Though he stayed on his toes, he felt a little conflicted. "Yonabari… Just what the hell are ya up to?"

"Hm, what's that? You wanna know what I'm doing for lunch tomorrow?"

"Don't play dumb with me. What're you scheming?"

Ikyuu wanted to turn the Taisho world on its head. Furutsubaki was manipulated into Eizen's service. But the intentions of Yonabari were the one thing Izuchi couldn't figure out. He'd asked to hear their motives before, but he didn't know how much of what they said could be believed. Why did they serve Eizen? Why did they steal that demonic blade? Why did they disappear for an entire year only to reappear now?

"Nothing much. Just the same thing I've been plotting from the start." With an upbeat tone, Yonabari plastered on a fake smile. "I like drinking tea, you see. There are a lot of good pastimes out there, but nothing beats relaxing on the veranda and sipping good old tea."

Their voice was singsongy and terribly hollow. Izuchi couldn't feel any deceit in what they said, which only confused him all the more.

"I don't hate new things. I drink coffee, and I love wearing Western clothes. Western food is good too, though I guess I have a thing or two to say about motion pictures… But you know, it just doesn't sit right with me when people look down on the old just because it's old."

How all this was meant to answer Izuchi's question was unclear, but they spoke their words sonorously, as though they were an actor standing atop a stage. In a flowing motion, their arm swayed down to

their hip to rest on a sword. Inside its unadorned metal scabbard was no ordinary blade.

"You and I are the same; we both dislike the current world. But I'm not out for revenge against it; messy things like that just aren't for me. I only want to lash out a bit. Thankfully, I now have a way to do just that." Yatonomori Kaneomi. The demonic sword of *Demon Wail* was now in their hands. "I served Eizen-san because I was after this, but I didn't hate him as a person or anything. This era robbed him of a lot. We were kindred spirits, in a sense, so I'm thinking maaaybe I should avenge him."

"Avenge him…by killing the Demon Eater?"

"No, no. Eizen-san's enemy was the *present*, and so is mine. Didn't I tell you before? The Taisho world itself is my enemy."

The Nagumo were spirit hunters who fought for the people, but the new era had seen those very same people deprive the Nagumo of their swords. Similarly, modernization deprived demons of their place in the world. And so Yonabari's enemy was neither humanity nor demons but the Taisho era itself. If the era was trying to do away with demons, then it was the era itself they had to oppose.

Yonabari's innocent words carried bottomless malice. The expression on their face betrayed none of it, but their eyes—showing not hatred but madness—hid nothing.

"What d'ya think, Izuchi? Wanna help me?" Yonabari made their offer with the same friendliness they always displayed around Izuchi. "Don't worry, I won't go after Kimiko-chan and Yoshihiko-kun

anymore. You don't like the way things are either, right? Let's team up so we can fight back against the world together again."

Izuchi's body stiffened ever so slightly at the offer. He had joined up with Eizen because he wanted to destroy the essence of the Taisho era. He wished for demons to remain the strong, feared beings they once were—for demons to be demons. And here Yonabari was, saying they needed him now.

He, a pathetic demon with no place in the world, was needed. That made him happy, yet he still looked Yonabari in the eyes and flatly refused. "Sorry, but I can't take you up on that."

"…Can I ask why?"

"Because I've figured out I'm weak." There was a hint of self-deprecation in Izuchi's voice, but he was proud of his realization. Yonabari seemed a bit annoyed by his answer. "I didn't lose my place in the world 'cause I was a demon. I lost it 'cause I was weak. I can't blame the world for somethin' that's my own fault. Plus, I'm startin' to come around to a lot of what the world has to offer."

"…I see."

"Disappointed in me?" No matter how he spun it, he had indeed abandoned his wish and instead indulged in the present he had once opposed. He wouldn't blame Yonabari for thinking him a fool who had simply given up his ideals.

But Yonabari shook their head and smiled. "Nah. If you're happy with that, then it's whatever. But man… With Ikyuu and Furutsubaki dead, I guess I'm all by my lonesome, huh?"

Though faint, there was a bit of loneliness in Yonabari's expression. But it was gone quickly, hidden by their usual fake smile. "Oh well. See ya, Izuchi."

"Hey, wait. Where do you think you're going?"

"Ah haa ha, don't worry. We'll meet again soon enough," they said reassuringly. Then, as swift as the wind, they left.

Izuchi's eyes shot wide. He had intended to chase Yonabari, to force out whatever they were scheming and put a stop to it. But he couldn't. Not because of the way he felt but because he physically couldn't. Their speed was too great for him to even hope to follow. The Yonabari he had previously known wasn't nearly this physically gifted.

"Yonabari…you…" Izuchi stood stock-still, his murmur fading into the summer sky.

Yonabari was sure to act soon, and whatever they were scheming was bound to be trouble. Nevertheless, Izuchi felt something other than anger toward them.

He could not lend a hand to Yonabari, nor even wish them luck in their efforts. Something about that pained him, though he himself did not know why.

***

The next day, Izuchi paid Jinya a visit first thing in the morning. The two faced one another in the servants' quarters, detached from the main Akase home. Izuchi recounted the events of the prior night while drinking the tea he was served.

"I already know I'm pretty dumb. Instead of jumpin' to my own conclusions, I'd rather leave the thinking to someone smarter, know what I mean?" Izuchi said, explaining why he came.

Yonabari had returned with their Yatonomori Kaneomi blade. With some scheme in mind, they'd asked Izuchi to join them. Jinya processed every part of Izuchi's detailed explanation and thought for a moment. "Yonabari, huh…"

Jinya had only encountered Yonabari a couple of times, but Himawari seemed to be wary of them. She even went as far as to say Yonabari might be their true enemy rather than Nagumo Eizen, and as a daughter of Magatsume, Himawari's words carried some weight.

"So? What d'ya think?"

"No idea. I know next to nothing about it. Your thoughts are as good as mine here."

"Damn. Fair enough, I guess."

Yonabari was plotting something that would shake the Taisho world. That was all that could be concluded from this. There was simply not enough information to manage anything more.

Izuchi racked his brain as hard as he could to take a stab at guessing what Yonabari might be up to. Figuring anything was better than nothing, he said the first thing that came to mind. "Well, they said they'd been after that demonic blade, and they ran off faster than I've ever seen them move before. They must've used the ability of a demon sealed in the blade. Maybe they want to do something else with the blade too?"

"So they're using the demonic sword of *Demon Wail*… How annoying," Jinya muttered.

Izuchi gave him a quizzical look. Both Yonabari and Jinya seemed fascinated by the demonic sword. Suspecting something was up, Izuchi firmly asked, "What's going on, Demon Eater? You're hiding something."

"Pardon?"

"Don't play dumb. I heard it straight from Akitsu the Fourth. You've been after Eizen's Yatonomori Kaneomi blade this whole time. Just what's so special about this blade that both you and Yonabari are after it?"

The air turned a little tense, but Jinya calmly replied, "There are four Yatonomori Kaneomi blades, all forged by Kaneomi, a swordsmith from the Warring States period. They are man-made demonic swords that have demon abilities. The one Yonabari possesses has the ability *Demon Wail*, which lets it seal demons away within its blade."

"I ain't asking for a description. I'm asking why you two care so much about the sword. What's its big secret?"

"I hate to let you down, but I'm no expert in ancient weapons, and the only man I can think of who might've been one is dead."

Nagumo Eizen, who had drawn out the power of the blade, was deceased. If there were any secrets behind it to be found, he would have known them—or so Jinya appeared to be saying. Izuchi didn't buy it and gave Jinya a doubtful look. He seemed convinced there was more going on and wasn't going to back down until Jinya fessed up.

"If you don't know anything about the sword, then why do you want it so much?"

"For personal…no, *sentimental* reasons."

"Oh, come on. Cut the crap already and get to the point." Izuchi glared, irritated by Jinya's constant deflecting.

Seeing that Izuchi was too stubborn to let the topic go, Jinya sighed. "Look, I really don't know much of anything about the sword. But you're right that I was hiding something."

It concerned his past alone. A past he hadn't told Michitomo or even Somegorou about.

Jinya's gaze turned sharp as he somberly said, "I wanted to take the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade back from Eizen."

"Back? You mean it was yours first?"

"No, but I owe a debt to its previous owner." That was why his motives were sentimental ones.

Izuchi nodded, apparently satisfied by the answer. Jinya wanted the demonic blade of *Demon Wail* not because he desired its power for himself, but because he couldn't stand a monster like Eizen using its power. And since his reasons for wanting it were fundamentally different from Yonabari's, he really wouldn't know why they would want it.

"I see… Hm? But wait, what's this thing you said you're hiding about the sword, then?" Izuchi asked.

"Again, I don't know any secrets about the sword itself. I just know the name of its previous owner and of a demon sealed inside it."

He happened to hear about it only by sheer coincidence. After leaving Kyoto, he drifted aimlessly for a time and heard a particular tale about a village guardian slaying a demon. That much was nothing special; the story itself was an ordinary folk tale. But he recognized the names of the village guardian and the demon.

To be a demon was to be long-lived, and just as a long life came with many meetings and partings, so too did it come with many opportunities for reencounters. The tale Jinya heard was an event he himself had witnessed in the past, but only after hearing it as a tale did he learn more of its finer details.

The demonic sword of *Demon Wail* was a legendary weapon featured in the story, and Jinya had seen it used to seal away a demon firsthand.

He wanted to keep this all secret if he could. But with Yonabari scheming something, it was better to share what information he could. "The name of the sealed demon is Kaede."

"Kaede? What'd a demon with a girly name like that do to get sealed away? Oh wait, doesn't Kaede mean 'maple flower'? They a daughter of Magatsume?"

"No. Kaede was sealed away long before Magatsume ever appeared." That wasn't to say the two didn't have ties, but Jinya had no reason to explain that far.

Why did Magatsume name her daughters after flowers, anyway? Jinya always wondered that, but perhaps it was because Suzune had always known Kaede's secret. Suzune was born between a human and a demon, and perhaps she could instinctively tell Kaede was like her.

So maybe she misunderstood and thought demons had to be named after flowers.

There was no way for Jinya to be sure, and knowing wouldn't change anything. He kept a stony look on his face, acting unperturbed as the discussion continued.

"I get the idea this ain't just some hearsay," Izuchi said. "You knew this demon?"

"I did. We only talked a few times, but I owe them a lot. I only learned they were sealed away in a demonic blade much later in life, though."

The previous owner of the sword had called the demon Kaede. Jinya was still young then, so he couldn't connect the dots, but he was older now and had learned many things. He could make a guess as to the true events of that day.

"I know the truth now…"

Jinya had learned from the village chief that Kiyomasa, the chief's son, had failed to draw Yarai from its scabbard. The same went for the demon of *Farsight* that had attacked the village. But Suzune, the child of a human and a demon, and Jinya, a human who had fallen to demonhood, could draw the blade without issue. And so could Shirayuki.

None of this had bothered Jinya at first, but he understood the significance now. He didn't know why, but Yarai could only be drawn by someone who possessed the natures of both man and demon. And if Shirayuki could draw it—*then the blood of demons must run in the Itsukihime line*.

Viewed in that light, many things changed. The way of life Jinya once believed in took on a more sinister tone.

The Itsukihime never left the shrine and was only ever seen by the village chief and the shrine maiden guardians. Those guardians served both as protectors of the Itsukihime and as slayers of the demons that threatened the village, but that was only on the surface. The true purpose of the shrine maiden guardians was to slay the Itsukihime herself if she ever became a threat to the village.

That was why nobody faulted Jinya when he failed to protect Shirayuki. They knew the truth of what she was.

In the Japanese language, "Itsukihime" meant the "Pure Woman of Fire." But it could also hold another meaning. "Itsuki" could mean "stayed," and "hime" could mean "crimson eyes." Put together, "Itsukihime" had the secondary meaning of the "Crimson-Eyed One That Stayed."

Shirayuki wasn't isolated because she was worshipped but to keep her away from others. It was an unspoken agreement of what the role of shrine maiden guardian truly entailed, and her death had always been an accepted possibility. She was no more than a caged zashiki-warashi. She brought good fortune, so she was protected. But if she died, well, then everyone could simply sleep easier knowing there was one less spirit around to worry about.

But it didn't stop there. Even the noble self-sacrifice of Jinya's foster father took on a new light with this knowledge.

"The former owner of the demonic blade was Motoharu, the previous shrine maiden guardian of an iron-producing village called

Kadono. The demon sealed away is named Kaede, or as she was known…" Jinya hesitated. He grimaced as he forced out the words.

Kaede. Though it was a single kanji character, the name could be split into the characters for "tree" and "wind." When she inherited Yarai, she gave up the "tree" half of her name and adopted the "night" kanji of Yarai to assume a new one.

"…Yokaze, the Itsukihime."

2

THERE WAS A SHRINE in which a certain demon-slaying tale had been passed down. A tale of an all-too-ordinary tragedy that occurred in a mountain iron town, featuring a battle between a demon and a village guardian. Or at least, that was all it was supposed to be.

Kadono was a village that produced iron. Its people worshipped a local goddess known as Mahiru-sama, and the shrine maiden who offered their goddess prayer was known and worshipped as the Itsukihime. The Itsukihime was sacred to the village, and a shrine maiden guardian was always placed by her side to protect her from harm.

Jinya's foster father and swordmaster Motoharu was one of these shrine maiden guardians, and the Itsukihime at that time was Yokaze, Motoharu's wife.

Though he could never tell him so directly, Jinya—*Jinta* had looked up to Motoharu. He was stronger than anyone and put his life on the line to protect his loved ones. Young Jinta thought he was like a hero straight from an epic tale and aspired to be like him someday.

"Yokaze…"

But children grew up. Eventually, a day came when they discovered the things they couldn't see when they were younger.

"You always did tell me I was the wrong man to be your shrine maiden guardian. Perhaps you were right. Maybe I'm not fit to be your guardian or your husband."

The massive demon attacked the shrine and devoured Yokaze. Motoharu stood before it, knowing full well he couldn't win. Jinya watched on, seeing bravery in his actions.

"But I regret nothing. I don't know if it was for better or worse, but meeting you changed me. Being a shrine maiden guardian wasn't all smooth sailing, but I got to be with you. This life wasn't bad, really… Was it the same for you? In the end, I never did get to ask, did I?"

But it wasn't bravery. And Motoharu's words weren't for himself; they were meant for the demon he faced—his wife, who had become a hideous creature due to her demonic nature.

The Itsukihime line had the blood of demons mixed in. The role of the shrine maiden guardian wasn't to protect the Itsukihime but to slay her if she ever ran wild. Yokaze was consumed by the demon lurking inside her, so Motoharu fought to fulfill his duty as shrine maiden guardian and slay the Itsukihime that had become a threat to the village.

If Itsukihime was both a play on the "Pure Woman of Fire" and the "Crimson-Eyed One That Stayed," then perhaps the shrine maiden guardian (*mikomori*) could be considered a play on "submerged in

water" (*mikomori*). In old Japanese, "to be submerged in water" meant "to hide one's heart," and so the one who served the Woman of Fire would be the one who had the true intentions of their heart submerged where the fire couldn't reach.

"Don't end up like me, kid."

Motoharu, always smiling, must have hidden his heart as well.

"Nothing that exists is changeless. Even the most precious of feelings change shape. Perhaps they grow more precious, and perhaps they grow so hideous you can't stand to see them anymore. I couldn't accept that truth, and this is where it got me."

Motoharu said he hated Yokaze at first, but his feelings changed and love bore fruit. He eventually wanted to protect the Yokaze he had disliked, but even that had to change.

He wanted to protect the Kadono that Yokaze loved and swore to do just that. But then he learned what it truly meant to be a shrine maiden guardian and had to weigh his feelings against his duty. Left with no choice but to fulfill his role, he fought the woman he loved.

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

However, the meaning of those words remained unknown to Jinya. After leaving them behind, the village guardian Motoharu lost his life.

Just what did Motoharu feel as he turned his blade against his wife? What did Yokaze feel as her consciousness faded?

Their wails reached no one, and the story of the demonic blade came to a close.

In the very end, all that remained was a tale of a sword that lost its master.

After drifting away from Kadono, the blade ended up preserved in a small shrine somewhere with just two short lines of description:

Once upon a time, a demon named Yokaze attacked a village.

A village guardian known as Motoharu is said to have slain them with this sword.

The loving couple was forgotten by time, and two short sentences became the sword's entire legacy.

"The Itsukihime…?" Izuchi parroted back. His confusion was understandable, since he knew nothing of any Itsukihime, shrine maiden guardians, or Jinya's past.

"It's what this one village called their shrine maiden. That shrine maiden was actually a demon, and the village guardian sealed them away. It's a clichéd tale, but this one actually happened." Jinya had no reason to go into any detail. The story of his foster parents had no bearing on their present situation, and he had no inclination to share their last moments with anyone.

"Ah. And you were on good terms with this guardian person, I take it?" Having grasped enough of the picture, Izuchi nodded.

"Right. But that's it. I have no idea what ability the demon had. If there was anyone out there who knew…"

"It'd have been the Eizen geezer, huh? No, wait, I guess Yonabari might've been after it because they knew too."

"It's likely."

The black miasma Eizen had controlled was nothing more than a byproduct of something greater. Yonabari knew Yokaze's ability and stole it for some scheme, but Jinya couldn't even begin to guess what that scheme might be. But from the way they declared themselves an enemy of the Taisho era, they likely weren't up to anything good. Jinya couldn't simply stand by as Yonabari used Motoharu's sword and Yokaze's ability for ill purposes. He didn't want their memory to be dragged through the mud.

"At any rate, I'll be taking the demonic sword of *Demon Wail* back…no matter what I have to do." Jinya's words were not directed at himself but at Izuchi. He knew Izuchi had been allied with Yonabari under Eizen before, so he made it clear he would not hold back—no matter *who* got in his way.

After a pause, Izuchi replied. "…I get it."

Though Yonabari spoke frivolously, claiming that they were merely lashing out against the world, they were certainly up to no good. They were similar to Eizen in how they lacked morals and were willing to do anything. If left alone, they would bring about a lot of harm. Izuchi understood that well.

"But y'know, drinking with 'em wasn't bad…"

But his heart wasn't completely on board.

"…Jiiya?"

That same night, Jinya was brooding in his room when Ryuuna looked worriedly at him. He patted her head a few times to let her know he was all right, making her squint comfortably.

She had become much more expressive than before. She didn't shy away from touch anymore either; she'd even come here on her own to ask if they could sleep in the same bed. He was happy to see such growth in her, but at the same time, it wasn't proper for a girl her age to ask for such things. But considering the way she had lived most of her life, he didn't have it in his heart to refuse her wishes.

She lay down on the bed and kicked her legs with a happy smile. He grinned, amused by her childishness. A young lady shouldn't be kicking her legs, though. Speaking softly, so as not to come off as angry, he chided, "Hey now. That's not how a lady acts."

"Mm…?"

She cocked her head to the side, not understanding. She was an obedient girl, but teaching her to act with grace would apparently take a while yet.

Jinya sat on the edge of the bed. Ryuuna rolled over and reached out her hand, which he squeezed softly. Even such trivial contact made her smile. His expression softened in turn.

"They're a liar," she said out of the blue. Her smile was gone, and her voice lacked emotion. Confused, he looked at her. Dispassionately, she continued, "Yonabari. You want to know about them, right?"

Was this what people meant when they said children grew fast? Ryuuna somehow sensed Jinya was after Yonabari, or perhaps Izuchi

had told her. At any rate, it seemed she had come to Jinya's room to talk.

"Do you know Yonabari?" he asked.

"They came a lot when I was in my cell. Only they used my name."

Ryuuna had been locked away to be a tool for Eizen. Her body was altered, and she was intended to be violated and give birth to demons. Nobody treated her like a human then, and something that wasn't human needed no name. So she was only ever referred to as "it" or the "*Kodoku no Kago*."

But Yonabari was different. Though it was a name Eizen had given with ill connotations, they properly called her Ryuuna. They didn't treat her as a thing or a man-made poisonous temptress but as a person.

