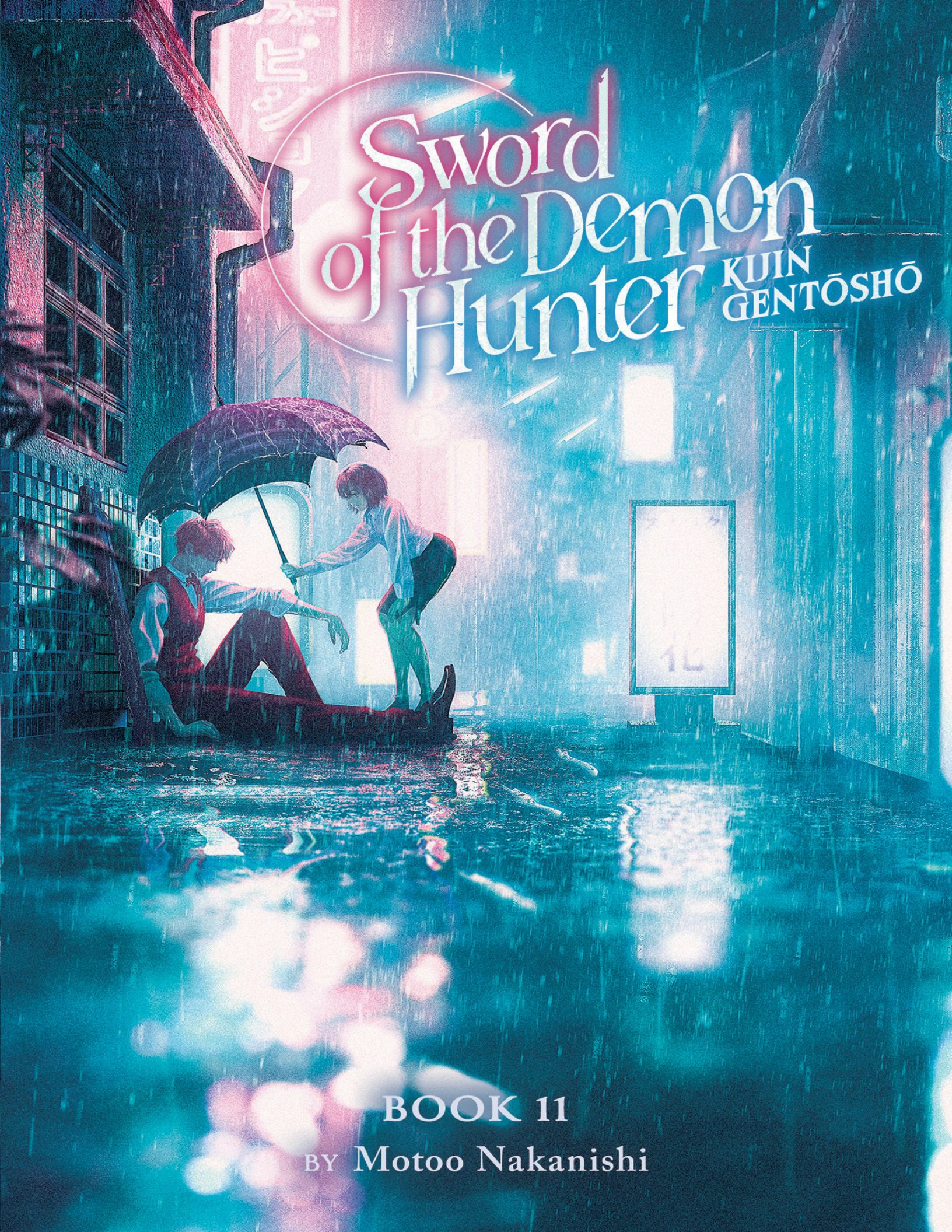

Sword of the Demon Hunter
KUIN GENTŌSHŌ
BOOK 11
BY Motoo Nakanishi

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BOOK 11

WRITTEN BY
Motoo Nakanishi

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

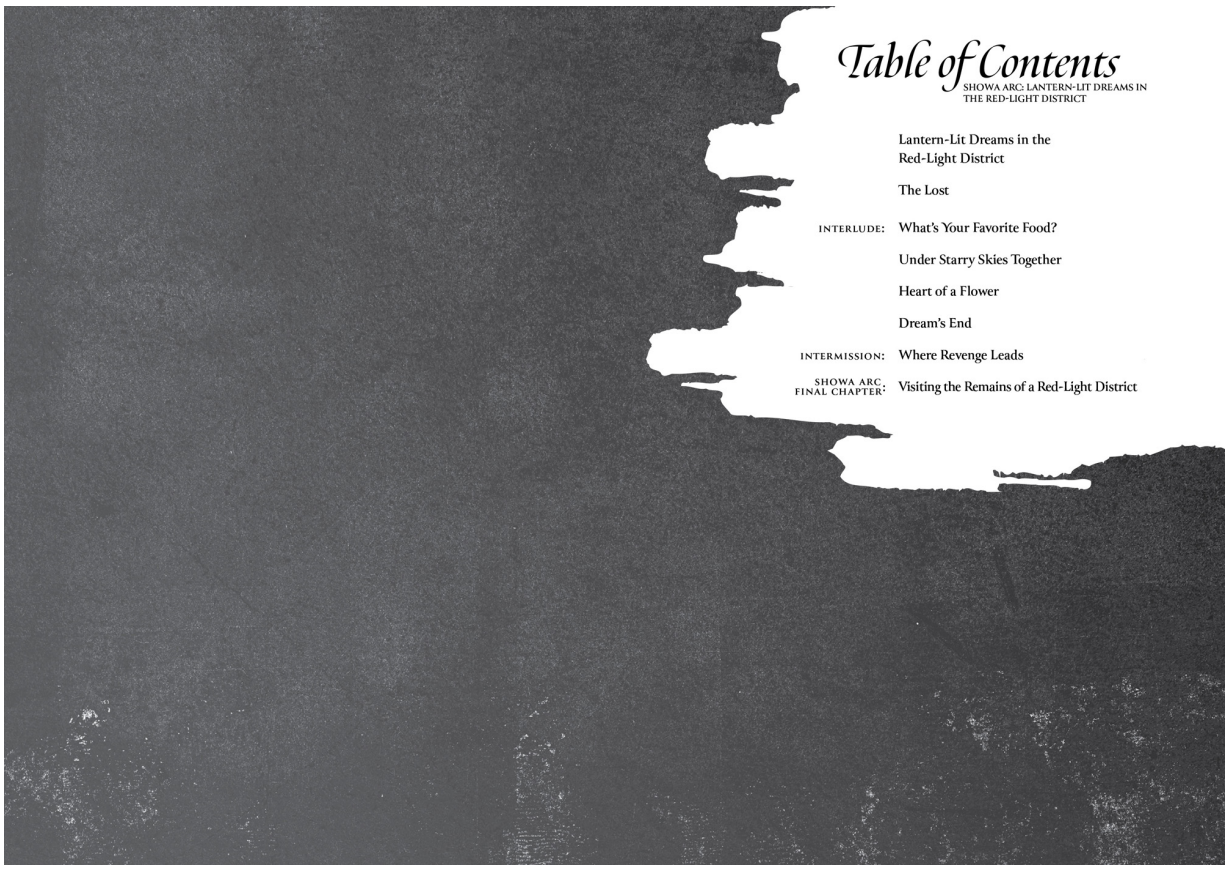


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Character List

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

Toudou Yoshihiko: The manager of Koyomiza, a motion picture theater in Shibuya.

Toudou Kimiko: Wife of Yoshihiko. Formerly from the Akase noble family.

Toudou Jingo: Eldest son of Yoshihiko and Kimiko.

Ryuuna: A girl who became a demon as part of Yonabari's scheme. Lives with the Toudou family.

Izuchi: An employee of Koyomiza. Formerly one of the demons in the service of the spirit hunter Nagumo Eizen.

Hotaru: One of the sex workers working at Sakuraba Milk Hall. A woman reminiscent of older times.

Kajii Takumi: Hotaru's boyfriend, and fiancé, before she became a sex worker.

Akemi: One of the sex workers working at Sakuraba Milk Hall. Hates Hotaru.

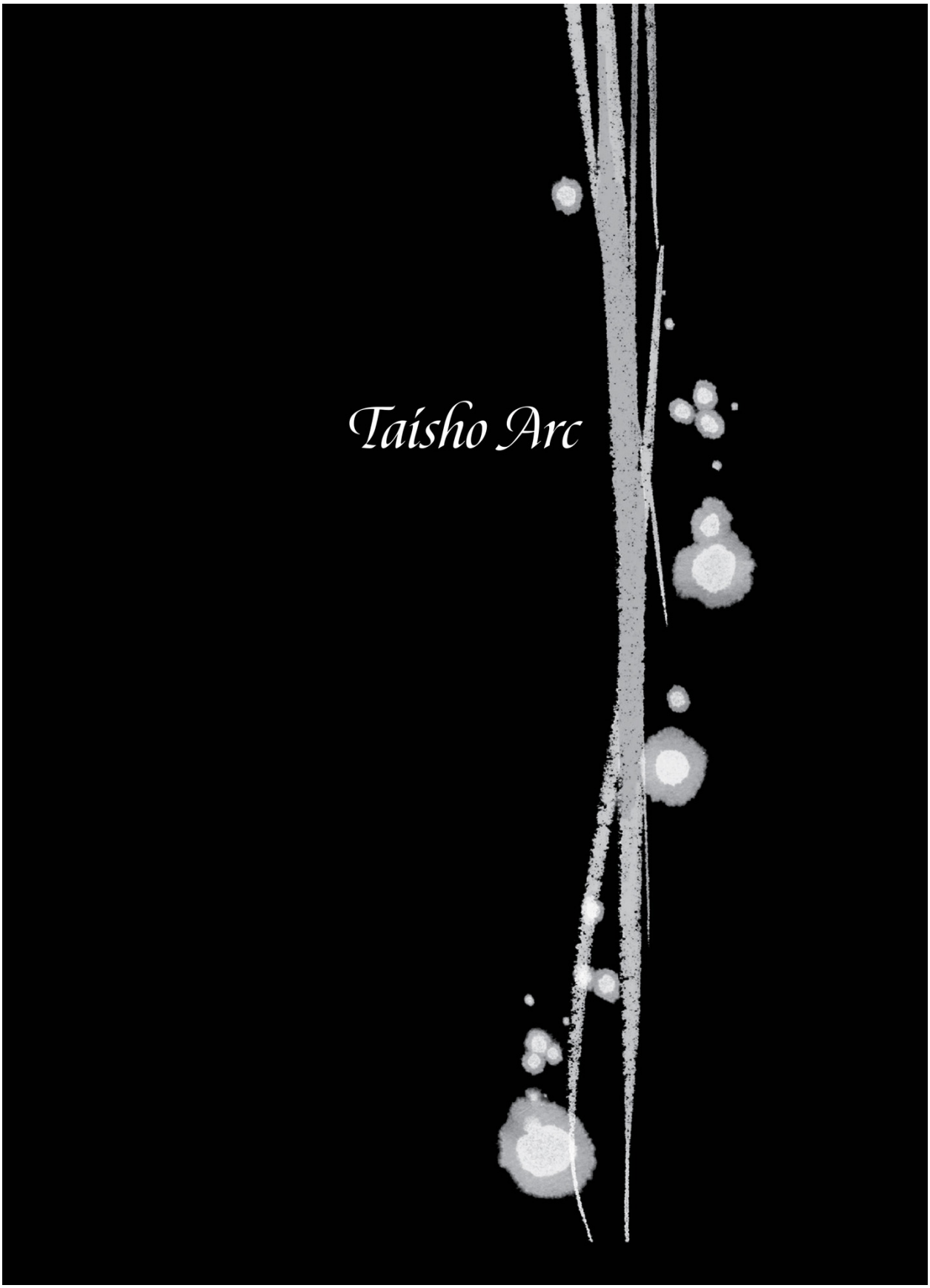
Aoba: A sex-worker-in-training who helped Jinya when he wandered into the Dove District.