"I only thought they were weird before, but now I know they were a liar. They smile, but it isn't a real smile."

Nevertheless, Ryuuna did not have a good opinion of Yonabari. There was something about them that felt wrong.

"But they still helped me."

"…They did?"

"Mm."

Clumsily, she started to explain.

On the night of the Nagumo's evening party, Himawari snuck into the underground cell holding Ryuuna and Kimiko and encountered Yonabari there. Even though they were supposed to be keeping

watch, they ran off without offering any resistance. Stranger yet, they even asked Himawari to save Ryuuna.

Jinya had heard that much from Himawari herself already. He thought Yonabari had been pulling some ploy, but Ryuuna seemed to simply believe they were lending her a hand. He didn't suggest otherwise out of fear of hurting her feelings, but something about it all did bother him. Looking back on it, Yonabari had been very careful when it came to Ryuuna even though they'd hurt Kimiko and Yoshihiko. And something told him they weren't just following Eizen's orders.

"…Hm." Jinya hung his head and thought, but no clear explanation for Yonabari's actions came to him. He sighed and lifted his face to see Ryuuna struggling to keep her eyes open.

It was late, and she was at her limit. He put his disorganized thoughts on hold and pulled the blanket up over her.

"Go ahead and sleep."

As he ran his fingers through her hair, her eyelids drew closed. He heard the steady, peaceful rhythm of her breathing and patted her head one last time before removing his hand.

He looked toward the window and saw no stars outside. The moon was hidden by thick clouds that left the night pitch black and silent.

A disagreeably lukewarm wind blew through the crack of the window. Its unpleasant touch seemed to caress his spine and made his gaze turn fierce.

***

Two weeks passed with nothing significant happening, and August came to an end. Though the weather still held trailing notes of summer, the sunbeams were now soft, and the air was pleasant.

Rain continued through the morning on the first day of September, but slowly the clouds thinned and the sky grew bright. At this rate, the rain was bound to let up before noon, giving way to a pleasant autumn sunshine.

Izuchi stared outside from the desk. Not many customers came when it rained. He yawned, bored out of his mind. “Looks like we can’t expect much business this mornin’.”

“Yeah. But we’re usually so busy, so a slow day like this is nice every now and then.”

“You said it.”

Yoshihiko dutifully fixed the posters that were beginning to peel and cleaned up inside the building. Izuchi couldn’t resist a smile watching him. Not because he was working so hard but because of the person who was working with him.

“I’ve finished cleaning over here, Yoshihiko-san.”

“Thank you. Sorry for the trouble, as always.”

“No, it’s no trouble at all.”

Yoshihiko apologized, but Kimiko seemed to be genuinely enjoying herself. The two of them together had been a common sight lately. Kimiko very obviously had feelings for Yoshihiko, and Yoshihiko likely felt the same way himself. The two had grown quite close over the past year and found an excuse to be together whenever they could.

Sadly, neither of them had the courage to take that final plunge, so they remained nothing more than "really good friends." Their timidness was adorable but also somewhat frustrating to watch.

"It's so obviously mutual, and yet…"

"Hm? Did you say something, Izuchi-san?"

"Nothin', Yoshihiko-senpai."

Though he showed backbone when the chips were down, Yoshihiko acted like any other young man when it came to love. Izuchi sighed. At least watching the two of them was a good way to kill time. The whereabouts of Yonabari had him worried, but moments like these were few and far between, and so they needed to be savored.

"Oh, by the way, where's the Demon Eater at?" he asked Kimiko.

"Jiiya will stop by later. He's always spending time with Ryuuna-san lately."

Though she was the daughter of a baron, Kimiko was fairly expressive and puffed her cheeks out now. Ryuuna was a good friend of hers, but it irked her to have her caretaker monopolized by someone else.

Izuchi grinned at her childish look but soon made a serious expression. “He’s with Ryuuna-chan, huh?”

Izuchi didn’t think the Demon Eater was the type to mess around. He must have realized something, so he would have to question him later.

As he thought that, he looked outside and saw the skies had already cleared. It was right about noon. The rain clouds had parted to make way for soft, autumn rays of sunshine, but there was no time to enjoy the moment.

“What the…” Instinctively, Izuchi felt something was off.

He thought he heard something clattering inside the building—then the ground itself began to roar and violently shake.

“A-an earthquake?!”

“Y-Yoshihiko-san!”

Yoshihiko stood stock-still, unable to move amid the shaking. Kimiko leaned against him fearfully. Normally Izuchi would have stopped to appreciate such a heartwarming sight, but this was no moment for things like that.

This is bad.

His body moved before he could even think as he grabbed the other two and dashed out of the building.

1923 (Taisho 12), September 1st, 11:58:32. A record-breaking seismic tremor that would later be known as the Great Kanto Earthquake wreaked havoc on Tokyo.

***

At that same moment, Jinya was with Ryuuna. The two of them were making their way to Koyomiza after the clouds parted when they felt the ground start tossing violently.

The earth warped and let out a shrill cry like the ocean on a stormy night. The surrounding buildings collapsed one after another, and the sky changed from a soft autumn glow to orange. Wisps of black smoke rose, a sign that fires had broken out.

The shaking continued. Jinya held Ryuuna in his arms and ran into the middle of the main street where they wouldn't be crushed by falling buildings.

"Mm…"

"It'll be all right."

Ryuuna cowered fearfully. The hand with which she clung to his clothes trembled.

People ran wildly this way and that, their shrill screams overlapping with the cries of the earth. The chaos was like a portrait of hell.

In the middle of it all, a single person nonchalantly strolled around, not caring about the earthquake. It was difficult to even stand with all the shaking, and yet they alone moved unaffected. They were calm and collected, as though soothed by the screams around them. A chill ran up Jinya's spine.

Still holding Ryuuna, he drew Yarai out of the bamboo sword bag in which he hid it and pointed it at this person. Seeing this, they waved like one would toward an old friend.

“Heya, Demon Eater. It’s been a hot minute, huh?”

Surrounded by pandemonium, Yonabari greeted Jinya with a cheerful but cold smile.

3

“JIIYA…”

“It’s all right. There’s no need to be scared.”

Ryuuna trembled, and not just because of the earthquake.

The demon stood before them with a facsimile of a smile. The fact that they could look calm at all in this situation was unsettling.

“Heya, Demon Eater. It’s been a hot minute, huh?”

The shaking earth made it difficult to even stand. Nearby, the ground caved in like it were liquid, causing entire buildings to vanish. Many lives were swallowed up in an instant.

The quaking gradually subsided, but the chaos continued. People screamed, buildings crumbled, and the road lay fissured. Cars collided and burned. Tokyo had turned into a hellscape, but one person seemed removed from it all. Unruffled, they looked around and watched the city crumble around them.

Yonabari. The gender-ambiguous demon who had once served Eizen.

Jinya noticed immediately that they didn’t have the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade on them. But before he could question them, they said, “Oh, I sold the sword to this old antique store I know called Kogetsudou. It’s served its purpose. I talked to Soushi-kun about you

while I was there, though. Apparently a demon in a human's guise killed little Miss Sahiro-chan! How awful. First she was consumed by Furutsubaki, then you cut her down. The poor, pitiful thing. What kind of man kills a girl in cold blood anyway?"

Jinya told himself not to fall for Yonabari's cheap provocations as he trained a sharp and cold gaze on them.

They wore a black school uniform with a matching school cap and an overcoat, looking like your typical high school boy. Their graceful posture matched well with their androgynous, slender body. They stared back at Jinya with murky red eyes and a fake smile. Though they tried to act as indifferent as possible, there was no hiding the faint scorn on their face.

"You…"

"The name's Yonabari, not 'you.' Let's not forget our manners now, 'kay?"

Now Jinya could see what Izuchi meant when he said Yonabari had a nasty personality. From the sound of things earlier, Yonabari had looked into Jinya a bit—but Jinya had done his research as well.

"I'm guessing you're after Ryuuna?"

Yonabari expressed some shock, eyes opening wide. They'd fed Saegusa Sahiro to Furutsubaki, stabbed Yoshihiko's stomach to manipulate him with *Plaything*, and offered Kimiko to Eizen. The only one they hadn't directly laid a hand on was Ryuuna. Far from it, they even helped her escape from the Nagumo home.

Jinya couldn't figure out the reason no matter how much he thought it over. The only thing he could conclude was that they wanted Ryuuna for some purpose of their own.

"Oooh, you're sharp. Izuchi would never have gotten that far."

It was honestly no more than guesswork, but it looked like Jinya had hit the mark. With a fake smile, Yonabari threw up their hands and feigned surprise.

"Aha, so *that's* why you've been glued to her side lately? Man, no wonder I couldn't get a chance to meet her alone."

"What are you plotting?"

"Plotting? I'm not plotting anything. I'm just looking for a life partner I can call my one and only."

Thanks to the chaos brought on by the earthquake, not a single person stopped to pay Jinya and Yonabari any attention. The disaster was just that great. But that only made Yonabari's nonchalant attitude stand out more by contrast. It was as if they'd known the earthquake would happen.

"I don't want some old-fashioned marriage meant to bring together two families; I want to marry someone I love with all my heart. A marriage of romance! Know what I mean? The freedom to do just that is one of the great things about this new era."

Yonabari nodded along to their own words before suddenly shooting Jinya an amorous look. Even now, they insisted on playing the fool.

"Mm, but yeah. What I'm basically trying to say is…"

Except this time they were serious. Even though Jinya was glaring straight at them, making sure not to look away, Yonabari vanished from his sight.

"Please give me your daughter's hand in marriage…! Or something like that?"

A chill shot up Jinya's spine. He hadn't let his guard down in the slightest, and yet Yonabari had effortlessly closed the distance between them.

Underneath their frivolous tone hid absolute confidence. They were different from before, stronger. They pulled out a pistol and smoothly aimed it at Jinya's brow.

"…If you want my blessing, you'll have to beat it out of me," he replied.

"Ah ha ha. Hey, you're more fun than you look."

And just like that, hostilities began between the two demons.

Jinya had had a feeling it would eventually come to this, which was why he had brought his sword along in a bamboo sword bag. Still holding Ryuuna, he popped the blade from its scabbard and drew it in one motion, pushing off his left foot to make a horizontal slash.

Unruffled, Yonabari retreated a half step back and evaded the blade, then aimed their gun at Jinya's brow again. Their weapon wasn't the grip gun Jinya had seen before but a Type 26, made by Imperial Japan in the Meiji era.

Faster than the crack of the gunshot could sound, Jinya moved out of the trajectory, then dropped Ryuuna and closed in on Yonabari.

He heard the wind slice as the bullet approached and grazed the side of his temple, but he didn't hesitate.

He slashed diagonally down, but Yonabari read his movements and slammed their gun's grip against his blade, taking the opportunity to slip close and strike with the heel of their left palm without stopping their momentum.

Jinya pulled his upper body back to dodge. But that appeared to have been Yonabari's intent all along, because they took advantage of his broken posture to kick at a speed that rendered them a blur.

Yonabari was combining firearms with martial arts all in close combat. Jinya certainly hadn't experienced anything like this back in Edo times, but it didn't matter. If something unfamiliar to him were enough to catch him off guard, he would have died long ago.

Jinya used his left arm to meet the powerful kick aimed to shatter his skull. He didn't plan to block it but to knock it down outright. He aimed a backhand fist at Yonabari's shin with the intent to smash it but was surprised to find it was solid, as if he were punching steel. His opponent was a demon as well. It would take more than this to break them.

With neither of their moves having the intended effect, they both came to a temporary halt. Their gazes met, and Yonabari's androgynous face twisted into a mad, savage smile.

The pause lasted for only an instant as Yonabari fired once more. Jinya smelled smoke and gunpowder as the lead bullet neared. However, it wouldn't land. He had dodged, or rather he had fled from its future path. He couldn't use *Indomitable* while moving, so his only

way of dealing with the gun was to predict the trajectory from where the muzzle faced and move before it fired.

The bullet made a shrill sound as it whizzed past his ear.

The gun was a problem. Yonabari could make a lethal attack with a simple squeeze of a trigger and do it from any position. Even if Jinya somehow took the advantage in the fight, the gun remained a trump card that allowed Yonabari to turn things around in an instant. The fact that one could buy such a weapon for only twenty-two yen (equal to 44,000 yen in modern times) only made things even more aggravating. One didn't need to be Izuchi to dislike guns.

But complaining was pointless. The moment Jinya evaded the bullet, he rushed forward. The Type 26 was a revolver, so it couldn't fire until the hammer was raised again, which allowed a brief opening. Jinya abandoned all caution to capitalize on the opportunity while he still could.

Of course, Yonabari was aware of their gun's weakness as well. Their left hand already held another gun pointing Jinya's way.

Jinya had accounted for this possibility, however. The fact that Yonabari had used a grip gun in a prior encounter and wore an overcoat even though it was summer made him expect around three or four hidden weapons at the very least. He was already prepared by the time Yonabari had drawn the second gun. In his left hand was his metal scabbard. He swung from below, scooping upward, using it like a club. He aimed for the gun held in Yonabari's left hand and struck the base of the grip to send it flying.

Or at least, that was the plan.

Though he struck at full force, Yonabari's grip didn't give; their arm only budged. That wasn't Jinya's intent, but it was enough of an opening. He took a big step forward with his right leg as he drew back the metal scabbard, then used *Dart*. Moving at an inhuman speed, he let all his momentum flow into a thrust with his blade. He meant to take Yonabari's life with this strike, here and now.

There was no hesitation in his blade, no holding back or showing mercy. Nothing that would dull its edge. His sword thrust at Yonabari's throat like a flash of lightning.

"Whoa, whoa." There was a lack of tension in Yonabari's voice, and their movements were sharp. They swung their arms forward and let the counterforce push them back. Their decision to do so wasn't instinct or reflex. They clearly saw Jinya's *Dart*-empowered thrust and chose to dodge that way.

Jinya's thrust missed Yonabari's throat, but they'd lacked the leeway to attack him back. After swiftly righting themselves, Yonabari leapt back.

Jinya tried to step forward again, but Yonabari fired at his feet and stopped him from making a follow-up attack. Yonabari wasn't just nimble but alert as well.

"Phew, close one. Let me know before you go for the kill like that, would ya?" After putting some distance between them, Yonabari breathed a sigh of relief.

By no means was Jinya weak. He had lived for a hundred years, built up his body, polished his techniques, and awakened to an ability of his own. He was strong enough to defeat half-baked demons

without breaking a sweat. There was no doubt in his mind that his strike would have killed Yonabari if they'd stayed the same since the last time they met. And yet, Yonabari avoided his killing blow without moving until it had already begun. The physical ability and reaction speed needed to pull that off had to be tremendous. There was also the way they closed the distance earlier to consider as well. As aggravating as it was to admit, Yonabari was better than Jinya when it came to raw physical ability.

"You've gotten quite a bit stronger," Jinya said.

"Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I? Did you think you were the only one who could show up with new strength at the eleventh hour? It's not like you have a monopoly on getting stronger or anything."

Their movements, strength, reflexes—all of it was nothing like before. In the short span of a year, Yonabari had become unbelievably strong, and that made Jinya feel strange.

He looked hard at Yonabari, sizing them up. Unlike Magatsume, who solely relied on her monstrous abilities, Yonabari's martial arts and firearm usage were well polished.

But Jinya had strengths as well. He had experience fighting countless demons, well-honed sword skills, and a number of demon abilities that were impossible for an ordinary demon to match. None of these things were in any way inferior to Yonabari's skills. To put it bluntly, Yonabari still lacked what it took to defeat Jinya in a fair fight.

Yonabari themselves should have known that, though. That was why something felt off. They were shrewd. Even if they were stronger now, they had to know this was still a hopeless fight for them. Were

they just careless and showed up without knowing their respective strengths?

Impossible, Jinya immediately concluded. If they were so foolish, he would have ended this fight already. Which left one possibility: Yonabari had *something* that could turn the tides for them here. Jinya had no proof; all of this was just empty guesswork. But his whole body screamed that Yonabari was dangerous.

"You know, that's your problem, Demon Eater. You—hey, wait!"

They tried to say something, but it didn't matter.

Oneness—Dart, *Jishibari*. Combining his abilities, Jinya made four chains rush forth at tremendous speed. He would end this quickly, before Yonabari could drag things out. The chains clanked as they zigzagged forward like lethal snakes, nearing their target.

"Jeez. You know it's rude to interrupt when someone's talking?" None of the chains reached Yonabari, who looked down on him with a mocking smile.

To show discomposure was the same as displaying weakness. That was why Jinya made a conscious effort to keep his expression flat, even in the middle of combat. But he was simply too startled here to not go wide-eyed. He wasn't surprised because his attack was fended off but because of something else.

"…I see. I guess you wouldn't need the demonic blade anymore if you can do that." Jinya understood at a glance. He didn't know how they managed it, but there was no denying what his eyes saw.

"Oh? That's weird. I thought you'd be a little more surprised."

His insides felt like they would boil over in fury, but he kept the wrath of his younger self behind a blank face and directed a blade of honed malice at Yonabari. “I am surprised…and equally furious.”

“You mean it? I guess it was worth all the trouble, then.” Yonabari let Jinya’s malice slide right off like a spring breeze. A dark miasma rose around them. It was nothing like what Eizen had made. This was denser, tangible like it was a part of Yonabari’s body. Using it, they had crushed the approaching chains.

Jinya had heard from Izuchi that Yonabari was a haniwari, a term that referred to people with both male and female genitalia, as well as ones whose gender couldn’t be categorized because they lacked clear male-female characteristics. The first gods of Japan were the hitorigami, gods that were neither male nor female but both at the same time. This departure from traditional gender was part of what made them holy. By extension, haniwari were seen as mystical for their similarly ambiguous gender and were believed to be the perfect mediums for the divine gods to possess. This was all to say that a haniwari would surely make a more appropriate vessel than the *Kodoku no Kago*.

“Oh, right. I forgot to thank you,” Yonabari began as Jinya gritted his teeth. They returned him a beaming smile and said in a boundlessly joyful tone, “Thanks, Jinta-kun. Your mother was a real treat.”

That black miasma was originally the ability of the demon sealed away in the demonic blade. In other words, the spirit of Yokaze now rested in Yonabari.

4

THERE WAS A HIDDEN SIDE to the tale left unspoken. The shrine maiden with demon blood went mad and attacked her people, and the guardian of the village appeared in the fiend's way. Nothing was remembered but the all-too-common tale of a hero, while the hearts of two unrewarded, misunderstood people went unseen.

"...In the end, a demon is no more than a demon. Even my heart that once loved you has become defiled. My eyes see nothing but hideousness no matter where I look."

Though there was no wind, the candlelight flickered as the two faced one another in the red-lacquered shrine. The silence weighed heavy, and the shrine had none of the peace it should have possessed.

The floorboards creaked. Or was it the sound of something straining between the two of them?

"I will pray for Kadono no more. My only wish is to see the people of this village burned to ashes. I'm sure they'd love nothing more than a fiery death, having worshipped a goddess of fire."

Yokaze stared with vacant eyes, seemingly having given up on everything. She *had* given up on everything. She could not return to being the shrine maiden, nor could she remain Motoharu's wife. She forsook all her happiness for the sake of her hatred. She was a demon, and a demon could not deny their chosen way of life. A

demon lived and died for their wish, and that was exactly what she desired to do.

"Are you just going to let hatred consume you, Kaede? You loved Kadono more than anyone. I know you did."

Motoharu pleaded to know why she was doing this, but he knew his question was meaningless. From the very start, the moment he was wed to her, he knew it might end this way.

"Don't make me repeat myself." Her answer wouldn't change. ***"Look at us. I have become a wicked demon, and you are a man sworn to protect the village. No questioning or pleading will change what must be done... That was the deal, Motoharu."***

Indeed. On the off chance the Itsukihime became a threat to the village, it was the shrine maiden guardian who would have to kill the Woman of Fire.

Yokaze wished for nothing other than the death of all who lived in the village, including Shirayuki, Jinta, and Suzune—and even Motoharu himself. Hence, it was Motoharu's duty, as shrine maiden guardian, as father, as husband, to put a stop to her.

"...Why?" Motoharu's voice trembled and became faint. He stood there with his head down, unable to even draw the sword by his side. *"Why didn't you say something, anything? Why didn't you ask for help? Why didn't you tell me you didn't want to be alone? If only you'd said something sooner..."*

He would've killed countless people for her sake if she wished it. He would've laid waste to everything they saw if it meant they could

be together.

But no. Yokaze herself didn't wish for that.

She had come to loathe all that she once loved and turned into something twisted and hideous, and so she wanted someone to put an end to her. If at all possible, she wanted the one to finish her to be the one she once loved.

"Ah, I knew it. I was wrong to pick you as my shrine maiden guardian."

Motoharu lamented. He knew how she felt, yet he still wanted to take her side. It was because he was such a man that a lump remained in her chest.

Yokaze's only regret was selecting Motoharu. She chose him because he was the strongest swordsman in the village, but he lacked respect and regarded her, the Itsukihime, impiously. Though she was not one to show her emotions much, Yokaze often butted heads with him. They had more fights than one could count, but he never stopped being true to himself. Eventually, her hard exterior broke, and he found a side of her she had never shown anyone else. They had surely known happiness back then.

"All right, Kaede… I'll do it…"

But all things come to an end.

She couldn't even reply. She stared coldly at him, and he went dead silent.

He knew it had to be this way. Slaying her if she became a demon was the vow he made as shrine maiden guardian and the

promise he made to Yokaze. If he truly loved her, then he had no choice but to kill her.

Oh gods, please grant me my wish. So she silently prayed as he trembled with his head cast down. She could no longer pray for Kadono anymore. This wish was for Motoharu alone.

Motoharu was probably too kind a soul to want to kill her. Her hatred toward the village wouldn't fade, but she did not want to make her husband suffer. So she prayed—*turn me into a hideous beast to lessen the burden on his heart.*

She wished to become a monster that killed without a second thought, a fiend that could only be described as a calamity, hated by all. Only then could her loved one fulfill his duty without sadness. He wouldn't need to lament the death of a monster, nor shed tears at the sight of its corpse, and he could go about his life even after she was gone. *May your remaining days be full of happiness.*

The shrine maiden's sincere wish was fulfilled. After all, the body was but a container for the heart, and the shape a heart took was decided by the emotions. If one's emotions were unwavering, their body would take the appropriate form. That was what it meant to be a demon. Of course, Yokaze's ability played a role as well.

And so, we reached the final scene of the tale.

A demon suddenly attacked the shrine of the Itsukihime and devoured its inhabitant, Yokaze. To prevent further damage, the village guardian Motoharu confronted the demon.

It was said that he traded his life to protect his son and daughter and seal away the massive demon.

The couple loved one another but could not remain as they were. After an all-too-common tragedy and battle, just this tale was left behind. Those who heard it only took note of the demon-sealing sword, and the emotions of two people who once existed were left forgotten, not even remembered in the story.

***

The ancient tale of demon hunters was forgotten with time, but Yokaze's ability manifested once more in the modern world.

"Spirit invocation… I never thought I'd see the ability of ancient oracles used in the Taisho era," Jinya said.

Yonabari wasn't using a demon ability like *Assimilation* to manifest Yokaze's ability. Instead, it was made possible by a haniwari's unique aptitude for being a vessel. In the old days, oracles would receive the word of the gods, curb pestilence, and end calamities by calling down the spirits of divine beings or wicked demons to possess their body. This was an art lost to modernization, an ability once utilized by mystics who could connect with the spirits of the world around them.

"Not bad. I see your age isn't for nothing, Jinta-san. I didn't think you'd know about it."

Yonabari calling him "Jinta" must have meant at least some of Yokaze's memories were passed on to them. Jinya stiffened a bit. It

rubbed him the wrong way for a demon as superficial as Yonabari to possess the ability and memories of the foster mother he so respected.

"I'm the shrine maiden of Mizuchi," Yonabari said nonchalantly. "Calling down spirits and drawing out their power is child's play for me. I'm even better at it than Ryuuna-chan, and she was molded for it."

Jinya was angry. Of course, he didn't know the full story of what happened to his foster parents. He knew nothing of why Yokaze became a demon, or of how Motoharu felt when he had to seal her away. Only the gods could know everything. But he still recalled that rainy night when Motoharu had extended a hand out to him and his sister. He and Yokaze both had given them a new home.

Yonabari was casting mud on their memory, and that alone was reason enough for Jinya to be angry.

He glared, making no effort to hide his malice. Hatred, an emotion he had only felt toward Magatsume for the longest time, boiled inside him.

"I don't get it."

But he wouldn't give in to anger and make a foolish move. Or rather, he couldn't afford to. His opponent was superior in physical ability and possessed the black miasma Eizen had controlled. The difference in their fighting power was clear.

"Hm? Get what?"

Yonabari was unpleasant, but they were also strong. They might even be on the level of Okada Kiichi or Magatsume, two opponents who had brought Jinya to his knees before.

Still, fleeing wasn't an option. Yonabari would still be after Ryuuna even if he did run, and someone so cunning wouldn't let him get away easily anyhow. The only way through this was to defeat them.

"All of this. Consuming Yokaze-san, targeting Ryuuna, openly appearing in front of me like this. I don't believe for a second that you genuinely want to make Ryuuna your bride. I haven't a clue what you're after." Jinya lowered his weight slightly, taking up a stance with his sword ready at his side. He paid full attention to every tiny movement Yonabari made and adjusted the distance between them as he questioned them. Everything they'd done—from taking Motoharu's blade and Yokaze's spirit to saying they wanted to wed Ryuuna—seemed to be meant to provoke Jinya. It was as though they had something personal against him.

"What I'm after, huh? Wait, don't tell me you think I'm doing this because I have a grudge against you or something? Ah ha ha, oh come on. Not everything is about you, Demon Eater. Conceited much?" Yonabari denied his suspicions while keeping their superficial tone. "I don't like messy things like revenge. It's really all a coincidence that things ended up like this." But it was that precise tone that made their next words shock him. "But I guess I *did* think it would be fun."

Their callously indifferent tone made Jinya's thoughts grind to a halt. They really didn't care if things ended up this way or not, and that realization only angered him even more.

"I had a bone to pick with the Taisho era and needed the strength to work against it. Everything else was for pleasure, I guess. Messing with people is kinda like a hobby of mine. It's nothing personal, I swear."

The strength sought by Yonabari just so happened to come from Jinya's foster mother, who just so happened to be sealed away by his foster father; Jinya just so happened to become enemies with Eizen, whom Yonabari just so happened to join up with; and Ryuuna just so happened to come under Jinya's care while Yonabari was already after her. It was a series of coincidences. Jinya was no more than an afterthought who wound up being a good source of amusement.

"…I don't understand."

"Is it really that complicated? I've got nothing against you. You just looked fun to bother. And you were!"

That was all there was to it. They trampled over Motoharu's memory and consumed Yokaze's spirit, then came to show off their new power just so they could taunt Jinya. There was no reason or meaning to be found. They did it for the hell of it.

"Ah ha ha, there we go. That's the face I was after. *Finally* you show how pissed off you really are." Yonabari laughed joyfully.

A murky emotion rose inside of Jinya. He had no idea what kind of face he was making at that moment. "You wanted the demonic

sword to do something so ridiculous?”

“There’s nothing ridiculous about it. Making every day as fun as possible just makes sense. It’s much more wholesome than living for revenge, at least. You gotta live life looking forward, not all hung up on the past.” They giggled with kind eyes, but their lips were curled in a sneer. They were taunting him, saying their way of living was superior to his meaningless revenge.

Everything about them infuriated him.

There was no denying Yonabari had ill intentions for Jinya, but there was no cause for it. No reason. Their wickedness was like a capricious child choosing to scribble graffiti on a wall.

Defiling Motoharu and Yokaze’s memory was nothing more than a prank to them.

“I see. How very logical.”

Jinya had reached his limit. He hadn’t felt this worked up in ages. Though it was different from the hatred he felt for Magatsume, an intense loathing surfaced in him. His whole being screamed for him to kill Yonabari.

“But I don’t like it. I’ll kill you here to make sure you never say nonsense like that again.”

He stooped low and dashed forward all at once. He ran close to the earth at a speed most people couldn’t react to. He abandoned all caution in favor of haste, a clear murderous intent visible in his eyes. It was nothing more than the reckless charge of someone who had given in to his emotions.

"You really haven't changed, Jinta…" Yonabari had Yokaze's knowledge. Jinya had only talked to her a few times, but Motoharu must have told her what an impulsive boy he was. With a grin mocking his foolishness, Yonabari aimed a gun his way. A low crack sounded, and Jinya's forehead was pierced by a bullet. But it traveled straight through him, and then his figure vanished like a mirage.

The days when Jinya let anger control him were long gone. He'd used *Invisibility* and *Falsehood* at the same time to hide himself and attack with an illusion. His illusion couldn't cause harm, but having it catch his opponent off guard was enough. Jinya took advantage of the opening to wrap around Yonabari and fire off a massive slash with *Superhuman Strength* and *Flying Blade*.

Though they seemed unguarded from behind, the lethal strike didn't land. The black miasma moved like a whip and knocked away the incoming slash.

Jinya's attack failed to even graze Yonabari, but they still turned around with an irritated expression.

"I can't believe you fell for that. You're surprisingly simple-minded, Yonabari."

"Hey, using illusions and attacking from behind is playing dirty! Aren't we demons supposed to be honest creatures?"

"This isn't some honor-bound duel. I'll play dirty if I have to. A little shame is nothing if it means I can kill you." This time Jinya was the one to show Yonabari a scornful grin, and he took the chance to quietly instruct Ryuuna. "Ryuuna, get away from here. I'll be with you soon once I take care of this *thing*."

"Mm." After returning a nod, Ryuuna ran off without hesitation, not even looking back. She understood why he needed her gone. Yonabari wasn't someone he could fight while protecting her. She aimed for Koyomiza, where Izuchi should be.

"…Now you've said it." Yonabari showed anger for the first time, apparently not taking kindly to being called a thing. Without giving chase to Ryuuna, they attacked Jinya. Using their mix of martial arts and guns in close combat, as well as the black miasma, they were intent on finishing him off.

But that was just as Jinya wanted it. He fixed his focus on his enemy and put everything he had into his blade.

Inside, he was relieved. Ryuuna was a smart girl. She surely knew that she should run to Koyomiza. That was where half of his relief came from. The other half came from seeing Yonabari was only targeting him.

Though he might have talked big, Yonabari was definitely still stronger. If they ran, he wouldn't be able to give chase; and if they targeted Ryuuna, he wouldn't be able to protect her. Having Yonabari's focus on him alone made this easy.

He'd been able to irritate them with the earlier exchange and leave an impression that he could do the unexpected. That impression should pay dividends later. He was still certainly at a disadvantage, but he was off to as good of a start as he could ask for.

He would have to be clever to overcome the gap in strength between him and Yonabari. His plan was to take them by surprise, break their composure, and leave them with no time to think. Though

it was a shameful way to fight, this battle would come down to how much he could trip Yonabari up.

"Damn it…" Yonabari clicked their tongue. Their battle of sword and bullets proved to be a grueling back-and-forth between offense and defense.

Who could say how long their exchange lasted? They both teetered on the line between life and death for over ten moves, but Jinya still showed no signs of stopping.

He activated *Dart* as he stepped in, using *Superhuman Strength* only for the instant he swung. He pressed the attack without stopping to breathe, using multiple abilities with *Oneness* together with martial arts. *Jishibari* and *Dog Spirits* put on further pressure as he swung with Yarai and used *Blood Blade* to attack even more.

But even with all that, they were evenly matched. He'd revealed most of his hand already but hadn't managed to outmaneuver Yonabari once. He knew it would be a tough fight, but not this tough. A hint of restlessness started taking root in him.

"Ah, jeez! Cut it out already!"

A plume of gunpowder smoke rose as bullets whizzed by. Yonabari seemed to feel similarly flustered. They had overwhelming power now with Yokaze's spirit and likely believed they could make quick work of any demon, but Jinya was tenacious. Finally, they recognized him as a proper threat. Their fake smile had disappeared at some point.

"C'mon, quit struggling and go down already!"

"I could ask you to do the same."

Though they bantered, they did not stop fighting.

A single landed bullet or strike of black miasma would be fatal. Jinya had to dodge wider than usual, and that made it harder to close the distance. The precision of his movements also got looser as a result, leaving more openings.

Yonabari grasped this with the eyes of a hawk. They kicked, aiming for the very instant when Jinya was briefly off balance.

"Ngh!" He managed to block with his left arm, but he heard the bone creak.

They were evenly matched and both growing restless, but there was a difference there. Jinya's restlessness came from his inability to gain a slight edge, while Yonabari's came from the fight not being overwhelmingly in their favor like they expected. They felt the same thing, but there was a nuanced difference.

"I can't do it. You're just too strong."

That was why Yonabari moved back a distance the first chance they got. If they couldn't win in a direct confrontation, they would have to find another way. The flexibility Jinya himself lacked revealed another option to them.

Though they had been equally matched, that was only while Yonabari was so flustered. If they could calm down again, then Jinya would lose any chance he had. He couldn't let this brief window go. He mentally steeled himself to take a hit in return and prepared to close the distance in one go with *Dart*.

"Sorry, everyone. But I need your help!"

Multiple gunshots followed by screams stopped Jinya in his tracks. "What…?"

Yonabari went back to acting like a stage performer, firing off several shots with exaggerated motions.

Jinya was taken aback for a moment. He would've reacted normally if the attacks had been aimed at him, but…

"Ahhhgh!"

"Eek!"

"H-help me…"

But Yonabari wasn't targeting him; he was shooting the people around them who had just started to calm down after the earthquake. One by one the number of corpses climbed: a man who tried to help those too slow to escape the collapsing buildings, a woman watching the fight from a distance, a child clinging to the corpse of a parent, an old man who couldn't even stand. Yonabari didn't care who they were; the bullets pierced them all without bias.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Jinya pulled himself together and used *Dart* to close the distance and slash.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm shooting everyone. I'd rather not kill people if I can help it, but you left me no choice. You're too strong. In a way, it's kinda your fault."

Jinya slashed diagonally across, horizontally, vertically up and back, thrust at the heart. All his movements were sharp with little

waste, but Yonabari dodged every strike by a paper-thin margin, laughing all the while.

A chill immediately ran up Jinya's spine. There was no logic behind the feeling, only instinct. A sense of foreboding filled his chest, and he stopped his attack and leapt backward like a spring.

"Weaver."

His feeling hadn't been wrong, but retreating turned out to be meaningless. He only moved a few steps back before coming to an abrupt stop. For a moment, he didn't understand what had happened. But he quickly identified the feeling against his skin—*hands*.

He looked down at his body and saw he was coiled by jet-black hands. He had no time to stop and think what this all was. He was bound, and Yonabari wouldn't let that opportunity slip. The miasma surrounding them turned into innumerable whips and attacked him from all directions.

Jinya clicked his tongue. He could block bullets with *Indomitable*, but he'd learned from his fight against Eizen that its effect was poor against the black miasma. He instead summoned his *Dog Spirits*, but there were too many whips coming to block them all.

Blood sprayed through the air as the whips cracked and lacerated his flesh. A sharp rush of pain shot through him.

But it didn't end there. Just when he thought the whips had faded to mist, they gathered and solidified into one clump, dense like iron. It lunged at his abdomen in what was meant to be a finishing blow. He couldn't let it connect.

Oneness—Jishibari, *Indomitable*. Jinya wove his chains together to make a shield and used *Dart* to dash to the side while he was still restrained. The chains shattered mercilessly, but Jinya made it. The dense miasma aimed at his gut only grazed his flank.

"Gagh…!" He groaned painfully. Though it was only a graze, an intense, searing pain spread through his body. The wound bled where he was scraped, but it was fine so long as he could still move.

He gritted his teeth and looked at Yonabari, only to go wide-eyed at the spectacle he saw. Black miasma rose again, but this time it wasn't coming from Yonabari; it was from the corpses of the people killed moments earlier.

"Wow. I'm surprised you dodged that one," Yonabari said with an impressed look. Their praise seemed genuine.

Of course, Jinya didn't care about their approval. The only thought on his mind was of the ability they were using. His mind raced to try and figure it out.

"You seem curious. Oh, maybe you didn't know what your own mother's ability was?"

Weaver. Was that Yokaze's ability? Jinya had only seen her as a demon when Motoharu fought and sealed her. He knew that massive demon had been Yokaze, but he didn't know what ability she possessed.

Taking Jinya's silence as an answer, Yonabari nodded their head repeatedly. "Oh, I see, I see… Then let me be the one to tell you!

Though you weren't related by blood, you have a right to know as her son."

Revealing how one's own ability worked to an enemy was practically suicide, and yet Yonabari seemed happy to do just that; their voice was almost singsonging, even.

"This ability is called *Weaver*. It's a bit hard to say what it does in just a few words, but I guess it gathers emotions and changes their shape? Basically, it takes wishes and makes them something physical. It gives shape to the shapeless. Manifests prayers. It's a power befitting a shrine maiden that prays to the gods, except *Weaver* can only grant wishes in a negative way."

The power to give shape to emotions. Though it had a nice, wholesome ring to it, its true nature was anything but, as evidenced by the black miasma Eizen and Yonabari controlled. The miasma was raw, gathered emotion.

Not all emotions were pleasant. Remorse, malice, jealousy, and hatred were all emotions too. The *Weaver* ability took the emotions of its user and others and crafted them into something real.

Eizen likely used the emotions of the people he consumed. For Yonabari, it was the ones they'd murdered just now. The lingering regrets of people slain before their time were gathered and woven into a weapon. That was the identity of the black miasma.

"But I'm surprised. You saw it for yourself and still didn't get it?"

"…Saw what?"

"Your mother, of course. Don't you remember how hideous she got when she attacked your village?"

The demon that attacked the village walked on all fours like a beast but was still larger than Motoharu. It had no skin and spewed saliva from its mouth, looking everywhere with its bulging red eyes. Though he didn't know it at the time, that monstrous thing was once his foster mother.

But if he'd really thought about it, he would have realized something was off about that. Tsuchiura and Naotsugu—and even Jinya himself—were humans who had become demons, but none of them looked anything like Yokaze had. Would she, having already had demon blood in her veins, turn out like that through natural means?

The doubt rose to his mind and was nonchalantly answered by Yonabari. "That was the power of *Weaver* as well. She prayed hard for herself to become a monster, one that wouldn't hesitate to kill, a calamity that would bring harm just by existing. And her wish came true."

Yokaze wanted to become that monster? She made a wish to harm others?

Impossible.

Everything about Yonabari pissed him off. His thoughts became heated, but he forced himself to stay calm. "Don't be a fool. Yokaze-san would never even think of such a thing."

"But she really did become a monster and attack the village. What more evidence do you need?"

There was nothing Jinya could say against that. Yonabari possessed Yokaze's memories. They knew her better than he ever did. Maybe—just maybe—they might be right.

"Buuut it doesn't really matter either way whether you believe me or not." Yonabari showed little interest in the matter and changed the topic cheerfully. "Something I said seems to have gone over your head, though, so I'll point it out again for you. This ability can make monsters out of the right people."

Jinya didn't need to ask what they were getting at. He'd had an inkling all along what they were leading up to.

"And by 'right people,' I mean ones who have lived as vessels, like a shrine maiden or a haniwari… Or maybe even a girl who's been altered to be made into a calamity."

Jinya's thoughts froze over when he heard those words.

"Say, d'ya think Ryuuna-chan will turn out the same way?"

What had only been a foreboding feeling became reality. His suspicion hadn't been wrong. Immediately, he knew exactly what Yonabari was getting at.