Motoki Soushi: A spirit hunter who ran Kogetsudou, an antique store in Asakusa, back in the Taisho era.

Saegusa Sahiro: A distant relative of the Motoki family and a childhood friend to Soushi. Absorbed by Furutsubaki as part of Yonabari's scheme, only for Furutsubaki to later be consumed by Jinya.

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.


Taisho Arc

Lantern-Lit Dreams in the Red-Light District

1

I LEAN BACK in my seat, the soft spring breeze caressing my skin. Sunlight fills the white walls of the neat room as I look out the window. Amid a shallow dream, I drift, awaiting his arrival.

***

Every now and then, a most peculiar guest would visit the red-light district.

It was now April in year thirty-four of the Showa era (1959 AD).

Night fog blurred the light of the street lamps. The intermittent zaps of gathered moths drawing too close to the lamps could be heard—an occurrence all too common to inspire thought in most people. Bugs were bewitched by light, only to fly too close and perish. This place was meant for such creatures. Perhaps that was why Hotaru felt she could sympathize with the moths as she walked down the street.

The Dove District was located in Tokyo, about a kilometer away from Tamanoi. Tamanoi had once been home to many pleasure quarters that had stood since antiquity, and it had continued to thrive before the war as a red-light district. It was once even hailed as the place a man could buy a dream for a night. The area saw particularly remarkable success from around the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake to the early years of the Showa era. Sadly, the brothels were burned down in the air raids of the war, and the long history of Tamanoi's sex industry came to an end. But no matter the era, there were those who could not choose the means by which they lived.

Several brothels migrated toward Mukojima and gathered in one part of town to form what would later become known as the Dove District.

Red-light districts like the Dove District—which was also euphemistically called a "café district" or a "special restaurant district," referring to common brothel fronts—became only semi-permitted during the occupation by American forces. On maps used by police, a red line was drawn to denote these establishments of dubious legality. Still, red-light districts saw success after the war, and the Dove District was perhaps the most successful of them all. The unique smell of love was in the air day and night there.

Taking a look around, the majority of the chic-looking establishments along the street were brothels. There were buildings with fronts lathered in pink mortar, buildings with faux brick tiles, buildings with display windows, and more. The place had its own alluring charm, for sure. But the narrowness of the street and the incohesive aesthetics made it all feel so cluttered.

Twenty-four-year-old Hotaru was one of the many who found themselves swept along by life until they drifted here. Hotaru meant "firefly." It was not her real name, but one that she chose after abandoning her old name together with her family name. She lost her parents when she was young and was passed around, unwanted, by relatives for most of her life. The household of a family friend took her in after the war, but she didn't stay there either. The only place where she could finally put down roots was the Dove District.

She spread her legs for a living. She was accustomed to taking unknown men as clients and was long past thinking of what she did

as shameful. But different thoughts would occasionally come to her—not in the moments she spent with clients, but in moments like this, spent alone walking down the cluttered street.

The men flocked here in search of comfort, and the women swarmed those same men. Of the two, which exactly were the moths?

She watched as a moth was burned by a street lamp and saw her own fate mirrored in its charred corpse.

"Oh, Hotaru-chan. Welcome back." Her return was met by the listless drawl of a sharply dressed man.

This small, tiled, modern-looking building that resembled a café was Hotaru's workplace—Sakuraba Milk Hall. There were always at least three or four waitresses on staff at any moment, and the place served light meals and drinks, generally milk. But of course, its main service wasn't refreshments. The real goods on offer were Hotaru and the other waitresses. The clients chose whichever girl caught their eye and went upstairs with them for some private time. The milk ordered by the customers was simply to pass the time until they made a selection.

"Sorry I took so long."

"No, no. I'm the one who asked you to run an errand, sweetie. There aren't too many customers, anyway," the forty-something man said in an effeminate tone. He was the manager of this establishment, essentially making him her pimp. He was a gentle, mild-mannered man, though, and Hotaru had a favorable impression of him.