"You wouldn't dare!" Jinya shouted.

Yonabari laughed, as though responding to that reaction itself. "Ha ha. I'm not dumb enough to reveal my own ability for nothing. That face right there was what I was after."

What Yonabari said about wanting a life partner hadn't been in jest at all. Their objective had likely been the same this whole time. They served Eizen in hopes of eventually taking the Yatonomori

Kaneomi blade and gaining the ability of Yokaze sealed inside. They were after Ryuuna now so they could use *Weaver* to change her into a monster. That was why they hadn't harmed her up until now.

Yonabari was trying to *make* their better half, a life partner with whom they could bring ruin to the world of man.

"Welp, I'd better be off. Ryuuna-chan shouldn't be too far away yet," they said nonchalantly.

As if Jinya would just let them leave. He tried to step forward, but the same jet-black hands stopped him. There were more of them now, and they grabbed him by the ankles, completely locking him in place. They weren't just hands anymore either. More black miasma gathered and formed the upper bodies of people. They grasped at him wordlessly, making him think of hellish ghosts of the dead. No, perhaps these *were* ghosts of the dead, shaped from the lingering regrets of murder victims to drag the still-living down with them.

"Get off me!"

"Ah ha ha ha. There'll be some more appearing soon. I made sure to kill lots and lots to keep you busy. Meanwhile, I get to go make a move on Ryuuna-chan."

He couldn't shake them off. No matter how much he swung, more and more sprung up. Yonabari watched as they left, enjoying the sight of Jinya's pathetic struggle.

He swung, struck, and tossed off as many of the ghosts clinging to him as he could. He even tried to use *Dart* to get away, but there were too many of them.

Yonabari had revealed how their ability worked purely for their amusement. Jinya knew everything they were about to do, but he was helpless to stop them. It was just as they wanted it. Only despair awaited Jinya. With panic setting in, he struggled even harder to shake off the ghosts, but eventually Yonabari was completely out of sight.

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Not a trace of its former glory could be seen.

Ryuuna raced as fast as she could down the ruined streets of Tokyo. She wasn't fleeing. Running was simply the best thing she could do now to avoid getting in Jinya's way. There was no doubt in her mind that he would defeat Yonabari.

Her breath was ragged, and her pace gradually slowed out of exhaustion. Eventually she came to a full stop.

"Haah…"

Her lungs inhaled air. Her surroundings were nothing but rubble, and endless sobbing could be heard on all sides.

It was a terrible sight. Things came apart so terribly easily. Was this sadness she felt, or loneliness? Unable to put her emotions into words, she hung her head. Still, she had to keep running.

Her breath steadied. She stepped forward, about to break into a trot again, when a firm hand grabbed her shoulder.

She could think of only one person who would stop her here. He had caught up with her. With a smile on her face, she turned around.

"Heya, Ryuuna-chan. Looks like we meet again."

She saw the grin awaiting her and let out a shriek of terror.

The story of the demonic blade had long since ended.

Time weathered all things. None remained who knew what the guardian and the shrine maiden once felt. Old stories became no more than clichéd tales, and the once beautiful emotions of a couple…gave rise to a new monster.

A Girl Called Ryuuna —
Part Three
1

THIS IS THE STORY of a girl.

There was nothing particularly special about her birth. Her parents were commoners, and neither of their households had been particularly poor or wealthy. The two had simply come of age and had an arranged marriage. They never grew madly in love, but they proved to be compatible. Their marriage wasn't intense like the fireworks of summer but instead comforting and warm like hot tea in winter. Though they rarely said it outright, they undoubtedly held affection for one another.

Time passed in peace as they lived a normal life, and at some point they had a daughter. The biggest of their worries then was what to name her. They lived ordinary, happy lives, and that was enough for them.

"Hm. I suppose that one will do for a base."

But on a whim, they were chosen. Or perhaps the one who chose them had been jealous to see a family living happily in the new era. Nagumo Eizen murdered the parents and took the daughter for himself.

Not knowing the name her parents had lovingly chosen for her, he instead gave her a name of his own, calling her Ryuuna. "Ryuu" had the double meaning of "cesspool" and "to concentrate energy." Her new purpose was set. She would house a wicked spirit and

become a man-made demon god, then birth the demons that would bring ruin to the Taisho world.

Her womb was altered before she was even old enough to be aware of the world around her. All that remained was to wait for her to grow. She was raised no better than cattle, kept underground and given food periodically. Every now and then her body would be changed further to suit Eizen's needs.

She did not think of herself as unfortunate. She had nothing to compare her circumstances against. Having never known happiness, she could not recognize the injustice of her life.

Discomfort. Pain. Hunger. She felt these things, but to her they were ordinary. Her whole world was the underground cell, and the thought of escaping to another life never even occurred to her.

"Heya, Ryuuna-chan. How've you been?"

Occasionally a demon called Yonabari would come by. They were a strange one, coming without a purpose and leaving without doing a thing.

Ryuuna didn't particularly care about them, but they always visited during the day, meaning the slightest bit of light seeped in when the door connecting to the outside opened. It was a light different from the candles, more radiant somehow. Ryuuna would wonder to herself where that light came from.

That small curiosity became something of a yearning. She started to imagine what the world outside her cell might be like. For

only the briefest of moments every day, she would think of the outside world.

She was still trapped in her cell, but something small had changed. After coming to know the radiance of the outside, she realized just how dark her cell was.

Who could say how much time passed after that? Her faint yearning for the outside was forgotten with time. She was a caged bird. She would live without ever leaving her container and die without purpose. But she was not afraid. She lacked enough attachment to life to be afraid of death. She simply spent her life waking up, then waiting until she was tired enough to sleep again. Her occasional suffering only served to break the monotony slightly. She knew no happiness, but she knew no unhappiness either. She simply lived, and nothing more.

At some point, she learned she was going to become a monster that would bring ruin to the world of man, but not even that was of any interest. Even if she became a monster, she would only continue to drift through life. She could not see how anything might change for her.

She was empty. She lacked both a past and a future and didn't even have a will to act on. Her only purpose was as the vessel Eizen wanted her to be.

"Choose. You can die here, or you can come with me."

That was why she was neither happy nor surprised when a man appeared and suddenly thrust a choice onto her—she was confused.

She had no experience with making a choice. Only very few visited her underground cell, and that was to either feed her or alter her body. Having someone extend a hand to her like this was a first.

"It's settled, then. Let's go."

And yet, she had taken his hand before she knew it. She did not know why. No part of her cared to leave her cell. If there was any reason at all why she did what she did, it must have been because she simply wanted to know what his hand felt like.

It was rough and so strangely warm.

After being brought to the outside world, she learned of many wonderful things. The vast sky above and dazzling sunbeams. The beauty of flowers and the thing called a smile. Sweet candy, cold water, soft bedding. Holding hands and soft head pats. There were more wonderful things than she could count. The outside world proved to be full of happiness.

But every now and then she would stop and turn around, and right there behind her would be the Ryuuna from the dark cell, watching. Of course it was just her imagination, but the past Ryuuna's gaze would be full of jealousy and loathing.

When she realized her past self was watching, Ryuuna would grow scared of many things. The blueness of the sky above was dazzling, but it made the darkness of starless nights all the more unnerving. Flowers held such beauty, but the sight of their petals scattering felt lonely. Without a proper bed, she would never have learned how cold the floor was, and she would never have feared

letting go of someone's hand if she had never held anyone's in the first place.

She would think to herself that perhaps she would've been better off having never left her dark cell, but it was too late now. She had discovered so much and no longer wished to return. She liked the way things were now.

So she made a wish: *Please, let these days continue.* She did not think the gods would hear her, so she directed her prayer to the small warmth that lingered in her hands.

"Heya, Ryuuna-chan. Looks like we meet again."

But her wish didn't come true.

A black substance poured out from Yonabari, and Ryuuna's time as a human came to an end.

Welcome back. Her past self finally caught up to her, and its cold hands dragged her back into the darkness.

No. Perhaps she never truly left. It had all been a dream. The happiness she felt was all her imagination, and so was being saved by someone. A monster couldn't hope to live with people. From the very start, she had been fated to become a calamity that would bring ruin to the world of man… But then why did she feel like crying?

Ryuuna's heart was trapped in her dark cell once more. But despite the pain, part of her felt at home.

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The ghosts born from black miasma grasped mindlessly at the living. Though Jinya pitied these manifestations of lingering regrets,

he had no time to mourn them.

"Move it!"

With a slash, one vanished into mist like it had never been there to begin with. Jinya felt nothing in particular. Without even stopping to breathe, he swung madly. He didn't bother to count as his kills vanished one by one, until finally an end was in sight.

This would be it. He slashed the final ghost but remained alert. After making sure there were no more left around him, he bolted forward without delay.

He'd lost a lot of time. Yonabari had likely already reached Ryuuna by now and…

Anxiety flared in his chest. He was often too slow when it mattered. That had been the case with Shirayuki and Natsu, and Nomari as well. No matter how frantically he ran, he arrived too late so often.

Stop. Don't think. He shoved aside the thoughts and focused only on what was ahead. Though he slipped in the mud made by the rain, he got up and kept running. Not even the buildings ruined by the earthquake entered his sight anymore. The only thing on his mind was reaching Ryuuna. He tried to keep his restless heart in check, but his apprehension bled through and urged him to go faster.

The scenery around him blurred, and the crying and screaming around him grew distant.

He saw a figure ahead and came to a stop. Standing in the middle of the fissured road was Ryuuna.

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"Damn… They got hit pretty rough over here."

The earthquake damage was relatively light in Shibuya. Koyomiza still stood despite the cracks in its building, and the road was fissured but serviceable.

But the devastation only got worse as Izuchi made his way toward Kojimachi. The dazzling imperial capital of Tokyo had become a city of rubble. The land in many places had caved in from underneath, and the air was mixed with dust and made Izuchi cough.

"W-we need to find Jiiya and Ryuuna!"

"Wait, Kimiko-san. We should stay put in an emergency like this."

Though shaken by the earthquake, Kimiko was more worried about Jinya and Ryuuna than herself. She seemed almost ready to bolt off in search of them, but Yoshihiko managed to stop her.

"Izuchi-san, this area seems more or less fine. Could you go meet up with Jiiya-san and Ryuuna-chan for us?"

"…Are you sure?"

"Please. I fear the worst… Make sure Ryuuna-chan is safe for me."

At Yoshihiko's request, Izuchi left and made his way to the Hydrangea Mansion, where Jinya and Ryuuna were coming from. He hesitated to leave Koyomiza in this situation, but Yonabari weighed on

his mind—and apparently Yoshihiko's as well. Yoshihiko didn't say it outright, but Izuchi picked up on what he implied. The two of them both knew Yonabari's character well. This earthquake was quite likely no *natural* disaster. That was why Yoshihiko went out of his way to stop Kimiko and ask Izuchi to find Jinya and Ryuuna on his own. He suspected that Yonabari would take this chance to act and Ryuuna was in greater danger than Kimiko.

"Heh. Yoshihiko-senpai's thick when it comes to romance, but he's surprisingly sharp otherwise."

Yoshihiko had also been the only one who noticed Yonabari's surprise attack on Kimiko back during the raid on Eizen's second home. Izuchi had to hand it to him—Yoshihiko had a better set of brains than his own dull self. The fact that Jinya had been glued to Ryuuna's side lately probably served as a clue as well.

Izuchi wove through the ruined streets at a light trot. He scanned his surroundings as he went along, eventually spotting a familiar face ahead.

"Oh, Ryuuna-chan. Good, you're all right. And alone? Where's the Demon Eater at?"

She was alone in the middle of the street for some reason. Thinking that was strange, Izuchi called out. Nothing seemed amiss, though. She just stood there without saying a word.

"Hello…? What's up? You hurt or somethin'?"

She still didn't respond. Getting worried, he studied her expression.

"Ryuuna!"

Izuchi heard Jinya shout out.

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By the time Jinya reached Ryuuna, Izuchi was already with her. He was afraid Yonabari would have caught up to her by now, so his shoulders slackened with relief when he saw that wasn't the case.

"Thank goodness. You kept her safe?"

"Oh, Demon Eater. No, I just got here. More importantly, there's somethin' wrong with the girl."

Jinya looked over and saw Ryuuna standing stock-still in the middle of the road with her head down. She had to have heard them, but she didn't react in the slightest. It was like she was caught in a daze.

A sense of foreboding flared in Jinya, but his worry for Ryuuna won out.

"What's wrong?" He didn't see Yonabari around them. Staying wary, he approached Ryuuna and reached out. She didn't seem hurt, and she wasn't particularly pale. She simply wasn't reacting in any way. Just what could have happened?

The moment before his extended hand could touch Ryuuna, he grabbed Izuchi by the collar and hastily leaped backward.

"Gagh, hey! What the hell was that for?!" Izuchi angrily shouted, having been choked by his collar.

Jinya paid no attention to him and kept his eyes on Ryuuna.

"Don't ignore me! I said what the hell was that for?!"

"We can talk later. Get ready."

"Huh? What are you…?" Izuchi's voice trailed off.

Jinya wished he could say his body moved instinctively, but the truth was far plainer. He felt death. As though he would expire where he stood if he had retreated a moment too late. The air of death exuding from Ryuuna was so dense that it made Jinya retreat out of reflex, and he had been right to do so.

"…What kinda sick joke is this?" Izuchi murmured.

With her long black hair and shapely face, most people would agree Ryuuna was beautiful. Jinya was far from unbiased, but even he thought she looked fair. All of that beauty warped away now.

Ryuuna's flesh and bones began to morph. Her body creaked and groaned as it became larger, her muscles swelling abnormally and her flesh turning an ashy white. Not a shadow of her former self could be seen.

She, who had always looked up at Jinya with upturned eyes, now stood taller than him. Even as she stood on all fours, he had to crane his neck up to see her.

Ah… His mind halted for a moment. Even with the piles of rubble and the callously strewn corpses, the scene before him was familiar—nostalgic, even. Saliva spewed from the beast's mouth as its bulging red eyes looked around, perhaps in search of prey.

Was this fate? The monster in front of Jinya bore a great resemblance to the demon that once attacked Kadono—in other

words, to Yokaze.

“Oooh, groaaaaaaaaaaagh…!”

She let out a roar. A shout, or perhaps a cry. It was low and heavy, shaking the air.

Jinya wanted to believe it had been a wail because he knew what she had been. She said little but was pure of heart. Though it was a slow process, she was learning how to open up. Their meeting had been nothing special. She was simply a pawn he had taken away from Nagumo Eizen during their conflict. But the two had grown close enough that he genuinely wanted to protect her now.

“Ryuuna…” In disbelief, he called out her name. Someone he wanted to protect had turned into a hideous fiend.

Her very aura alone was overwhelming. His skin prickled from the pressure she exuded. Ryuuna was now a spirit that could stand equal to the strongest of demons he had faced in the past. If he left her be, many would die.

“That’s…Ryuuna-chan, right? Why…?” Izuchi couldn’t evenfinish his words. His mind struggled to grasp what he had seen.

“Things have gone just as Yonabari planned.”

“This is what they were after? What the hell… After all they said about not wanting to kill? How is this not crueler?” Izuchi glared furiously at Ryuuna. His anger was not directed at her but at someone who wasn’t there. Someone he had once fought side by side with had made this monster, and that made him seethe. He clenched his teeth out of pure rage.

"Ryuuna! Can you hear me? Do you…still understand me?" Jinya desperately pleaded. The monster's eyes focused on him. He thought for a moment that a bit of her might have remained, but that hope was quickly dashed.

Her eyes were empty, devoid of emotion. There was no malice. No ill will. No hostility. There wasn't even any interest. He was simply there when nothing should be. Showing the indifference with which one would brush aside litter or squash a fly, she attacked Jinya.

His addled mind sprung to life all at once. He immediately chose to move away from Izuchi's side, believing this fight would be too much for him.

Ryuuna leapt forward with a speed unthinkable for her massive form and closed the distance between her and Jinya. It was too late for him to retreat. Instead, he sidestepped what he could of her charge, but her claws grazed his chest.

He felt a searing pain, and fresh blood danced in the air a moment later. But Ryuuna didn't stop there. Moving on four limbs, she followed Jinya's retreat and swung her claws again.

He thought about dodging once more but decided against it. This was no ordinary opponent. He didn't know what Ryuuna might be capable of, and trying to narrowly dodge could backfire. For now, he had to observe. Using *Dart*, he leapt to the side and opened a good deal of distance.

Ryuuna effortlessly kept pace with him and slammed her left arm down on Jinya.

"Gh…?!" Jinya's decision hadn't been a bad one. Ryuuna's movements were simply far beyond what he'd anticipated.

He had expected she would be strong. He knew she was among the highest rung of spirits, and from what he had already seen, he understood she excelled at fighting. He did not loosen his guard for an instant, and yet she still overshadowed his expectations. The gap between them was a vast rift.

"Ngh…"

Jinya lay flat on the ground, pressed down from above. She had enough raw strength to indent him into the earth. Not even *Dart* had been enough to shake her off. In terms of raw physical ability and strength, Ryuuna outdid not just Yonabari but even Magatsume.

This exchange alone made it clear that Jinya had no chance of winning in an honest fight. Though the process was different, she had become the demon-birthing temptress that would bring ruin to the Taisho world. The *Kodoku no Kago* was complete.

"Ngh, gaaah!"

Jinya had activated *Indomitable* in just barely enough time to live. Using *Superhuman Strength*, he lifted Ryuuna's arm up and tossed it aside.

The bug she thought she'd squashed was alive, but she lacked even the self-awareness to be surprised. Only reacting blindly to his movement, she swung her arm again.

"I thought I'd gotten a little stronger… How pathetic." Jinya grinned in self-deprecation.

Magatsume, Okada Kiichi, Yonabari. And now, Ryuuna.

He hadn't slacked in his training. He had crawled to hell and back many times up until now. And yet, he was being overpowered so easily. He felt frustrated that he was so weak. But this was not the first time he had been pushed into a corner. He wasn't so green as to go timid in the face of death.

He moved forward and let Ryuuna's attack brush past him. A follow-up attack came, but he maintained a measured distance and slipped under it. He heard the rush of the wind as the sharp claws gouged the air. Though the strikes didn't land, just being close made his spine chill. Even these haphazard swings of hers were deadly. All the more reason for him to move forward without fear.

With her size, Ryuuna couldn't turn tightly. Furthermore, her massive muscles proved to be a blessing in disguise because they made the direction and timing of her attacks easy to predict. Jinya noticed this and stayed two or three moves ahead, devoting his whole being to evasion.

One misread would lead to an instant death. An observer might think he was handling this with ease, but in truth he was walking a narrow tightrope.

Perhaps irritated that her little pest was still scurrying around her, Ryuuna's movements got more intense and wild. Finally, his chance had come.

She let out a roar and raised an arm. Aiming for the instant her muscles flexed, Jinya used *Jishibari* and *Indomitable*. With his four chains, he took advantage of the opening to restrain all her limbs.

When Jinya combined *Indomitable* with other abilities using *Oneness*, he could not achieve the same robustness as he could when using it on himself. *Indomitable* was an ability manifested from a wish for an unbreakable body, so it made sense that using it for another purpose wouldn't produce the same effect. Hence, when he combined *Indomitable* with *Jishibari*, he couldn't make unbreakable chains, only sturdy ones. But though they fared poorly against Yonabari's black miasma, they were good enough to hold back raw strength alone. Not even Ryuuna could break them with ease. And in the brief window they provided, he could make his move.

"…Damn."

But *what* would his move be? Would he cut her down? Certainly not. Though she was different now, she was still Ryuuna. He could not turn his blade against her. He needed a way to stop her rampage, not slay her. He had chosen to protect her, and he wouldn't give up on that after one little hurdle.

"Oooooaagh!"

Indecision made Jinya stop in his tracks. Still restrained, Ryuuna gaped her mouth open. He didn't even have time to wonder what she was doing. What came out of her mouth wasn't a voice but a ray of pure darkness.