She handed over the bag of things he'd asked her to buy, made a small bow, then went upstairs to change into her waitress uniform—

a modest, Western-style dress that was all white and smothered in frills. It was slightly difficult to move in, but in her line of work, form came before function.

She returned downstairs to the place where her fellow waitresses were, as well as one customer who shot glances all over as he drank milk at the counter. Her eyes met his, so she politely bowed.

Her modest dress and graceful bowing posture made her seem like a prim and proper woman, even in an establishment like this. Of course, it was all an act for the sake of being chosen.

"Just look at her…"

The other waitresses quietly scoffed behind her back, but she paid them no mind. They were only jealous of how often she was selected, and what's more, this was simply the trick of the trade. Men didn't shell out so much just to sleep with a woman, but to *dream for a night*, and so a sex worker had to be a woman worthy of being part of that dream. She was only doing what was expected; there was no reason for the other women to be so snide. It annoyed her how they could be so stupid, but she was used to that too, and so she didn't dwell on it.

She put the peanut gallery out of her mind and smiled emotionlessly, after which the customer immediately called out to the manager. She would fulfill her role perfectly. It was everything to her now.

"Hotaru-chan, a moment, please?"

"Coming."

Her client for tonight looked to be a broad-shouldered man in his forties with the vulgar grin and eyes of a lecher. Her face seemed to pass his standards as he moved his gaze downward, practically licking her full breasts and slender hips with his eyes.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Hotaru."

She was used to this kind of appraisal and was more than capable of feigning indifference. She flashed a coquettish smile that seemed to greatly please the man, whose expression changed rapidly.

"O-oh…" He swallowed back a mouthful of saliva.

She didn't feel too much revulsion toward his naked display of lust. There were many kinds of awful customers: rich ones who looked down on sex workers, bastards who only saw women as objects to please themselves with, and so on. Comparatively speaking, this client wasn't bad at all.

"Please, follow me." She gently took his hand and led him upstairs. The room farthest back, the one with the balcony, was her assigned work room. In it was a tidily arranged bed, a side table, and a lamp that she'd requested.

She lit the lamp. The flickering light of its flame was faint, and that was what made it perfect. A dream was only a dream if its shape was indistinct.

"You're a pretty little thing, you know that?" the man said.

"Hee hee. Thank you very much."

The sight of her face in the orange light of the flame must have been irresistible for him, because he suddenly reached out. She put

her palm over the back of his hand and guided it to her dress.

"Would you undress me?" she asked.

He seemed to fall into a trance from the atmosphere she created. His touch grew several degrees softer, like he was handling porcelain, as he undressed her piece by piece. He stared in awe at her bare skin. Her body was symmetrical and perfect, unlike that of the common sex worker who thought youth was all one needed to work. As the last article of clothing fell to the floor, a sugary smell of perfume wafted up to the man's nose. Sweet like nectar. This, too, was one of her tricks of the trade.

"…What—"

What is a girl like you doing in a place like this?

She knew what he was going to say, so she stole his lips before he could finish. There was nothing rushed or crude about her action. Her lips met his softly, then she slid her tongue in and wrapped it around his, producing lewd and wet noises. When she drew away, a line of saliva formed between them.

She touched his neck with her thin fingers, then drew them across his peach fuzz and up to his lips. "Why spoil our night with boorish talk?"

Pushing him onto the bed, she lay on top of him, and felt his warmth directly through her skin. His body was hot from arousal. Meanwhile, her own body felt as though it was only getting colder.

She slept with men for money. She'd done so more times than she could count, spending every night in the arms of a different man.

It became easier as she gained experience. Even if there was no love, she could feel the warmth of another. And yet, for some reason, she felt so cold just then.

Letting out sweet moans, she allowed herself to drift off into this shallow dream, as if to leave behind and forget the worries of her heart.

After the deed was done, the two lay side by side in the bed. She drew close and clung fawningly to him. When the Dove District was formed after the war, many of its sex workers were inexperienced and acted as though the men were lucky to sleep with them. Women who played the role of a lover like Hotaru did were rare, and that seemed to catch the man's interest.

"Hotaru…" the man said.

Instead of replying, she reached out and touched his chest, looking up at him with upturned eyes. She was exhausted after their workout too; her smile was perhaps better described as hollow than ephemeral.

"Whew, that was real good. I'll be sure to visit you again sometime."

"Thank you very much," she replied with some exhaustion.

The man threw on his clothes. She sat up and covered her chest with the sheets, and he handed over the payment. He added on a fair amount extra, more than the usual price of a "dream." The look on his face told her he was simply that satisfied. She had played her role well.

She put her clothes back on, thanked him for waiting, and then left the room with him. After confirming no one was around, she kissed him, and then they went down the stairs arm in arm. She was intimately familiar with the whole send-off process by now. She bade him farewell right outside the entrance, and the dream reached its end. All that was left in its wake were her earnings and a feeling of languidness. She repeated all of this with three or sometimes four clients a day.

It was April, but the wind had a chill that made her narrow shoulders tremble. The moon, veiled by thin clouds, looked dimmer than the street lamps did.

She looked away from the direction the man had gone and gazed at the moths gathering around a street lamp. Some called those in her profession the "butterflies of the night," but she saw herself more as a moth. They were identical in almost every way, but while butterflies danced beautifully through the air, a moth only drew too close to bright lights and perished.

"Both fireflies and moths live such busy lives…"

She had never found her life as a sex worker to be unpleasant. Maybe it wasn't something she could brag about, but it suited her nature, and life in this small world wasn't bad.

She returned inside to report to the manager that the job was done.

"Good work, Hotaru-chan," he said in his effeminate drawl.

"Thank you. I'll be stepping out for a bit."

"Now? It's late, so do be careful."

She went upstairs to change out of her uniform and into plainer Western clothes. Her work room on the second floor doubled as her bedroom. Sakuraba Milk Hall wasn't just her workplace, but also her home. Staying in the same place all day was suffocating, though. That was why she liked to go for night walks on days she didn't have a client until morning.

Tonight, she took more detours than usual. The varied alleys were soothing when her mind was plagued with too many thoughts. There was a hodgepodge of smells, mostly the kind that came from clogged ditches. She saw a Western-style building with a pink cloth hung at its entrance; elsewhere was a neon sign in the shape of a heart. The Dove District was not like the classy pleasure quarters of the past. Most of the sex workers were young amateurs; those like Hotaru who could provide truly adequate service were rare. That fact earned her a fair share of envy from her colleagues, but it didn't matter. Her life was better than it was before. That was why she shivered when she heard a familiar voice from her past.

"I finally found you."

"Ah…" she said weakly. The face in the darkness was one she recognized well. "Takumi-san…"

"You remember me. I was worried you'd have forgotten."

How could she ever forget Kajii Takumi? Before she drifted to the Dove District, he had been her boyfriend.

Ask anyone, and they would probably say the two had been a close couple. Takumi loved her to the point that he'd even proposed,

and she held affection for him as well. He was eight years older than her, and he had become a physician after the war. He inherited the clinic his family had run for generations and was by all means an upstanding man. He did not look down on or pity Hotaru and her lack of parents.

But the two parted in the end. There was no infidelity, nor was there any fight. Not a single clear reason for their split could be found. It simply hurt too much for her to stay with him. That was why she ran, discarded her name, and became Hotaru. The woman he had known was nowhere to be found anymore, so why was he here now?

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Do I even need to say it? Come on, let's go home. Together." He offered his hand. She did not feel threatened or fearful as he reached out. The fact that he still remembered her after all this time should have made her happy. But it didn't.

"No. I am not the woman you knew. I'm Hotaru now." She felt indebted to him, and so she kept her voice cold and showed no emotion. She knew she could not go back with him, so she at least wanted to let him forget her and leave with no lingering regrets.

"…Why? You know I—"

"Don't, Takumi-san. The two of us are over."

"Enough of that. You don't belong in a place like this."

"I could say the same thing to you."

She wanted to flee right then and there, but she didn't. She couldn't bring herself to run, nor to say another word. She didn't have

it in her to push him away twice. He violently reached out, but a strange man caught his hand.

"Leave it at that."

He was around seventeen or eighteen. It was unusual for someone so young to come here, but he carried himself with confidence. His grip on Takumi's arm was firm, not budging in the slightest as Takumi pushed and pulled.

"I don't know what's going on, and I don't like to meddle in a couple's affairs, but surely you can see you're frightening this woman?"

Takumi groaned, and his expression turned pained.

Hotaru impassively told the young man, "Please. That's enough."

She was relieved to be helped but couldn't bear to see Takumi suffer. Was that contradictory of her? The young man said nothing as he shoved the arm, and Takumi with it, backward. He stepped forward to stand protectively before her. He didn't make any threatening moves whatsoever, but Takumi still shrunk back, intimidated.

"I'll…come again." After a few moments, Takumi gave up and left down the dark alley. He left willingly, perhaps not because of the young man's presence but because of Hotaru's sad eyes.

"Thank you for helping me," she said. The young man probably thought he was just chasing away a drunk, but she was still thankful.

"Not at all. But are you okay ending things like this? It sounded like he really plans to come again."

"He's welcome to. This is the Dove District, after all."

Indeed, there was nothing odd at all about Takumi's presence here. Strange and peculiar guests visited all the time, and Takumi certainly fell within those bounds. Or at least, that was what Hotaru told herself as she put on her best flirtatious smile.

The young man wasn't shaken by her efforts at all; his expression didn't shift in the slightest. He simply stared into her eyes, then closed them after seeming to peer into her depths.

"If you say so." And with that, he left.

Hotaru was alone again, and the night was stiller than before. Reminded of the past by the silence, she hung her head.

Takumi had said he would come again. She was not afraid, but she was saddened to know that he hadn't given up.

***

"Jin-san, w-wait up."

After parting from Hotaru, the young man—Kadono Jinya—walked for a short distance. He stopped in his tracks when he heard his companion Aoba, out of breath, finally catch up.

She was a sex worker he'd met here in the Dove District. She was only sixteen, though, and had yet to take a single client. She wasn't even at the level of apprentice yet either, technically speaking. She was thin and petite, and her large eyes made her seem even younger than she already was. Her outfit, a skirt on the shorter side and a blouse, had apparently been arranged by an acquaintance and did not make her look like much of a sex worker at all.

Aoba was the first person Jinya became acquainted with in the Dove District. They met by chance, and she had followed him around ever since. Her exact reasons for following him were a mystery she had kept hidden for the two months they'd known one another, but he didn't exactly mind as she made a good area guide.