The air trembled. Jinya hadn't a clue what he was seeing, but his accumulated experience whispered to him that it was dangerous. Without delay, he dove to the side.

The dark ray struck past the place where he had stood, scorching and melting the earth black. White vapor, perhaps smoke,

rose from the spot.

She'd fired something strong enough to melt the ground away. Belatedly, Jinya realized what it was.

"…Just how many surprises do you have in store for me?"

It was a concentrated curse. Negative, life-cursing emotion so condensed that it could burn away physical material. If that landed, not even bone would remain. Jinya wasn't too inclined to test whether *Indomitable* would withstand it.

Ryuuna flailed and shook off the chains that were holding her. She was now free from her bindings, but for an instant she would remain unguarded.

However, more than anything else right now, Jinya needed time to think. He figured this was the best time to create some distance and tried to do just that, but Ryuuna proved faster. Her empty eyes followed him as she opened her mouth once more.

"Hraaah!"

Jinya heard a rough grunt, and then a large piece of rubble flew into view.

This time Ryuuna was the one to withdraw. The rubble wouldn't hurt her in the slightest if it hit her, but her reflexes were too sharp for her own good. She dodged out of the way as a knee-jerk reaction.

The one who threw the rubble was Izuchi, who had been biding his time and waiting for a chance. Thanks to him, Jinya managed to put good distance between himself and Ryuuna.

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"Sure, but don't expect much more. It sucks to say it, but I'm out of my league here. Damn it, where's that Okada bastard when you need him?" There was no vigor behind his disparaging words. Having lost his gatling gun, Izuchi was no more than an ordinary lesser demon. He didn't have either the physical strength or the technique to oppose Ryuuna, so throwing junk was the most support he could offer. He felt ashamed of his own weakness. Still, Jinya's gratitude was genuine.

Jinya turned his attention back to Ryuuna. Before she could make her next move, he summoned his *Dog Spirits* to surround her, then used *Jishibari* again to bind her limbs. She'd have to focus on the jumping black dogs for a while, which would buy them some more time.

"So, how's it look, Demon Eater? Can you kill her?" Izuchi delivered his question directly and without emotion. His question was twofold: Can your blade reach her, and do you have what it takes to kill someone you wished to protect?

He intentionally made his question as blunt as possible to avoid conflicting Jinya, but Jinya didn't waver. He answered the sudden question without hesitation.

"I cannot. I've already decided I would protect her."

Not expecting such a reply, Izuchi's face clouded. If they didn't slay Ryuuna here, further damage would spread across Tokyo. This was no time to play favorites. "I get how you feel, but we don't exactly have a choice in the matter."

"Trust me a little. I'm not without a plan." After much pondering, Jinya had come up with a single method. He couldn't know whether it would work or not until he tried it, though. But he had to try it.

"A good one?"

"That's not for me to say. I won't know if it'll work until I try it."

"You don't exactly make me confident…but I'll hear ya out anyway." Izuchi furrowed his brow, worried by Jinya's phrasing.

Jinya softly took a breath, then revealed his plan in one go. "I'll use my ability *Oneness* to combine *Assimilation*, *Spirit*, and *Furutsubaki*. *Assimilation* will let me connect to Ryuuna while *Spirit* and *Furutsubaki* control her, stopping her rampage."

Though Jinya normally used *Assimilation* to take the abilities of other demons, its true purpose was just what one would expect from its name: to assimilate. The demon of *Superhuman Strength* that had attacked Kadono used it to connect himself with others. *Spirit* was the ability to puppet flesh and *Furutsubaki* was the ability to control people with weak hearts. The three combined would, hopefully, let him control Ryuuna.

His goal was set, and all that remained was to carry it out. This would be all or nothing, but Jinya saw no issue with taking the gamble if it meant there was a chance of saving Ryuuna.

"Will that work?" Izuchi gave Jinya a look. Sadly, he couldn't reply with total confidence.

"Who knows?"

Izuchi groaned. "You can't be serious…"

"Sorry. I've never combined three abilities at once before, nor even tested *Furutsubaki*. But this plan isn't without merit. They didn't call Akitsu Somegorou a legendary spirit hunter for nothing."

Izuchi frowned, confused by the sudden mention of Akitsu Somegorou. He seemed completely divorced from what was going on now to Izuchi, but not to Jinya.

Spirit hunters had fallen to the wayside in the Taisho era. That was why Nagumo Eizen had tried to create his *Kodoku no Kago*, to make people need spirit hunters—specifically the Nagumo—once more. But there was a catch.

Akitsu Somegorou was known as a legendary and completely peerless spirit hunter. To put it plainly, he was stronger than the Nagumo were. If there was a spirit the Nagumo could slay, then it stood to reason that Somegorou should be able to slay it as well. By that logic, the *Kodoku no Kago* wouldn't be a spirit that only the Nagumo could defeat, and Eizen couldn't fulfill his plan to raise the Nagumo name above all other spirit hunters.

Which left only one possibility. The *Kodoku no Kago* had to be strong enough that nobody could defeat it, yet weak enough that the Nagumo could do so. It needed to be that sort of contradictory being.

That was why he needed Ryuuna. Jinya always found it strange that Eizen had kidnapped a child when he had also learned Magatsume's techniques from a daughter of Magatsume he'd captured. One would think he could simply have created a demon from nothing. But no, he'd chosen to prepare Ryuuna as a vessel, and now Jinya understood why.

"It's easy to beat an unbeatable opponent. You simply have them throw the match for you. That's what Furutsubaki was for."

The *Kodoku no Kago* wouldn't be a pure demon but a human who was corrupted into a demon. Its base was still that of a human. Eizen's loyal follower Furutsubaki had the ability to control humans, so it made sense that Eizen's plan must have been to control the human part of his *Kodoku no Kago*.

That being that case, *Kodoku no Kago's* strength level didn't matter. If Eizen could control it, he could arrange to slay it himself. Having control made it easy to direct its actions as well, and he was likely prepared to place the children she bore under his control too.

But there was no reason Jinya shouldn't be able to do the same thing. If what stood before him was really the *Kodoku no Kago*, then *Furutsubaki* should be able to control the part of it that was Ryuuna. Either way, he had no choice but to take his chances.

"I don't get it. What do you mean?"

"No time to explain, but I'll need your help."

"Erm, sure. You've lost me, but I'll do what I can if it'll help Ryuuna-chan."

The problem was that whenever Jinya devoured an ability from one of Magatsume's daughters, it degraded somehow. He planned to supplement it with *Assimilation* and *Spirit*, but he had no idea how well he could control Ryuuna with *Furutsubaki*. To make matters worse, he needed to directly touch his target to use both *Assimilation* and *Furutsubaki*, and he would be rendered completely defenseless

the moment he did so. Giving an opening to such a deadly opponent was risky.

Even if he did somehow succeed and she regained her senses here, that wouldn't change the fact that she was still a demon. She would have to live hidden among humans like Jinya, Izuchi, and Okada Kiichi did.

Jinya had many concerns. Failure was likely, and victory came with drawbacks of its own. But he would take the gamble anyway. He had come too far to give up now.

"I won't have the leeway to use any of my other abilities, so I'll need you to draw Ryuuna's attention. Just a little bit is fine. I only have to get close enough to touch her."

"Sounds pretty risky…but all right. I'll do it. Yoshihiko-senpai asked me to look out for Ryuuna-chan, anyway."

"Sorry."

"It's fine."

Izuchi took a deep breath, then slapped his cheeks to build his courage. Jinya quietly steadied his breathing and watched Ryuuna.

"Jiiya…"

He thought he heard her call out to him for a second. *All the more reason.* His days of lamenting his weakness were long behind him.

"I'm coming, just you wait." He shaped his shaky resolve with words to steel himself. He inhaled deep and filled his lungs with the

dusty air, then emptied hot breath in one go. No longer would he waver.

"Urrraah!" Izuchi was on the move by now. *Jishibari* and *Dog Spirits* had already faded away, so he leapt out into the open and used his one asset, his strength, to launch a massive piece of rubble at Ryuuna.

Of course, that could amount to no meaningful damage, but distracting her for even another second was just what he wanted. Now that her attention was on him, he focused purely on fleeing. He knew he looked pathetic, but this was no time to worry about appearances. He would fulfill his role no matter how laughable he seemed. This was do or die for him as well.

"Thank you." Quickly acknowledging Izuchi, Jinya rushed forth at Ryuuna from her blind spot. He needed to touch her head to take control of her quickly. If he dawdled, Izuchi would die. But if he used *Dart* or any other ability, the potency of his key abilities would drop, making this all for nothing.

Though he felt anxious, he forced himself to be patient. Ryuuna was still focused on Izuchi. Just a little farther and Jinya's hand would reach her. Putting force behind his last step, he leapt forward. But that was the moment a certain someone had been waiting for.

"Mm, I just knew you would, Demon Eater."

There were many different viewpoints on what made for the best strategy. Some preferred to let their opponents fight among themselves and win without dirtying their own hands. Others employed surprise attacks, ending encounters before their opponent

even knew it. Still others chose to minimize loss, finding greater gain through fleeing.

There was no clear answer as to which strategy was the best, and what suited one's needs changed from moment to moment. For Yonabari, in this moment, it was this.

"You're *wiiide* open when you charge forward like that."

The moment when a person committed themselves to something was the moment when they were most vulnerable. Yonabari had found the way to inflict maximum damage with the minimum possible effort.

Jinya had put all his soul into his last leap, desperately extending his hand out toward Ryuuna. He could not stop his momentum now. But if Yonabari succeeded in tripping him up here, there would be no second chances.

"Wha…?" Jinya's thoughts froze. Black miasma suddenly manifested before him and solidified into spears. They totaled six in number. Not many, but all of them approached from the front.

They were aimed for the moment he leapt, and he couldn't change his trajectory now. If he was hit, he would fail to reach Ryuuna. But dodging would be just as disastrous. He technically had the option of using *Dart* to kick off the air and dodge to the side…

"Grr, oooooogh!"

But Ryuuna had already noticed him. Even if he dodged the black spears, he would only be struck by a direct hit from her instead.

Slowly, she opened her maw. That curse attack was likely coming next. If he dodged the spears, he would be melted away by the curse instead. If he pulled away completely, then Yonabari would join the fight, and he would lose any hope of ever saving Ryuuna.

This was checkmate. There was no good move to be made. The situation was exactly what Yonabari had hoped for.

He was caught between a rock and a hard place. Damned one way or the other. But even in a predicament like this, his thoughts were terribly clear. Or perhaps the decision simply didn't even need thinking to be made.

Shirayuki had once called him a man who would continue living the same way he'd lived all this time. She was probably right. If he was doomed no matter what, then he would rather live true to himself until the end.

"…Dart."

He held back on using abilities to preserve *Oneness*'s strength, but what was the point of that if he couldn't even make progress? He used the ability a woman once manifested, created from a wish to be faster than anyone else, a wish to return home to her husband. Jinya thought he understood a little of how she felt now. His mind held nothing but thoughts of reaching Ryuuna as soon as he could.

Using *Dart*, he kicked off the air. But instead of dodging the approaching spears, he barreled straight into them instead.

"Ngh, gaah…!"

He almost lost consciousness from the pain. But in exchange for accepting the attack, he kept his momentum and stayed on the quickest path to Ryuuna.

With the added speed of *Dart*, he quickly closed in on her. His flesh was ripped into, and his guts felt like they would be torn out. But so long as he stayed conscious, he would reach her before her curse could reach him.

"Jiiiiiyaaaaa!"

A dark mass of pure curse gathered as she shouted. Perhaps that curse was her own grief, formed from her jealousy of those who'd been given an ordinary life.

Jinya summoned the last of his strength to reach out his arm.

He was showered in a great ray of curse in return. Swallowed by the wave, his mind faded.

2

THE FIRST THING JINYA FELT when he saw Ryuuna was pity. Not because her body had been altered so much, but because she was so empty. She lacked a will of her own. The only thing left to her was to fulfill her purpose and become the *Kodoku no Kago*. She resembled the way he had been when being a shrine maiden guardian was everything to him. But despite the similarity, they were not quite the same. They both lived to fulfill their purpose, but only he had chosen to do so willingly.

In the past, Jinya's duty meant everything to him. To stay by Shirayuki's side, he vowed to be her shrine maiden guardian. It was

an arduous path to take, but he had chosen it of his own volition. Not so with Ryuuna. She hadn't been given a say in any part of her life. Perhaps that was why Jinya had extended his hand to her before he even realized it.

Having lost so much throughout his life, Jinya saw Ryuuna's emptiness and felt sympathy for her. But that was precisely why he didn't take her away by force. There would be no point. Though her environment might change, she would still only be swept along and live the life another person had chosen. There would be no meaning if she didn't take that first step forward herself. His outreached hand was an offer for her to finally choose something on her own.

And choose she did. Though gingerly, she took his hand.

If she could choose for herself, then he would help her. He prayed she would find something precious to live for one day, as empty as she might have been then.

Jinya himself had received many precious things from many others. This time, he wanted to be the one to impart. He thought doing so might make all the losses he'd experienced less meaningless.

"Ah…"

Jinya's consciousness grew cloudy as he was enveloped by the ray of curse. His body was in pain, but the aching in his chest was even greater. He felt awful, likely because he was being showered with so much negative emotion. Memories he didn't want to recall were dredged forth by the curse.

He lost his birth father and was called a monster. His daughter forgot him, and he lost his home. His arrogance caused the sword

that called herself his wife to be destroyed.

What Ryuuna felt in the world outside her cell must have been something like this. She learned of many wonderful things, but they came with the fear of losing it all. She placed a lasting curse on her own heart. Though he could offer his hand, he could not pull her heart out of the darkness.

"No…of…course…not…" he muttered absently.

His motives had been impure. The one to whom he extended his hand wasn't Ryuuna but the part of himself he saw in her. He wanted to save his weak self, the one who couldn't protect a single thing. His motives were impure, and an impure heart couldn't save another.

But hearts changed. Though he may have chosen to do it for the wrong reasons, he had lived with Ryuuna for a while now. He'd seen her learn many things and slowly start to walk on her own, one step at a time. The world was tough and she was scared, but Ryuuna stayed strong and lived an earnest life. Jinya could not glimpse his past in her anymore. He came to see her for who she was. The curse coiling around him now was the fear that tormented her throughout her time in the world. If he couldn't overcome it, he had no right to save her.

Jinya directly faced the remnants of his past that surfaced and faded. He was left pained with every regret-filled memory that went by, but he forged ahead. With a pure heart, he reached out to touch her. The moment his palm made contact, the great wave of curse vanished like bubbles along the surface of water.

***

Ryuuna felt as though she had been dreaming for a long time. Dreaming of a girl locked in a cage and dreaming of a foolish man who tried to save a curse-spewing monster.

Through her hazy consciousness, she heard someone's soft voice and roused from her sleep. The first thing she saw was the sliver of blue between freshly parted clouds.

"…Hey, Ryuuna. Are you all right?"

Then she saw Jinya smiling down at her. He had wiped his blood, but his wounds hadn't healed and more redness seeped through. He sat cross-legged on the edge of the road with her head in his lap. He had saved her, but the look of relief on his face was so great that one might think he was the one who had been saved.

"Jiiya… I…"

Her whole body felt exhausted. She couldn't properly move, and it took all she had to even speak as she laid her head on him.

She recalled how he'd tried to save her. He had reached out to touch her heart directly, facing her straight on. The warmth she felt from where he had touched her brought joy, but it made her sad to see him so hurt. Neither crying nor smiling, she simply closed her eyes.

Trying to comfort her, he started running his fingers through her hair.

"I was so scared. I thought I'd lose something precious to me again. I'm pathetic, really. A coward through and through."

It felt strange to hear him admit so softly that he was scared. She could not smile back at him, though. Someone like her, who had secluded herself in darkness because she feared losing all the things she had gained, surely lacked the right.

"But I'm glad. I could finally reach out to you with an honest heart."

She felt his hand tighten on hers. Not wanting his feelings to go unrewarded, she reached out and placed her hand on his chest. She felt the beat of his heart, and it finally set in that he was right beside her.

"Jiiya… I'm sorry… But…thank…you."

She struggled, having little experience with apologizing and showing gratitude. Only a few modest words came through. Still, she had a feeling it was enough.

"You're very welcome. You must be tired, though. Go ahead and rest for now… I'll need you to help me with work again in the morning."

In his own terribly awkward way, he was saying he wanted her to stay with him. Overjoyed, Ryuuna closed her eyes.

No longer did her past self linger behind her. Enveloped in warmth, she suspected she would have a nice dream this time and peacefully let herself drift off to sleep.

***

"Hmph. Booooring." Yonabari puffed out their cheeks as they watched everything unfold from a distance. They had wanted to make

Ryuuna their partner. Not in the romantic sense, of course, but as someone with whom they could wreak havoc on the Taisho world. The Demon Eater just had to ruin their fun.

Yonabari hadn't thought he would actually manage it. They'd been looking forward to seeing his look of defeat and humiliation. A shame, but oh well. More importantly, he was too tired to fight back right now. Yonabari could take his life as easily as trampling weeds. Only a fool like Izuchi insisted on fair fights. This opportunity was too good to pass on. Ready to end things, Yonabari stepped forward.

"What an utterly impure man, as mired in excess as ever."

But a demon blocked their way. He wore hakama pants and a men's kimono, as well as tabi socks with zori straw sandals. At his hip was a metal scabbard containing a long tachi blade. It was a murderer from an era past, looking like he'd stepped out of a history book. On his face was a ghastly grin, and he reeked of blood.

With a wispy, eerie laugh, he said, "Keh, keh keh. But so assuredly seeing through one's impurity is pure in its own way. He reminds me of cloudy, unrefined liquor, bearing a unique flavor of his own."

His gaze focused on Yonabari. His left hand was already on his scabbard.

"Yikes, the scary one's arrived. Any chance you're here for someone else?" Yonabari asked.

The sound of a blade popping from its scabbard was Okada Kiichi's only reply. He drew it and confidently began walking forward.

He switched from talking to fighting so readily that Yonabari couldn't help but be a little taken aback.

"What, we're fighting? Just like that?"

"What is there to discuss? The thoughts of lowlifes are readily apparent. I have no attachment to that girl there, but it would be a disgrace to let an interloper defile such a pure conclusion."

In other words, Kiichi had shown up knowing that Yonabari would make a move. But what threat could he pose? Yonabari had the spirit of Yokaze with them. They had no reason to fear any demon. Far from it, the only thing they felt regarding Kiichi was annoyance.

Thinking this really just wasn't their day, Yonabari forced a yawn.

"…Huh?"

Or at least, that had been the idea. But before their yawn could come out, the distance between them shrunk.

Kiichi's physical capabilities were by no means great. He didn't measure up to Yonabari, or even Jinya for that matter, and yet he somehow moved faster than Yonabari's empowered reflexes could register. This was simply due to the fluidity of his movements. The stability of his core, his pacing, the very slight shifting of his center of gravity—every aspect of his movement was polished to perfection and made him look faster than he actually was. It was enough to make one shiver.

"And so I shall stop you here."

Before Yonabari knew it, Kiichi was in striking range. He was slower than they were, but he managed to close the distance by traveling with all wasted movement stripped from his approach.

Kiichi's naked blade swung to kill at Yonabari's neck. But make no mistake: Though Kiichi might have had swiftness granted through technique, Yonabari was still quite capable of dodging even if they moved after the strike was made.

They drew two pistols and pulled the triggers as they sidestepped and dodged the blade by a paper-thin margin. Not even Jinya was able to dodge bullets. The best he could manage was predicting the trajectory and moving away beforehand. There was nothing Kiichi could do here, since he was even slower than Jinya. The bullets should have pierced right into his forehead.

…But instead, they skewed right past him.

Yonabari saw the whole thing. Kiichi didn't dodge or block the bullets. Instead, he observed them clearly at close range and brought his sword up to their sides just enough. He *parried* the bullets.