"What'd you run off so suddenly for? You just left me behind."

"Sorry. Something caught my attention."

He had asked her to guide him around the Dove District for yet another night. He'd abruptly run ahead when he saw the earlier quarrel, but he'd been certain she would chase after him. She looked a bit annoyed, though.

"Was it the person you're looking for?"

"Unfortunately not."

Jinya had come to this red-light district not to sleep with a woman but for another purpose. He was searching for a specific person, or rather, a certain demon.

"Well, there are more than three hundred sex workers here, and they come and go all the time. Many use the names of flowers as aliases, and you don't even know the name or face of the person you're looking for. Can we really find this mystery woman of yours?"

According to a certain rumor making the rounds, there was a peculiar sex worker in the Dove District, one who bore the name of a flower and was a tremendous beauty. Apparently she had a mysterious aura that could make any man feel like they were amid a dream.

"Who knows? Perhaps it'd be better if I don't find her."

"What now? Is that supposed to be some kind of riddle?"

"Just my honest thoughts." Some unease stirred in his chest. His intuition was never wrong in times like these. "I doubt anything good can come from a place like this."

Jinya gazed up at the night sky. The moonlight filtering through the clouds looked terribly cold.

2

RAIN POURED DOWN. His mind was too hazy to think. It felt like his brain was being churned.

He sat himself down on the side of the street and leaned against the wall of a café-style brothel to keep himself from falling over.

"Ugh…" he groaned. He wasn't wounded or bleeding, but his mind wouldn't function. He felt as though he would lose consciousness at any moment, partially because of the rain battering and chilling his body.

He stayed like that for a time until the rain abruptly stopped.

No. The sound of rainfall continued, but the drops no longer struck his body.

"You'll catch a cold, sir."

He forced his lifeless body to look up and saw a young woman holding an umbrella over him.

This was how Jinya met Aoba, a sex worker who wasn't even apprenticed yet. She was a kind soul who smiled for him, a stranger,

and didn't care if she got wet while she was covering him with her umbrella. But he had to wonder, why did she look to be in tears?

The event that started all this took place about a week earlier.

Jinya spent the years of the war away from civilization, but he returned to Koyomiza theater in Shibuya, Tokyo after the war ended. He spent his time growing a few plants with Ryuuna, doing domestic chores, helping out with the theater, and looking after Kimiko's grandchildren. It was a busy life.

He hadn't forgotten his principal purpose, but demon rumors were few and far between at that time. The enigmatic Magatsume made no moves, and his days passed relatively peacefully. Eventually, though, a strange rumor reached his ears.

"Jii-chan, you got some time?"

This rumor was brought to him by Jingo, the eldest son of Yoshihiko and Kimiko. Despite Jinya's protests, the couple had insisted on using the same "Jin" kanji character that was in Jinya's name for Jingo. Jingo was quite fond of Jinya and called him "Jii-chan," a cross between Kimiko's nickname of "Jiiya" and the word "Gramps."

"Sure. Need something?"

"No, I just made some isobe mochi and thought you might want to share. I've also got an interesting rumor for you."

"Oh, really? I'll gladly accept both."

Jingo turned twenty-nine this year, had a son of his own, and his wife Asako was pregnant with their second child. What had once been

a mischievous little boy had grown up into a fine parent, but to Jinya he was still something like an adorable grandkid. The reverse was true too; even as an adult, Jingo looked up to Jinya and often came by to chat over tea with him like this.

"Glad to hear it. You really like isobe mochi, huh?"

"I do. It was a rare treat in the past. I used to get excited for it as a kid."

"I have a hard time imagining you as a child. Anyway, as I was saying…"

After they finished their isobe mochi, Jingo took a sip of his tea and changed the topic. Though he didn't have the exact details, he knew the gist of Jinya's goals and a little about Magatsume. That was why he occasionally came by to report any strange rumors he heard, no matter how inconsequential or far-fetched they sounded.

"Have you heard of the Dove District?"

"I have. Wasn't it one of those 'café districts'?"

"That's the one. Apparently, a mysterious prostitute with the name of a flower can be found there," he began. *"One who gives the people who visit her a dreamlike experience."*

"That's quite the interesting rumor."

The daughters of Magatsume all had flower names, but that meant little here because many sex workers also used the names of flowers. However, the fact that this woman was in the Dove District of all places piqued Jinya's interest.

"Ryuuna, take care of everyone for me."

"Mm. Leave it to me."

Jinya told the others what he would be doing, entrusted everyone's safety to Ryuuna, and then left for the Dove District.

Thought to have been built by those from nearby Tamanoi who survived the wartime air raids, the Dove District had become one of the most popular postwar red-light districts. It had even grown large enough to be featured in media, but its history ran shallow, and it had little to do with such things as demon rumors. But if a daughter of Magatsume was really there, then Jinya would deal with them appropriately.

Jinya made his way to Mukojima to look into things, but the moment he stepped foot into the Dove District, something assailed his senses and rendered him unable to move.

"Ngh…" When he came to, he found himself in an unfamiliar room. Slowly, he propped himself up with sluggish arms. He could recall collapsing in the rain on the side of the street last night, but nothing more than that. He moved aside the duvet that covered him, lightly stretched his stiff muscles, and looked around at his surroundings once more. The room had the bed he was in, a small dresser, a drawer, and a flower vase on top of it. It was a modest but neat room, and from the small accessories he saw, he ventured to guess it was a woman's. He had been changed into a yukata robe at some point. His leather sword bag was propped against the wall in the corner. In it was Yarai, his cherished sword that had been with him for many years now.

Nothing seemed to have been stolen, and he wasn't bound. His headache was gone, and nothing felt wrong with his body.

"Oh, you're awake." The woman who had held an umbrella over him last night entered the room. It logically followed that she'd been the one to bring him here.

"You are…?"

"Aoba. I'm a, well, you know. A woman from this part of town." Indirectly, she let him know she was a sex worker. He thought she looked a bit too young to be a lady of the night, but she probably had her circumstances, and they were no business of his. He turned to face her as she continued. "Do you remember me from last night?"

"A bit. You brought me here?"

"Ah ha ha, well, I couldn't just leave you out in the rain, now, could I?"

"I see. Thank you. I am in your debt."

A human might've died from being left out in the elements like that, but not a demon like him. Still, she had helped him out, so he thanked her with a small bow.

She looked surprised by this gesture, her eyes widening, but she quickly smiled. "Don't worry about it. The fact that I stumbled upon you just means it was fate for me to help you out. By the way, how are you feeling? You seemed pretty out of sorts yesterday."

"…I'm fine now." He didn't answer immediately. Something nagged at the back of his mind. His headache was gone, and his hazy consciousness was clear again, but *something* still felt off.

"What were you doing out in that pouring rain without an umbrella anyway? Oh wait, don't tell me." She made a face like she was walking on eggshells. "Did you get turned down by the girl you liked?"

She was completely off the mark, of course. Perhaps being rejected by a sex worker was a common enough occurrence here for that to leap to her mind. At any rate, Jinya himself didn't know what had happened to him. He'd simply found himself abruptly buckling over in the Dove District—the events leading up to that point were a mystery.

"I'm…looking for somebody." Jinya hadn't forgotten the objective he'd come here with, though. He told Aoba the truth without obfuscation—though he wasn't quite sure why he did so. "I heard there was a sex worker here with the name of a flower."

Himawari, Jishibari, Azumagiku, Furutsubaki—all of Magatsume's daughters bore the names of flowers. Sex workers often used flower names themselves, but a certain abnormality had led him to believe this lead was worth investigating. Having arrived, he now knew for sure that he had been right to follow up on his hunch.

"Aoba-dono, was it?"

"Umm, just Aoba is fine. 'Dono' is a bit embarrassing, ha ha. I'm not anyone important or anything."

"Aoba it is, then. Can you tell me what year it is?"

Her eyes widened at the strange question, but he was completely serious. Understanding that, she answered, "It's year

thirty-four of Showa, of course."

"And this part of town is called…?"

"The Dove District. You know, because it's full of us cute 'doves.'"

"Right. You did say earlier you were 'a woman from this part of town.' Can I take that to mean you consider yourself a sex worker?"

She nodded.

"I see…" he mumbled. "And nothing about that seems out of place to you, does it?"

Confused, she gave him a questioning look.

That all took place a week earlier.

Convinced something strange was going on in the Dove District, Jinya stayed and searched for the mystery sex worker with the name of a flower, as was his original plan. There was one thing he didn't plan for, however.

"Jin-san, this way. Up next is the famous travel inn Kinomiya."

Aoba ended up tagging along wherever he went. He turned down her company at first, but she insisted with surprising persistence. It was hard for him to refuse too strongly since he was living out of her place for the time being.

"You're not from around these parts," she had said. *"It'll take you more than a couple of days to find this person you're after, so stay at my place. I'll guide you around while I'm at it."*

He did think it was suspicious. What kind of young woman would ask a stranger—a man at that—to stay with her, even going as far as to provide a bed and meals? There were deadbeats bumming off girlfriends who worked here, and sometimes sex workers tried to trick customers into paying for expensive services by offering a free bed, but this was neither of those cases. Jinya had no interest in any service Aoba might offer—she apparently hadn't even started taking clients yet. She would get no benefit, monetary or otherwise, from helping him. And Jinya wasn't so naive as to blindly believe she was some kind of saint.

"Hm? Is something wrong, Jin-san?"

"…No."

He hadn't accepted her offer to help without reason, though. It was normal for a lady of the night to have a secret or two. If she intended to use him somehow, then so be it. He would use her for a place to stay in return.

If he grew careless and lost his life in his sleep, for example, then he would only have his own negligence to blame. If she was a minion of Magatsume, then he would be saved the trouble of finding a lead. So long as he stayed aware that she might be plotting against him, things should be fine.

"Any luck?"

"Another miss."

He checked all the sex workers at Kinomiya, a famous travel inn brothel, and asked if there were any strange rumors from the area while he was at it. He came up empty-handed in both regards. They'd

spent the whole week searching and hadn't found a single piece of useful information.

"Oh well, that's too bad. But I guess we *are* searching for a needle in a haystack here. Off to the next one?" Aoba showed no disappointment, smiling as she led the way. He understood she was purposefully keeping things light so he wouldn't be dejected by their string of failures, but he couldn't help but wonder what motive she might have to try so hard. She showed no sign of having any ill intentions toward him, and she sometimes looked at him with sad, wavering eyes that further dissuaded him from prying.

"Up next is this building here."

She led him to a two-storied café-style building next. A small signboard with the words "Sakuraba Milk Hall" was out front. The place's modern design strongly hinted at it belonging to the new wave of red-light districts.