Yonabari didn't even have time to register disbelief. Kiichi swung his sword diagonally across without a moment's delay—but the attack immediately changed to a thrust at their throat.

Yonabari had reacted to the initial slash, so their response to the thrust was too slow. They still had *Weaver*, though. There was no need to dodge when they could simply knock the strike aside.

They fired another shot and changed the rising black miasma around them into whips which they aimed at Kiichi.

"Gah?!"

But even that was too slow. The thrust had been nothing more than a decoy. Kiichi wasn't even in the spot where Yonabari struck. While their focus had been on the blade, he used his scabbard to attack from their blind spot.

Using *Weaver* itself was a blunder. Forming whips at a close distance obscured Yonabari's vision ever so slightly, creating an opening for Kiichi to strike their chin.

Kiichi wasn't unscathed, however. Not even he could block the black miasma. He had dodged many of the countless whips, but a number still landed and broke his skin.

But he had been ready for that degree of damage. He took advantage of Yonabari's brain being rattled from his blow and immediately sliced off their right arm.

"Argh! You little…"

Who the hell was this man? He was weak. Ordinary demons had more strength than him, and yet he looked down on and ran circles around Yonabari with ease.

Yonabari raised the pistol in their remaining left hand, but Kiichi dodged out of the trajectory. Then Yonabari took the opportunity to activate *Weaver*, and the miasma around them buzzed to life as numerous black spears formed. But before they could be fired, Kiichi closed in almost near enough to touch.

At this range, Yonabari would be caught in their own attack. If they tried to use their pistol, Kiichi's scabbard would strike their arm

and knock the gun away.

Out of desperation, Yonabari kicked, keeping the windup short. There would still be enough force to shatter Kiichi's skull anyway.

Not even that amounted to anything. Kiichi put the slightest bit of distance between them, then swung using just his elbow.

"You have strength but lack the mental fortitude to use it. A duel is no time for discomposure, greenhorn."

Yonabari felt a rush of pain. Kiichi had aimed for the tendon of their heel. They thought he had cut the tendon for a moment, but in truth he had only struck with the back of his blade. Clearly, he could very well have cut their leg if he wanted to do so.

Some slight distance opened up between the two, and Yonabari couldn't let the chance slip. They brought black miasma before themselves as though to fill the emptied space, kneading the condensed negative emotion together like a clump of iron.

The all-out attack was intended to completely crush Kiichi's feeble body, but it only struck air. Kiichi had dodged backward with ease, which would've been impossible unless he'd *known* that attack was coming.

"Hmph. I suppose that should be enough." Sounding bored, Kiichi sheathed his sword.

That rubbed Yonabari the wrong way. It seemed like he meant to say they weren't even worth killing.

Still holding a forced smile, Yonabari clenched their teeth and asked, "…What's the meaning of this?"

“My purpose was only to stop you here. A murderer I may be, but I still have good sense. Just as it is impure to spare that which should be killed, it is also impure to take another man’s kill.”

Renouncing all interest in Yonabari, Kiichi turned his back.

Realizing they were being completely looked down on, Yonabari grew enraged and lifted their gun, but froze when they felt a wave of bloodlust.

“The duty of killing you does not fall upon me. Isn’t that so, O Yasha?”

The noise of his footsteps sounded terribly loud in the moment. Jinya approached sluggishly, step by step, unashamedly baring his malice.

***

The moment Jinya laid eyes on Yonabari, the stony look that he usually tried to maintain crumbled. His face was still masklike and expressionless, but his eyes alone were sharp and carried an intense, unhidden rage that made Yonabari take a step back.

“I’m in your debt once again,” Jinya said to Kiichi.

“Nonsense. This took no effort at all. Treat me to a drink sometime and we can call it even.”

“I’ll treat you to as much as you like after I take care of this.”

Without looking back, Kiichi left.

Jinya’s focus was on Yonabari alone. Rage was turning his skin to gooseflesh. The hatred welling up inside him wasn’t the natural

kind he sometimes felt as a demon but one that sprang from emotion alone.

"Demon Eater…" Yonabari muttered.

Kiichi had set the stage nicely for Jinya. Yonabari was missing an arm and had lost a good deal of stamina from blood loss. It would be difficult for them to flee in their current state. They couldn't even hide the fact that they felt pressured. Their forced smile was stiff.

"Now then… How about I repay you for earlier?" As Jinya stepped forward, his body made a gruesome creaking sound. He planned to hold nothing back. His skin turned a dark shade that looked like black rust, and his left arm abnormally swelled as he assumed an inhuman form.

He took this form not just because there were no witnesses watching but because he couldn't contain himself any longer. Yonabari had hurt both Yoshihiko and Ryuuna, and they'd even made Kimiko cry. The mere sight of them filled him with loathing, and he couldn't rest until he killed them with his own hands.

"Ah ha ha, somebody's angry. All that effort into keeping up your calm act is going to waste, y'know?" Even now, Yonabari's attitude didn't change, but Jinya was grateful for that. They gave him no reason to hold back, so he would have no problem killing them without a second thought.

"I've always been the hot-blooded type. As I've gotten older, I've learned to act more like my age, but bad habits die hard. My youthful temperament just won't straighten out."

"Uhh, meaning?"

"I can't rest until I smash in that pretty face of yours." His soft tone turned icy cold. Not willing to wait another moment, he dashed forward, running low to the ground.

Yonabari was on their last legs. They'd lost too much blood from losing their arm. Moving as they had in their earlier encounter would be impossible.

They lifted their pistol with their left hand while simultaneously forming black miasma. For the first time, they were taking the offense themselves. They were wary of what Jinya might pull off. But right now, he really was just foolhardily charging in without a plan.

Though he'd assumed his demon form and was acting fine, Jinya was in a poor state himself. To save Ryuuna, he'd allowed all of the miasma spears to strike him. He was covered in wounds, full of exhaustion and pain, and had lost considerable blood. The precision of his movements had dropped. A drawn-out battle would be disadvantageous, so he planned to end this in one go.

It just so happened that Yonabari thought to do the same.

The space between the two shrunk to striking distance, and Yonabari was the first to act. They simultaneously fired off their gun and the black spears created by *Weaver*, leaving Jinya with no room to dodge. He was assailed from all sides, the attack intent on taking his life.

His response was foolishly simple.

"Like I care."

"Aguh?!"

He swung his monstrous arm into Yonabari's face.

There was only so much he could do with his injuries, and so he chose neither to dodge nor to run. The plan was to take some hits from the start. He let the bullet and the spears strike him as he combined *Superhuman Strength* and *Dart* to swing forward.

"Ngh, gah…"

This was one of Jinya's strongest single attacks, but Yonabari still lived. His step-in had been shallow, and now he was paying the price for his recklessness. The bullet and the spears had dug into his flesh. The sheer pain made it hard for him to move.

He felt as though his consciousness would slip away if he lost focus for a moment. He had to finish things before it came to that.

He formed a large tachi blade from his blood using *Blood Blade* and hardened it with *Indomitable*. Wringing out the very last of his strength, he swung the crimson sword diagonally down. This would be his last strike. If it failed, there would be no second chance.

Yonabari had no second chance here as well. They watched carefully as the deathblow neared. Reaching out, they kneaded their black miasma, which solidified into a thick membrane and shielded them.

"I picked this trick up from you," they said, referring to how Jinya combined *Indomitable* with *Jishibari* to make a shield.

The black membrane blocked the slash. Not giving a damn, Jinya put even greater strength into his strike.

"Hraaaaaah!" he shouted as the blade finally won out and dug into the miasma. Barely, it reached Yonabari.

Jinya was at his limit. With a final effort, he used all of his weight to pull his blade out.

"Ngh, no way?!"

He heard the sickening sound of severing flesh and could feel through his hand that the hit was good. His limbs instantly went lax. His crimson blade shattered like glass and faded into mist, and his strained body crumbled onto the ground. Moving just his neck, he glared at Yonabari.

He'd cut flesh but hadn't reached bone. Though Yonabari was bleeding profusely, they used the last of their strength to flee.

"Get…back…here…"

"Yeah, right… I'm not interested in dying, so… See ya!"

Jinya had expended every last bit of strength he had and could no longer even lift a finger. Yonabari was heavily wounded as well, however. They'd lost an arm, half their face had been smashed, and a deep gash was left in their chest. It was strange that they were still alive at all. They made no attempt to finish off the immobilized Jinya and fled as fast as they could manage, a look of agony on their face.

Jinya couldn't give chase. He'd been one strike away from finishing things but hadn't managed to do it.

His breathing was ragged and he felt bitter, but his consciousness slowly slipped away until he eventually blacked out.

3

RYUUNA REMEMBERED LITTLE from her time as a monster. While she wreaked havoc in Tokyo, she was lost in a dream. A dream in which she awoke from her happy life in the outside world and found herself back in her dark underground cell.

"I'm coming, just you wait."

She thought she heard someone's voice. She saw the bloodied figure of a man, but her heart did not stir.

Her legs and arms were bound in chains. She could not escape, but she had no desire to escape anyway. The inside of her cell was less frightening than the world outside. There was pain sometimes, but time passed peacefully here. If she simply gave up on everything, then she could surely die as easily as falling asleep.

"…Truly?"

An unfamiliar woman suddenly appeared. She wore a dark-blue kimono and had her hair tied back. Ryuuna felt annoyed at the woman, barging in on her dream with such a nonchalant look on her face.

"Is this truly what you want?"

Ryuuna didn't recognize her, though her voice was faintly familiar. Her words didn't matter, though. Ryuuna would become a monster, be forsaken by those she knew, and end up all alone, so she should at least let her stay here. She didn't mind the darkness and monotony.

"To stay like this?"

But the woman wouldn’t stop. Her words cut like a blade.

“All alone, holed up in this cell, not knowing warmth and dying without meaning. Can you honestly say that is what you wish for?”

She laid bare everything Ryuuna tried to hide. The things Ryuuna feared had increased in number, but there was a man who was happy to hear of that very change in her. He believed that one day she would come to see the value even in the things she lost and live past it all.

But it was too late to return. She was the one who had given up, using her fear of losing her happiness as an excuse. How could she face them now? She could handle solitude but not rejection. Her heart was too fearful to face reality.

“It’s fine. There’s no need to overthink it. Just say what you want to say.” The woman smiled, telling Ryuuna she didn’t need to put on airs.

Though she tried to tell herself otherwise, Ryuuna knew she didn’t really feel at peace here. She was afraid of this dark cell and of fading away all alone. In a feeble voice that lacked willpower and conviction, she said, “I…I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

She cried, clinging to the things she had tried to discard.

The woman nodded, as if waiting for those words. *“I see. Thank goodness.”*

In a blink, Ryuuna’s chains disappeared. Confused, she looked at the woman and saw her give a satisfied smile.

"It's a wife's duty to support her husband's antics wherever she can."

Finally, Ryuuna recalled where she had heard the woman's voice before. His sword had called herself his wife, hadn't she? She tried to call out the woman's name, but she vanished before she could speak.

She was alone now, but she could see the exit through the dim darkness. The chains holding her back were gone. She was still afraid, but she could walk forward as she was. She put a hand on the door leading outside and took her first step.

She awakened, not as a monster but as Ryuuna. She didn't tell Jinya of the woman she met in her dream. She didn't understand what had happened too well herself. Plus, she didn't want to share that she had cried. But of course, the fact that she could feel embarrassed at all proved she had taken a step forward.

***

"I've brought your food, Jiiya. Eat as much as you can so you can get back on your feet, okay?"

Jinya lay in bed, covered all over in wounds so severe they were painful to look at. But he was a demon. Even such serious injuries wouldn't be fatal. He was far from well, however, and was still stuck recuperating in bed after three whole days.

They were in Koyomiza, in one of the spare rooms meant for the live-in employees. The effects of the Great Kanto Earthquake had been devastating. Koyomiza, located in Shibuya, was relatively well-off, but the Akase home suffered heavy damage. Not even repairs would be enough; the whole structure needed to be rebuilt.

Thankfully, Michitomo and Shino were safe, but they were staying at a hotel for the time being. Yoshihiko was kind enough to talk the theater manager into letting Jinya stay in one of their rooms.

Ryuuna and Kimiko were also borrowing a room at Koyomiza, mainly to help take care of Jinya. Needless to say, Michitomo threw a fit, but he eventually relented.

And so, Jinya was left in the care of the two girls.

It hurt to miss his opportunity to kill Yonabari, but Yonabari had still lost their arm. For the time being, they shouldn't be able to make any moves. That being the case, the best thing Jinya could do right now was focus on recuperation by letting the girls take care of him.

He refused their help at first, but the two didn't back down. Eventually, he gave in, accepting this as his punishment for making them worry.

"Thank you, Kimiko and Ryuuna."

"It's fine. We've always been in your care, so we're just paying back some of what we owe. Now, open wide."

"…That's a bit much. Please."

Kimiko tried to directly feed gruel to Jinya with a spoon, like one might do with a baby. He realized she would probably keep insisting no matter how much he refused.

After he finished eating, they changed his bandages and laid him on his back again.

He didn't spend all his time sleeping, though. Every now and then somebody would come by and check on his well-being—like

Izuchi, for example.

"Hey, Demon Eater. Seems like you're doing better."

Or Yoshihiko.

"Jiiya-san. Please don't hesitate to tell me if you need anything."

The other people of Koyomiza would show up as well. The theater manager—being a good friend of Somegorou—would come by to talk, since he was curious what kind of person Jinya was. The theater manager's second son, who handled live narration, seemed interested in Jinya as well and would drop in with tea and snacks to shower Jinya with questions.

Izuchi and Okada Kiichi tried to bring Jinya some liquor, saying there was no better remedy than a hearty drink, but Yoshihiko stopped and lectured them. The young man was surprisingly courageous, not hesitating to scold two demons—one of whom was even a murderer.

Several more days passed. Jinya's body had healed considerably, so he got up for the first time in a while.

His muscles felt stiff, but they didn't ache anymore. He should be able to manage going for a walk in his current state. He was stretching a bit in his room when Michitomo paid him a visit.

"Hey, Jinya. How you feeling?"

"Not bad, though I'm not quite sure I like being pampered by everyone so much."

"Ha ha. That's too bad. Being pampered is the best part of recovering."

Michitomo apologized for not bringing a get-well gift, then sat down on the tatami mat. He saw how unexpectedly well Jinya was doing and smiled.

"You really pushed yourself this time, huh?"

"Yeah. I cut things a bit closer than I'd have liked."

"But all's well that ends well. You protected Kimiko, saved Ryuuna-chan, and you're still alive yourself even though you got hurt. I'm sure we can mark this up as a roaring success."

Though Michitomo didn't say it directly, Jinya could read between the lines. What the man had told him long ago proved true: Jinya *could* protect others.

Jinya was grateful for the man's kindness, but he hesitated to fully accept it.

"Hm? What's up?" Michitomo asked.

"Nothing. It's just…Ryuuna."

"…Is something wrong with her?"

She became a spirit. Even though her rampage was stopped, she couldn't be considered human anymore. She would cease to age and come to outlive the people she knew…but the same was true for Jinya, Kiichi, and many others. That alone shouldn't be a problem. Even Ryuuna herself saw no issue with being the same as her beloved "Jiiya."

What bothered Jinya was a failure on his part. "I guess there's no point in trying to hide it. Back when Ryuuna was a demon, I tried to reach out to her."

"Right, I heard. You touched Ryuuna-chan and managed to stop her from rampaging, right?" Michitomo said. Izuchi had told everyone what happened after it was all over.

Jinya shook his head. "Not quite. I failed."

"Huh?"

"I reached out, but my hand failed to touch her."

Jinya had stretched his arm out as far as he could at that moment. He used *Dart* and took the shortest path to Ryuuna, accepting that he'd have to be hit by Yonabari's black spears. But the black spears had slowed him down just enough. He was swallowed up by Ryuuna's great curse and lost consciousness just short of reaching her.

"I got stopped when my hand was just a few inches away from her. All that was left was for me to be killed. And yet, somehow I still made contact. I don't understand how."

He was glad Ryuuna was saved, but he hadn't been the one who saved her. No matter how much he puzzled over it, he couldn't figure out who or what it had been.

Michitomo laughed for some reason. Not mockingly, but more like he had been told something funny. "Ha ha. Interesting. You say demons can't lie, but you're sure not being honest."

"Michitomo…?"

"I don't know what happened, but I can tell you've already got a theory or two yourself." Perhaps he read Jinya's expression, or

perhaps he'd just known him that long. Either way, Michitomo spoke with certainty.

Jinya groaned. He avoided voicing his theory not because he didn't believe in it, but because it sounded hopelessly optimistic. "I have no proof. Honestly, I'm grasping at straws here."

But he could think of no other explanation. Perhaps this was less of a theory and more of a wish of his.

"But I do possess the ability to move a body that cannot move on its own. Kaneomi might've given me that last push I needed to reach Ryuuna. Maybe… No, isn't it all a bit too convenient to be true?"

He wanted to believe it was her timely aid that saved Ryuuna, because then he would have proof that a part of her still existed within him.

"Not at all. You were in danger. I see no reason why she wouldn't show up to lend her husband a hand," Michitomo said. He didn't write off Jinya's theory, instead accepting it as a possibility.

"You think so…? Maybe." Jinya gazed down at his left arm and offered his "wife" his heartfelt gratitude.

Thank you, Kaneomi. You helped me protect someone dear to me.

"So *you're* that Yoshihiko-kun I've heard so much about, huh? Thanks for all you've done for Kimiko and Jinya. Please let me show you my gratitude sometime."

"O-oh, um, there's really no need for that."

"By the way, just what is your relationship with my daughter? Think carefully before you answer."

"H-huh?!"

After chatting for a while, Jinya and Michitomo stepped out to go for a walk. They ran into Yoshihiko and Kimiko cleaning together at the entrance of Koyomiza, at which time Michitomo childishly began bothering them. The sight of him harassing a much younger man was quite pathetic. Jinya found it hard to believe this could be the same dependable man he was talking to just moments ago.

"Sorry, Kimiko and Yoshihiko-kun. I'm going to go for a walk to stretch my legs. Michitomo, don't bother them too much."

"Ha ha, I know, Jinya. Oh, you should take Ryuuna with you. Just in case."

Yoshihiko looked to Jinya for help, but if he couldn't learn to overcome Michitomo by himself, marrying Kimiko would be a hopeless prospect. He was on his own.

"Would you like to come with me, Ryuuna?" Jinya asked.

"Mm." Ryuuna gave a firm, happy nod. Recent events seemed to have greatly changed her disposition. There was less tension in her shoulders, and she acted more like a child should.

Though the damage in Shibuya was light, the buildings still were cracked here and there, and the citizens of other wards had to take temporary shelter in Shibuya's parks. People ran this way and that for restoration efforts. Things were chaotic. But the fact that people had

already started rebuilding the very day after disaster struck was a testament to the human spirit.

"…Humans are tougher than you think, huh?"

The pet phrase of Jinya's friend, Akitsu Somegorou the Third, came to mind. He would always say things like that. Humans were not as long-lived as demons, but they were undying, and so on. Jinya looked out at the hustle and bustle of Shibuya and thought he was right. Tokyo would surely be back on its feet in no time. It might even flourish more than it ever had before.

"…Hm?" He glanced to his side and noticed Ryuuna looking cheerful, as though she could break out into song. She wasn't just happy to go for a walk but to be together with Jinya, and it showed in her every movement.

Ryuuna noticed his gaze and answered him with a quizzical look.

Jinya didn't avert his eyes. This was a good time to have a proper talk. He straightened his posture and said, "Ryuuna. I'm sorry."

"Jiiya?"

"I'm glad you're safe. But…I still failed to protect you."

Ryuuna was no different than a demon now. She wasn't immortal, but she would live a long life without aging. Time would pass differently for her in comparison to the humans she knew. Jinya was sorry such a fate had been forced upon her because of his blunder.

She shook her head. "I was never human to begin with, and now I can live as long as you. So, I'm happy. You protected me… You

took me out of that dark place."

He could tell what she said was genuine. Her words reached deep into his heart. Maybe he was the one who'd truly been saved.

"…Thank you, Ryuuna." He kept his reply concise, to make his gratitude as genuine as possible.

Ryuuna didn't understand why she was being thanked, but she blushed a little and smiled. "You know…"

Though it was only for a short time, the two had connected with *Assimilation* and seen one another's memories. She knew the secrets of his heart, and he knew hers. That meant she had no reason to hide anything from him.

"I was scared of that underground cell and didn't want to go back, but I was just as scared of the outside world and didn't want to leave. In a way, I never really left that dark place. But I'm not afraid anymore. If I could do it all over again, I'd want to return to that cell."

She trotted a few steps ahead, then looked up at the sky. Her figure looked so dainty and thin from behind, but he did not think she looked weak.

"You'd want to return…? I thought you hated that place."

"Not necessarily." She shook her head without looking back. Her tall, straight posture radiated a strength he had never seen in her before.

He couldn't see her face. Who could say what she saw reflected in the deep blue sky above?

"If I were reborn, I'd like to go back to that dark cell again and again, however many times." Her voice was soft, like she would just fade away into the sky. "Because I know you'll always come find me. No matter how many times I'm reborn, I want to become 'me.' I'd go back there however many times I need to and wait for you happily. Then with a smile, I'd say…'Take me with you.'"

She turned around and showed a gorgeous smile, like a flower in bloom. She was so radiant he had to squint.

"No matter how scared I might have to be, I still want to be with you."

This alone made everything worth it. Her smile was beautiful enough to make him believe he hadn't chosen the wrong path.

"I see…" Not knowing what else to say, he scratched his cheek.

Ryuuna giggled at his bashfulness. At the same time, they each reached out for the other's hands and continued walking. Occasionally he'd sneak a glance at her and find she was still grinning by his side.

This is the story of a girl.

A girl who lost her parents before she was old enough to understand the world around her. A girl who could never truly escape her dark cell. A girl who was denied the life of a human and turned into a spirit against her will.

If asked to describe this girl with whom fate toyed so much, Jinya would say: "She's a girl with a beautiful smile."

Her background was hardly important.

This is the story of a girl who overcame many things and learned to smile more brilliantly than anyone else. The story of a girl called Ryuuna.

Final Chapter:
The Story of a Small Neighborhood Theater

THE BROADCASTING CLUB at Hyogo Prefecture's Modori River High School was small. It only had three members: the club president and two first years. But since the school had better facilities than most in the area, even a small club like this could get a proper club room to go with its broadcasting room. The coffee machine and TV in the club room were not the school's, however, but a generous personal gift from the club president.

"Say…" Miyaka was spending her lunchtime in the broadcasting club room together with her close friends Azusaya Kaoru and Kadono Jinya. None of them were members of the club, but Kaoru said there was a show she really, *really* wanted to watch, so they went and convinced the club president to let them borrow the room. The one who actually did the asking was Jinya, though. He was a friend and classmate of the first-year broadcasting club members, and he was somewhat acquainted with the club president from an earlier occult-related case. In other words, he cashed in a few favors to grant Kaoru's whim. Miyaka again noticed how oddly soft Jinya was when it came to Kaoru.

Kaoru planted herself right in front of the TV while Jinya sat by her side expressionlessly.

Looking at Kaoru, Miyaka asked, "Couldn't you have just set your TV to automatically record this at home if you wanted to watch it so

bad?”

“Oh, I did. But no real fan would miss an opportunity to see something they love live.”

Miyaka couldn’t understand for the life of her what her friend was so excited about. Daytime show slots were only thirty minutes long, so they would make it back in time for fifth period, but it was still weird to watch TV at school. But then again, Miyaka *had* agreed to come along, so perhaps she was just as weird too.

Belatedly, she began to wonder just why she had agreed to come along in the first place. She was initially going to say no, but then Kaoru had to mention that “Jin-kun” was also coming along, which piqued her curiosity. Just what could be so interesting that even a demon older than a hundred wanted to catch it?

“I’ve been looking forward to this. The movie was so good!” Kaoru happily squealed. Since Jinya appeared much younger than he actually was, the two looked like siblings.

“Oh, right. Here, I bought us some drinks.”

“Yay! Thanks, Miyaka-chan.”

Miyaka felt kind of bad for coming along so half-heartedly, so she bought some drinks. Strawberry-flavored milk was Kaoru’s favorite. Seeing her accept her offering with a beaming smile made Miyaka feel all the more guilty.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” Jinya accepted his coffee-flavored milk without any fuss. Miyaka still found it strange that he had come. It felt eerie, even,

to see him sitting in front of a TV.

Kaoru wanted to watch this specific show because a male actor she was a fan of was the lead in it. This actor was one of those handsome, dreamy types, so it was highly unlikely Jinya was here for the same reason. Which meant he must have forced himself along because Kaoru wanted to do this.

"Jinya, you know you don't have to make yourself tag along with whatever Kaoru wants to do."

"I'm not. I've been wanting to watch this myself too."

Now Miyaka was even more confused. The show was supposed to just be covering the live location a movie was set in. Was he a fan of that movie? He *had* shown interest in that *Song of Summer Clouds* DVD before. Maybe he was secretly a movie lover?

"Shush, both of you," Kaoru said firmly.

The show was starting. Some music played and then the title appeared, after which the narration began.

"We're here today at Koyomiza Theater, the setting for the movie The Koyomiza Story*."*

For long vacations, you had travel and the outdoors.

If you wanted a quick break on the way home from school, there were karaoke and arcades.

For something stylish, there was going to a darts bar or playing billiards.

And at home, TV, video games, and the internet were always waiting.

There were more forms of leisure than one could count in the modern era. Long gone were the days when motion picture films were the king of entertainment. One didn't even need to go to the theater anymore, since movies were broadcast on TV only a few months later. No longer was film regarded as highly as it was in the past.

But films *did* still command a certain degree of respect. They may not be the king of entertainment any longer, but even now a plethora of movies were still released every year. And with so many movies covering so much ground, every now and then somebody had the novel idea to make a movie on some more obscure material.

In such a way, movies about things one would never expect to see were made. This was one such movie, telling a story only discovered by chance that would otherwise have gone unnoticed forever. The story of a small neighborhood theater.

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It was now year thirteen of the Taisho era (1924 AD), and the imperial capital was as restless as ever. A year had passed since the Great Kanto Earthquake, and the city had managed a full recovery.

Of course, small traces of the disaster could still be seen if one looked hard enough, but what had been a city of rubble only a year earlier was now back to its old self. If anything, things looked even better than before. The buildings were more modern, and the government had spearheaded an initiative to install sewage and gas

lines everywhere while also making facilities like schools out of reinforced concrete.

Jinya was no Somegorou, but he had to agree that humans were tenacious. Even after such an unprecedented disaster, they rose to their feet again and continued onward. They were weak individually, but as a group they were more durable than any demon. Jinya felt awed by the way the city around him continued to ceaselessly develop.

"The city's really shaped up, huh?" Kimiko walked by his side and joyfully looked at the new buildings. Ryuuna scanned their surroundings as well and nodded along in eager agreement. The three of them were headed for Shibuya.

In no time at all, they spotted a familiar building. The cracks in the wall had been fixed, making Koyomiza look as good as new.

"Ah, Kimiko-san! And Jiiya-san and Ryuuna-chan as well!" Yoshihiko, who was sweeping in front of the theater, called out and waved when he saw the three. Overjoyed, Kimiko smiled and trotted over to him.

"Hello, Yoshihiko-san. Thank you for inviting us today."

"And hello to you, Kimiko-san. Can you believe Koyomiza's finally fixed up?"

"Congratulations. Or would that be a little weird for me to say to you?"

"Ha ha, maybe. It's not like I did much of anything. Save the congratulations for the theater manager!"

Their closeness was clear just from the way they greeted one another. With a warm smile, Jinya and Ryuuna watched the two who were acting like a little more than mere friends.

"Thank you two for coming as well, Jiiya-san and Ryuuna-chan. I hope it wasn't too much trouble."

"Not at all. I'm honored to be invited. Ryuuna's been looking forward to this as well."

"…Mm." Ryuuna bowed gracefully.

To think she could act so ladylike. Yoshihiko hid his surprise with a light smile.

As mentioned, the three of them were here at Yoshihiko's invitation. Koyomiza had been forced to undergo repairs and renovations after the Great Kanto Earthquake, but they were finally done and could reopen for business starting the next day. To celebrate that, the theater manager suggested they hold a small lunch party. Since he knew Jinya and the others from the days when Jinya rented a room with them, the theater manager suggested Yoshihiko invite everyone over.

"Is the theater manager around?" Jinya asked.

"Oh, sorry. He stepped out for a bit. He should be back by lunch, though," Yoshihiko answered.

"I see. I'll leave this with you, then. Shino recommended these."

Jinya handed over a package containing a luxurious assortment of a baked Western treat called cookies, as well as some chocolates.

These were favorites of Shino's. It was a pricey gift, being a foreign import, but Jinya didn't mind splurging for the occasion.

Yoshihiko's face brightened at the sight of the rare foreign sweets. "This looks expensive. Is it really all right for you to give us this?"

"Of course. I owe the folks of Koyomiza a lot."

Jinya owed Yoshihiko in particular for many things. It went without saying that he owed the young man for helping protect Kimiko, but he'd also helped find him a place to stay after his battle with Yonabari left him terribly wounded. The cost of the gift was nothing in comparison.

"Oh, I see our guests have arrived. Thank you all for coming."

After they chatted for a bit, a man came out from Koyomiza and approached them. It was Tsuguji, the second son of the theater manager who handled the theater's live narration. He had brought tea and chatted with Jinya often back when the latter was staying at Koyomiza. He bowed respectfully when he saw Jinya.

"It's been a while, Tsuguji-san. Thank you for having us."

"Not at all, thank you for coming. How are your injuries?"

"I'm glad to say I've fully recovered. I owe you all greatly for letting me recuperate here."

"Nonsense, we just did what was right. Please, enjoy yourselves today. We've prepared a bit more than we usually might, since today is also a celebration for Yoshihiko."

Jinya looked over at Yoshihiko to see the young man scratching his cheek sheepishly. When asked what was going on, he proudly said, "Eheh heh, so…I've actually finished my training under Tsuguji-san."

"Oh? You mean…?"

"Yeah. I can do live narration work as well now."

Because films were silent in the Taisho era, live narrators could be considered the star of the show. The skill of a live narrator was said to make or break the enjoyment of a film. It was a terribly important role. Though he'd only been a ticket boy himself, Yoshihiko asked to be taught the ways of narration. Finally, he had earned the seal of approval from Tsuguji.

"Congratulations, Yoshihiko-san! Does that mean you'll be doing the narration from now on?" Kimiko asked. She seemed thrilled, as if the news affected her personally.

"No, no. There's no way they'd hand the reins to me just like that. I'll only be doing a little bit here and there."

"That's still amazing! I'll be there when you're up, for sure!"

Yoshihiko blushed at her praise.

Jinya felt happy for Yoshihiko as well. Watching the leaps and bounds at which the young man moved forward made his old spirit feel a little younger.

"Oh, Demon Eater. I see you brought the girls with you."

With noon approaching, more and more people gathered at the entrance. The members of the party would be the theater manager's

family, the employees of Koyomiza, and the three guests. With Izuchi now present, the only one left to arrive was the theater manager.

"That's quite the bottle you brought," Jinya remarked.

"I guess. You're gonna drink too, right? Gotta live it up for Yoshihiko-senpai's celebration."

"Of course. It'd be a waste not to."

Izuchi had arrived late with a massive liquor bottle in hand. Jinya made no comment on the fact that Izuchi planned to drink even though it was only noon, since he was a heavy drinker himself. Liquor was a welcome sight.

"It's a shame, though. I wanted to invite Okada-san and Himawari-chan over as well," Yoshihiko murmured.

One of Jinya's eyebrows shot up. Inviting a murderer and a daughter of Magatsume? Though Yoshihiko didn't know them all too well, wanting to do such a thing was quite daring of him. He knew Izuchi was a demon but still treated him like his junior too. The young man was quite open-minded.

"…It can't be helped. Himawari went back to her mother," Jinya said.

"Ah, I see. She wasn't from Tokyo to begin with, huh?"

Her alliance with Jinya had only been temporary. After all was said and done, Himawari left to return to Magatsume. He was the only one she notified as she departed; she didn't care to talk to anybody else. Her mother and Jinya were everything to her, and everyone else merely existed in the background.

"Farewell then, Uncle. Though our partnership was short, I enjoyed it. Give Yoshihiko-san and Kimiko-san my regards… Oh, and remind Ryuuna-chan for me that I'm *your real niece, not her."*

But she did leave those words behind. Perhaps she had changed slightly in her time here. Hopefully not, since that would only make things harder for Jinya. He did not know whether he could truly fight her when they next met.

Okada Kiichi would probably laugh and call him impure if he were here. To hide how he felt, Jinya smiled self-deprecatingly.

"And that Okada bastard's gone off to who knows where," Izuchi grumbled. "Doesn't he realize Yoshihiko's Demon Trio ain't complete without 'im?"

"Hm? What now?" Jinya asked.

"Yoshihiko's Demon Trio. Y'know, the group of three demons that serve Yoshihiko-senpai?"

Jinya was quite bewildered by Izuchi's words. The first of the three demons being counted was obviously Izuchi, and the second must have been Okada Kiichi. But who was the third?

"Izuchi, don't tell me you're counting *me* as a member of that group?" Jinya asked.

"Ha ha ha ha!" Instead of replying, Izuchi laughed. That was answer enough, of course.

Jinya sighed in exasperation, then felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned around to see Ryuuna pointing at herself with a broad smile.

"Quartet," she said.

"Quartet?" Izuchi parroted. "Ah, gotcha. You want in too? Then we're Yoshihiko's Demon Quartet!"

Izuchi roared with laughter, and Ryuuna happily balled her fists and raised them up. Jinya felt exhausted just listening to them.

"Oh my, Yoshihiko-san. You have Jiiya, Izuchi-san, Okada-san, and Ryuuna-san all under your command. You could destroy the entire capital if you wanted to," Kimiko teased.

"Oh, please…"

Jinya and Yoshihiko's gazes briefly met.

You've got it rough.

So do you.

Without saying a word, the two sympathized with one another.

Just then, the theater manager of Koyomiza returned.

"Seeing as my father's back, how about we all line up for one moment?" Tsuguji suggested.

Jinya was confused for a second, but then he noticed the theater manager had someone with him and understood. "A photo?"

"Yes. My father wanted to take one to remember the occasion."

A camera stand was already set up. It seemed the theater manager hired a photographer to take a commemorative photo of Koyomiza's reopening.

Cameras existed in Taisho-era Japan, but they were still at too high a price for ordinary households. It was common for people to commission photo studios to photograph events like this instead.

"The three of us should step aside, then."

"No, no. Please, join us. This is an occasion for us all. There's the fact that Kimiko-san might eventually become Yoshihiko's bride to consider as well. This'll make a good memory for everyone involved."

Jinya suggested he, Kimiko, and Ryuuna let the people of Koyomiza have their photo, but the theater manager stopped and urged him to join them. Though Jinya was a little hesitant to intrude on their moment, Yoshihiko and Izuchi spoke up as well.

"I see nothing wrong with it, Jiiya-san. You don't get a chance like this every day, so you might as well take it."

"What Yoshihiko-senpai said. Let's get this photo done with and drink already."

Smiling, they all urged him to join them. He looked at Kimiko and Ryuuna. Without saying a word, they nodded back at him.

"All right. What's the harm?"

With that matter settled, they all lined up in front of Koyomiza. The theater manager, his wife, and his sons were in the middle. Izuchi, the tallest, stood in the back. On his left were Yoshihiko and Kimiko, and on his right were Ryuuna and Jinya. With their positions set, a peaceful mood washed over everyone.

"All right, everyone ready?" They all froze for the photographer.

The snap of the camera's shutters marked a new beginning for Koyomiza.

Some watched the films and boasted of the strides Japan was taking. Others watched and had their hearts moved by tales of

romance. The silver screen was for a wide spectrum of experiences, and the people loved it. Theaters were places full of stories.

The story of a demon. Unable to protect anything, he lost all he had. Still, he insisted something had been left behind and fought for it. In the very end, he found something precious to hold on to.

The story of a girl. Unable to truly escape her dark cell, she gave up on everything. But after overcoming many misfortunes, she learned to smile more brilliantly than anyone else.

The story of a young man and a young woman. No matter the era, the young were always drawn to trends. The daughter of a baron snuck out of her home to visit a motion picture theater, where she happened to encounter a young man. The two grew close. They faced difficulties, but with the help of many others they managed to reach a happy conclusion.

It was all like something out of a motion picture film. However, their colorful stories drew to a temporary close here.

"It feels kind of strange to see myself like this," Jinya said.

"Mm." Ryuuna nodded. The two looked at one another and shared a wry smile.

After the photo was hung up inside, all that was left was the celebration. Even if their stories ended here, their days together would continue.

"Feeling embarrassed, Jiiya-san?" Yoshihiko asked.

"Come on, Jiiya. I'll pour you a drink," Kimiko offered.

And their days together would undoubtedly be lively.

Jinya narrowed his eyes wistfully. Men did not live as long as demons, and he would experience loss again someday. The peace he felt now could only be the blink of an eye in the grand scheme of things. His life would be a constant cycle of discovery and loss.

But right now, he wanted to treasure this moment. That way he could look back on the photo taken today and say with pride that he had been happy then.

Jinya spent the rest of the day drinking plenty and eating his fill. And with that, this Taisho story comes to a temporary close.

***

Jinya watched the TV in the broadcasting club room. *The Koyomiza Story* was just what it sounded like—a story about a theater that actually existed.

The story began in the Taisho era, back when motion picture films were the king of entertainment and all the rage in Tokyo. Koyomiza was a small-scale theater run by a family and a handful of employees, but it enjoyed success and the days went by dizzyingly fast. Even when the Showa era came, business continued to thrive. But then the Empire of Japan started losing in the Pacific War. Tokyo became a burnt wasteland, the theater manager lost his life, and Koyomiza could no longer be operated.

Standing up to take on the mantle was Toudou Yoshihiko, an employee at Koyomiza, and his wife Toudou Kimiko. Not wanting the Koyomiza they knew and loved to disappear, the couple set about rebuilding the theater. The wife, a former noble, went around asking for help while the husband worked to prepare all they would need to

build the new theater, everything from construction materials to new films. They received many backers who were moved by their efforts.

In the late twenties of the Showa era (1945–1954), while traces of the war could still be seen in Tokyo, a small movie theater was built. Its manager was Yoshihiko.

When asked what they would call the theater, he answered unhesitatingly: *"This is Koyomiza. The same Koyomiza that's been around since the Taisho era, unchanged."*

Naturally, their busy days continued from there.

The middle of the Showa era (1926–1989) was the height of the movie boom. After that, TV and video triggered a decline in the medium. Things reached a point where it seemed like they might have to temporarily close down the business, but Yoshihiko did not give up and worked hard to keep Koyomiza's spark alive.

There was a time when it looked like Koyomiza would be demolished as part of land readjustment. But even as everyone around him gave up, Yoshihiko kept on fighting. They had to scale back slightly, but Koyomiza survived and kept its doors open in Tokyo.

The movie made it clear that the main character was not Toudou Yoshihiko but Koyomiza itself. It was told from multiple perspectives, documenting the efforts many people put in to keep a small theater alive.

The movie was based on a novel whose author apparently visited Koyomiza and wrote it based on what the theater manager, Toudou Yoshihiko, had told him. The emotionally moving book earned a decent following, so a movie adaptation was made. It featured

famous actors one would expect to see in mainstream dramas, and it received glowing reviews. The movie was even popular enough for a variety show that specialized in visiting the settings of movies to get involved.

"Wooow, it's just like in the movie!" Kaoru exclaimed. She wasn't a particularly big movie fan, but she liked the actor who played Toudou Yoshihiko, went to see the movie's premiere, and had been hyped about it ever since.

The show on TV had Kukami Ryuusuke, the actor who played Toudou Yoshihiko, visiting the real Koyomiza theater together with a female talent. Every now and then scenes from the movie would play. The idea seemed to be to encourage fans of the movie to check out the actual Koyomiza theater.

"This desk here is where Yoshihiko worked as a ticket boy in his youth," the actor explained.

"Wow, no waaay." The female talent gave an overblown surprised reaction. It was terrible and obviously forced, but that was par for the course in these kinds of fluff pieces. Miyaka was unamused, but Kaoru actually seemed to enjoy the show. Surprisingly, even Jinya seemed drawn in.

The TV camera passed through the entrance adorned with hydrangea flowers, went by the front desk, and continued inside. The inside space was shown, as were the posters and the theater space where Yoshihiko had once narrated. Finally, they went to the projection room.

Learning about old theaters turned out to be more interesting than Miyaka had expected. Before she knew it, she was watching intently.

After introducing the theater in its entirety, the actor emotionally said, *"Just as seen in the movie, Koyomiza theater has faced a lot of challenges across several turning points in history. But thanks to the efforts of many people, it continues to stand today."*

The show cut to a commercial break there. Kaoru sighed and said, "How nice. Learning about old buildings isn't so bad every now and then, huh?"

"Yeah." Miyaka readily agreed, having become engrossed in the show herself. "The story behind it is nice too."

She wasn't so interested in the movie, but she was moved by the way many people had worked to keep their small theater alive over the years.

For different reasons than them both, Jinya was enthralled by what he saw.

The Koyomiza Story spanned the Taisho and Showa eras and used Koyomiza theater, a place he knew himself, as its setting.

It had been quite the incident when Yoshihiko and Kimiko got married. Michitomo had objected, of course, and Shino had consoled him. It had been a wild ride at the time, but now it was all a good memory.

Izuchi and the other theater folks helped out a lot. The wedding celebration itself was held at Koyomiza, and Jinya felt a complicated

mixture of both joy and sadness as he watched the girl he helped raise be married off.

At some point in time, Ryuuna started helping out at Koyomiza. She was the one who grew the hydrangeas around the entrance. He still recalled how proud she had been, saying she was just like her Jiiya.

Those days were in the past now, but they still remained precious in his heart. He basked in nostalgia for a few moments until the sound of the TV brought him back to reality.

The commercials ended and the scene shifted. They were scheduled to talk to some people who were familiar with the events of the movie, so the actor returned to the front desk. There, where Toudou Yoshihiko had once worked as a ticket boy, were two people in wheelchairs. A large, muscular man over six feet in height and a girl with beautiful black hair stood behind them, holding the chairs' handles.

Sitting in the wheelchairs were an old man and an old woman, their faces covered in wrinkles. Their thin arms trembled like withered branches and only occasionally became still. It was clear from the way they looked at each other that they had spent many years full of love for one another.

"Ah, yes, yes. Things were difficult back then, they were." The old man's voice was raspy with age but full of emotion. His focus meandered at times, but he managed to talk about the difficulties he'd gone through in the past. One could feel the great number of years he

had spent with Koyomiza. *"We faced many struggles, but I remember it all fondly. Koyomiza is my home."*

The old man's eyes turned nostalgic, likely reflecting on the past. Koyomiza was the place where he met his wife and had many strange but exciting encounters. Though it was a bit of an embarrassing way to put it, it was the place of his youth.

"Indeed…" His wife slowly nodded. She was born as the daughter of a noble and was raised in a sheltered environment. She slipped away and visited a theater, where she grew enamored with romantic movies and, eventually, found love herself. Jinya witnessed it all firsthand.

Somebody once said that nothing that exists is changeless. But even if his happy days were taken from him, something would always remain.

Toudou Yoshihiko was one hundred and two years old. His wife, Kimiko, was one hundred and three. Perhaps because they lived with demons close by, they were still going strong at their age. They lived through the turbulent Taisho and Showa eras and protected the home of their memories as a harmonious couple—and they still continued to protect Koyomiza to this day.

"Movies have lost popularity from the Showa era to the Heisei era. What makes you still want to keep this theater open? And why keep it the way it is instead of rebuilding it into something more modern?"

Faced with the actor's question, Kimiko smiled softly and said, *"The world is always moving towards the new. That's why we strive to*

be unchanging. Why exactly that is might be hard for you younger folk to understand, though."

Nostalgically, she closed her eyes.

***

It was a lesson Jinya had imparted to her when she was young in the garden of the Hydrangea Mansion. Even without tending, the hydrangeas of the garden would bloom. The reason why he so dutifully tended to them anyway was so they would keep the same appearance even a decade later. Just as it required effort to change, he said as he patted her head, it required effort to keep things the same.

Kimiko had been too young to understand what he meant then. But once she grew old enough to look back fondly on the past, she understood.

Slowly, she continued, *"Sometimes a child will come to this theater along with their parents. That child will then one day grow into an adult themselves."*

Every now and then she would think back on the days when she was still only a girl. Her situation was peculiar. She was the daughter of a noble family but was raised to be a sacrifice. But her parents were loving, and their manservant Jiiya always protected her. She wasn't allowed to leave the Hydrangea Mansion, but she managed to sneak away to the theater to play and even met Yoshihiko there.

She became fascinated with motion picture films and started to sneak out more regularly. Many of her problems vanished around the time Jinya started bringing Ryuuna with them everywhere. She was no

longer confined to her home and spent her days having more fun than she ever imagined she could.

"Once they do, they'll have to work and will live busy lives. They'll look back fondly on the time they were still a child and remember watching a movie with their family. The fancy might even strike them to come by and relive their nostalgia. Wouldn't it be a shame if they found out the place they visited as a child had closed down?"

The Taisho era was short. Though it was a turbulent time, it was over quickly, and Kimiko was a busy mother before she knew it. She married the man she loved and had children. They faced many difficulties, but they knew happiness.

Their colorful and exciting almost motion-picture-like life was over, and that saddened her a little. But when she saw the hydrangeas again with Yoshihiko and her children by her side, she thought from the bottom of her heart that they were beautiful.

The unchanging flowers connected the present with her past. They reminded her of just how beautiful her memories of days gone by were, and how wonderful it was to have a past one could look fondly back on.

"That's why we've worked to keep Koyomiza as it was. So you who visit today can come here with your own children ten or twenty years from now and discover it to be the same as you remember it. So you can look fondly back on the memory of today."

She strove to be like those hydrangea flowers. She had always been the object of protection, so it was her turn to do something for

him.

"We remain the same humble neighborhood theater we are, have always been, and will always continue to be."

Koyomiza still stood, existing just as it once did.

"So come back and visit whenever you feel like recalling the memories of the past."

With that line, Kimiko brought her speech to a close. Most listeners probably thought she was addressing them, and that was fine. But Jinya knew her message was intended for him.

The actor made a few more remarks, and then the show started to draw to a close. The ending theme played, and the female talent asked, *"Do you have anything to say to our viewers at home?"*

It was the standard closing segment for every variety show. One could say just about anything here and it wouldn't be edited out.

Yoshihiko looked at Kimiko, then the man standing behind them, and then finally the girl. Everyone nodded as though they had planned something, and the elderly couple smiled and faced the camera.

"Jiiya…are you well? Come visit sometime if you can."

"Yes, you're always welcome here, Jiiya-san."

They couldn't enunciate their words well in their old age, but Jinya understood them clearly.

The actor and the female talent running the show with him looked at one another, not sure what was going on.

The tall man who pushed Yoshihiko's wheelchair gave a hearty laugh. *"Hey, Demon Eater. You're around Hyogo, right? Send over*

some of that coastal liquor. Oh, and some Kobe wine while you're at it."

The tall man handled the front desk and cleaning at Koyomiza, and he'd also stuck with the theater during the turbulent times. It was precisely because he was an unaging demon that he'd decided to see through the theater's days until the end. He, who had once tried to bring ruin to the Taisho world, had found a purpose worth devoting his life to.

"Jiiya."

The girl was the last to speak. Though she looked like she was in her late teens, she wore traditional Japanese clothes. She had a pretty face and glamorous black hair. Her appearance hadn't changed one bit since the Taisho era.

The only difference in Ryuuna now was that her smile had become as tranquil as a spring.

"We're still connected, even now."

She reminded him that even if their days together were in the past and even if they were far apart, they were still one.

Would this prank of theirs reach him? Kimiko wondered with a smile as she imagined the look her Jiiya would make.

***

The ending theme played out, and the show came to an end.

"Wow… That was great! Definitely worth catching." Kaoru seemed delighted, having enjoyed watching her favorite actor talk. The contents of the show had been fairly interesting as well.

Miyaka, on the other hand, didn't look as thrilled. She'd enjoyed the program, but there was something a bit strange in the last part.

"…Hey, Jinya?"

"What's up?"

"Am I crazy or was there someone who looked *just* like you in that photo they showed for a moment?"

A photo taken in the Taisho era had appeared for a brief moment. Being keen-eyed, Miyaka noticed Jinya in it. What's more, she saw Izuchi and Ryuuna as well—just in different clothing—so she was understandably confused.

"Well… They do say everyone has at least three people in the world who look just like them." Unable to lie, Jinya deflected.

Miyaka's frown only grew deeper. Anybody else might have passed it off as a coincidence, but she'd been pulled into several occult incidents by this point. It would take more than this to dupe her.

"We should get going soon or we'll be late for class," Jinya said, leaving. He felt amused, like a child who had succeeded at their little prank.

"Wha—hey, wait!" Miyaka hurried after him.

His steps felt light as he walked down the corridor. He glanced toward the window and saw the autumn sky. He noticed the glimpses of blue between clouds and thought of the distant past.

He had lived a long life and learned many times that precious moments couldn't last forever. All was swept away by time, doomed to

change shape. Motoharu's words proved to be truthful to the core.

But some things stirred the heart precisely because they changed. Those children had taught him that. The nostalgic days of his past would never return, but there were those who would protect what remained for him. Knowing that, he would continue to believe those days still existed in him somewhere as well.

"Right. We're still connected. Now and forevermore," he murmured softly, heard by no one.

Miyaka made a skeptical face.

"Something up, Jin-kun?" Kaoru asked.

"Yeah, what's up? Or should I say, what are you *hiding*?"

The faces of the two girls looked like nothing else in his memory. It would be boorish to compare the past with the present. His busy life in the Taisho era and his school life with these two would both become memories just as irreplaceable someday.

And that was not something to be sad about, for his ability to look back fondly on the past meant he had managed to accept the happiness of the moment.

As though to affirm his beliefs, Koyomiza still stands somewhere in Tokyo today. New stories continue to fill the small neighborhood theater, just as they did in the past.

To be continued in Sword of the Demon Hunter:
Kijin Gentōshō – Showa Arc

Intermission:
Young and Old

THE TAISHO ERA LASTED FROM July 30th, 1912 to December 25th, 1926—a mere fifteen years. Though brief, it was an era full of upheaval, with everything from the women's liberation movement getting its start to World War 1 to the disastrous Great Kanto Earthquake and, of course, modernization. The era brought about many changes to society.

Life continues even as an era ends. Many years had passed, but Yoshihiko, Kimiko, and many others still continued to protect Koyomiza well into the Heisei era.

On the other hand, Jinya and Magatsume's battle still hadn't reached a conclusion. But Jinya's Heisei life was peaceful nevertheless, to the point that even he had to wonder how it was possible. He did not live a life driven by hatred any longer. Perhaps the people of Koyomiza were to thank for that.

Yoshihiko and Kimiko had three sons and a daughter, who went on to give them grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. Jinya stayed at Koyomiza for a time, so Kimiko's grandchildren picked up the habit of calling his unaging self "Jii-chan," a cross between "Jiiya" and "Gramps."

It wouldn't be long until the moment foretold by the demon of Farsight nearly 170 year*s before* would arrive. Jinya's demon body

was as mired in hatred as ever, but he'd learned to let himself relax thanks to those around him.

"Hey, Jii-chan. You got a moment?" young Toudou Natsuki called out familiarly to Jinya.

Natsuki was the grandson of the Toudou couple's third son, making him Yoshihiko and Kimiko's great-grandson. He had lived at Koyomiza when he was young but moved to Hyogo at the age of seven due to his father's work. He was born after his father passed his thirties and resembled younger Yoshihiko to an absurd degree, so he was pampered not just by kin but by others like Ryuuna and Izuchi as well.

Jinya was not exempt. Though Natsuki was grown now, Jinya sometimes lapsed into being a tad too protective when dealing with him.

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Nothing, just wondering what you're doing for lunch."

"I bought a meal at the convenience store earlier."

"Cool. Wanna eat in class, then?"

Natsuki was now of high-school age and a classmate of Jinya. Since the two had known each other so long, things got awkward every now and then.

They met in class at Modori River high school completely unexpectedly; Natsuki's face was a mix of shock and bafflement then.

Though he was fond of the older mentor figure who had looked after him as a kid, that didn't mean he was thrilled to be his classmate.

"…It's still weird to see you in a school uniform. And eating lunch at school. Man, it's even weird seeing you eat a convenience store lunch." Natsuki didn't necessarily hate being classmates with Jinya, but he said it felt like having your parents in class every day.

Jinya had helped out many members of the Akase family, from Shino and Michitomo to Kimiko and her descendants. To repay that favor, Natsuki had been assisting Jinya with many things at school. It felt strange for Jinya to have their roles reversed. Natsuki could say the same, of course. He had no idea how to react to other boys his age informally calling Jinya "Kadono-kun."

"It's not like I can do anything about it," Jinya said.

"I know. Won't be for much longer, anyway." Natsuki knew about Jinya's life so far. If the demon of *Farsight* was to be believed, it wouldn't be long until Magatsume returned to Kadono.

But after living through the Showa era and meeting the one who used to be named after the daffodil, Jinya's heart had reached a decision. That was why he could now let himself enjoy his school life a little.

"Nakki! Jii-chan! We've got a problem!"

Natsuki and Jinya were eating lunch in the classroom when a girl hurried in.

"What's that, then, Miko?" Natsuki said flatly.

The girl was Nekune Kumiko, a friend Natsuki made around the time he first moved to the area. She was energetic and unreserved, and she quickly warmed up to Jinya while he was still getting his bearings at the school.

She seemed to think "Jii-chan" was a nickname Natsuki had given Jinya and copied it for her own use. She and Natsuki were close, close enough to provoke rumors among the class that they were lovers, or even married.

"Oh? Jii-chan, you got a convenience store lunch?"

"Yeah. It's nice and easy, and the recent ones don't taste half bad."

"Riiiight? I get 'em pretty often myself!"

"Aren't you forgetting something here?" Natsuki cut in. "What's this problem you're talking about?"

"Oh, right! There's this rumor going around! They say the audiovisual room is haunted by the Gap Woman!"

Jinya and Natsuki looked at her in surprise.

The Gap Woman was an urban legend that had caused a stir for a while.

THE GAP WOMAN

One day, a man living alone felt a strange gaze on him.

He looked around him, thinking it was strange. Had somebody snuck into his home? He grew worried and checked every place where someone could hide but found nothing. Still, his unease wouldn't fade, so he kept searching. Eventually he found the source of the gaze.

Squeezed in the few-millimeter gap between the drawers and the wall was her*, staring dead at him.*

The Gap Woman was an urban legend about a strange woman who hid in one's room. Its former name was "One-Millimeter-Thick Ghost," a story told on daytime TV during the ghost story boom of the 1990s. Similar stories had made the rounds since Edo times. The collection "Mimibukuro (Bag of Ears)" had one, for instance. Its author, Negishi Yasumori, claimed it was a true story his coworker had experienced. Whether that lent any actual credibility to the Gap Woman urban legend was up in the air, though.

"There are a lot of interesting stories these days. How nice," Jinya remarked. He wasn't so interested in how the story of the Gap Woman resembled stories from the past as much as he was interested in urban legends as a whole.

Urban legends were stories with lots of ambiguity that generally circulated orally as gossip. They were essentially the modern equivalent of ghost stories, told as things that happened to a friend of a friend or on online paranormal forums. There was never any proof the events were true, but there were always those who believed them anyway.

Back in the Taisho era, when streetlamps started to illuminate the night, Jinya thought spirits would lose their place in the world. But spirits deeply reminiscent of Edo times still thrived even in the Heisei era. The world was truly a mysterious place.

"There's nothing nice about it," Natsuki gruffly said.

Every school had its set of ghost stories and seven school mysteries, but they were generally fiction. People weren't as superstitious as they'd been in the Showa era either. Few, if any, gave such tales weight. Still, there was a reason why Kumiko was so worked up and Natsuki was so annoyed.

"One of our upperclassmen said they saw it themselves…" Kumiko said.

"Here we go again…"

Perhaps because he spent much of his youth with a few beings who weren't human, Natsuki tended to find himself involved in cases of an occult nature. He apparently met the Slit-Mouthed Woman when he was in junior high school and had received phone calls from Mary-san a number of times.

Natsuki himself had no talent whatsoever for being a spirit hunter, but he always managed to somehow safely overcome his encounters with the otherworldly. That earned laughter from Izuchi, who would say, "You ain't Yoshihiko-senpai's great-grandson for nothing!"

"So I was thinking, why don't we go check the room out ourselves? I mean, we'll be safe so long as you're there, Nakki," Kumiko said.

"…What am I, your good luck charm or something?"

Kumiko grabbed Natsuki's hand and dragged him out of the classroom. He could've resisted if he really didn't want to go, which seemed to indicate that he didn't actually mind.

His gaze met Jinya's as he left, so Jinya gave him a wave. "Be careful, you two. Let me know if things look dangerous."

"Wouldn't it make more sense if you just came with us? Or rather, stop her for me. Please." Natsuki slumped his shoulders, but he wasn't afraid since he trusted Jinya would help them if things actually got dangerous.

Just to be safe, Jinya combined *Invisibility* and *Dog Spirits* to make sure they were discreetly protected. Still, he figured they would be fine.

"C'mon, let's go, Nakki!"

"Yes, yes…"

Kumiko didn't sound the least bit afraid either, but that much was a given because she was an urban legend herself.

Natsuki could see her for what she was—*a white, wriggling thing to be feared*—but he pretended he didn't. Jinya didn't know the details, and he didn't see any particular reason to pry. There was already a demon in the class. What harm was there in another spirit?

"Good company makes good living," Jinya remarked, quoting an old author.

The two were human and spirit, but they cared for one another. As an old man, Jinya couldn't help but envy their youthful innocence. As he watched them leave, memories of the younger Yoshihiko and Kimiko surfaced in his mind.

People often complained about modern youths and grumbled that things used to be better, making deliberate efforts to beautify the

past. There were also those who did the opposite, focusing on new developments and mocking those of the past for their lack of knowledge. But the truth was that the past and the present were not so different.

For example, ever since the internet became widespread, more and more people had called horror stories cheap and unoriginal, but such complaints were nothing new. Even back in the Edo and Showa eras, there were already those who called ghost stories old-fashioned. There were those who complained that music was all love songs nowadays, but people have written love poems aplenty ever since the Heian era. There were youths who became enamored with the new Western films of the Taisho era while proudly proclaiming old Japanese stories to be stupid, and people did similar things today. People stopped being afraid of spirits, but terrifying urban legends took their place, and now children woke their parents when they're too scared to go to the bathroom alone at night.

Even if a decade or a century passed, people did not change too much. That was why Natsuki and Kumiko's bond was nothing to be surprised about. It was just another small love story that could be found no matter the era.

"It would be funny to see Natsuki's great-grandchild next."

Jinya saw Yoshihiko and Kimiko grow close firsthand. Who knew? The same thing could repeat itself, and he might find himself looking after more children again one day.

He was filled with a sense of excitement he hadn't felt in a long time. He looked forward to seeing the unknown future that lay ahead.

Footnotes

Interlude: Song of Summer Clouds

[1] *An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ri is equal to 2.44 miles.*



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