"I'll wait here outside," she said. It was bad practice to take a sex worker into a competitor's brothel, after all.

"Got it. Thanks." He placed his hand on one of the two rather striking diagonal brass door handles and opened the door, which let out a long creak as it opened. Inside was a counter one would generally expect from a café or milk hall, as well as several waitresses on standby. He received a number of bewildered looks, likely because he looked so young.

"Welcome." A man behind the counter, presumably the manager of the establishment, greeted Jinya. He had an effeminate drawl to his voice.

No matter the era, red-light districts operated about the same. Even if someone was a little young, they were a customer so long as they had at least some manners and could pay.

"I'll have liquor. Actually, some milk if you would."

"Sure thing."

Jinya checked the faces of the waitresses as he approached the counter, then ordered a drink. He took a quick look around and felt somewhat nostalgic.

Milk halls had been at the height of their popularity in the Taisho years. After the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake, they were mostly supplanted by the newer trend of cafés, making them a rare sight. Jinya sighed, thinking to himself how the old replacing the new was simply the way of things as he received a glass of milk from the manager.

"Thanks. I have some questions I'd like to ask, if that's all right."

"Well, of course. Need help making a pick?" the manager joked.

The manager had brought the milk over, not one of the waitresses, as he'd sensed beforehand that Jinya had questions. He seemed to intuit Jinya wasn't there to spend time with a woman. The milk was indirect payment for taking up the man's time.

Jinya took a sip of the milk, then asked, "Is there an employee with the name of a flower working here?"

"Sorry, none at our place. I'm sure you can still find a girl who suits your fancy here, though."

"Have you heard any strange rumors?"

"Rumors, dear? The Dove District hasn't been around long, but it's still a red-light district. You'll find your usual ghost stories here and there, if that's what you're after." The man shrugged, having nothing to offer on both accounts.

Jinya had come up empty-handed again, but he wasn't disappointed. The point of his search wasn't really the search itself but to see how the mysterious sex worker of rumor would respond. If she was really a daughter of Magatsume, then she should make a move at some point. By that logic, his efforts weren't truly in vain.

Just then, a waitress came down from the second floor, her arm linked with a customer's, and he recognized her. She was the sex worker he met last night, the one who'd gotten involved with some troublesome man.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Oh, that's Hotaru-chan. One of our most popular girls," the manager answered.

The woman seemed to take notice of Jinya as well, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. She looked away indifferently and leaned against her client, smiling warmly at him. She couldn't be eyeing other men while she was on the job, or her client would feel slighted. That kind of consideration brought to mind the sex workers of old. With some nostalgia, Jinya felt this lady of the night was out of place in this modern red-light district.

"Girls like her were more common back in the Tamanoi days," the manager said to himself. For a brief moment, his gaze turned melancholic.

It was a faux pas to dredge up the past in this line of business. Jinya tactfully made no comment on the manager's words, finished his remaining milk in one go, and then took out some money and got up to pay. "Sorry for the bother."

"Not at all. I love well-mannered men like you." The manager smiled slightly, amused by Jinya's antiquated mannerisms.

"Oh, one more thing." As he left, Jinya recalled one last question he'd forgotten and looked over his shoulder. "Why do you remain here?"

The question seemed to hit a sore spot. There was weariness in the manager's smile. "Good question. I suppose I have lingering regrets, and attachments too. We all have things we can't bring ourselves to leave behind."

His words resonated with Jinya, who carried his own attachments to the past. They met eyes and, feeling a kinship, both smiled softly.

"Feel free to come by again," the manager said. "Maybe for a stiffer drink instead."

"If I get the chance." Jinya looked away and left. As he opened the door, it creaked again, as though it hadn't been used in ages.

The blinding light of pink neon signs and street lamps greeted him as he stepped outside. This place was full of glitz and glamour, and yet it all felt so hollow.

"How'd it go, Jin-san?" Aoba quickly approached him like a puppy that had been waiting for its owner. She certainly had the

slyness of a lady of the night, being able to put on such a cutesy act while hiding her hidden motives.

"No good. I met an interesting fellow, though."

"Well, at least that's something," she said, smiling. He could see something lurking behind her smile, but he still chose to work with her for his own benefit.

"I suppose. Let's end things here for tonight. Sorry for making you come with me this late."

"Hey, don't treat me like I'm some kind of child. I'm a proper woman of the Dove District. The night is still young for my kind." She jokingly complained back, seeming to enjoy their banter.

Jinya looked down the cluttered street. Lust and greed; lecherous men and the women who tempted them. Raw, naked desire was always on full display in red-light districts, but one could also say they overflowed with a vitality unique to themselves. The Dove District was no exception, and that was why Jinya had felt a constant sense of unease ever since he arrived there.

To continue our story, we must first expand a little bit further on the history of the Dove District. Of the many burgeoning café districts, the Dove District was particularly popular and was even featured in various media, turning into something of a social phenomenon. It was often said that men who generally rode the Yamanote train line would go out of their way to make a pilgrimage to the après girls of the Dove District. The place only featured a handful of brothels directly after the war, but by the latter half of the Showa twenties, 108

establishments were all crammed into the fairly small part of town with over 300 sex workers in total.

But times changed. After the war, a rapidly rising awareness of women's rights swept the nation, and prostitution was deemed a societal ill.

"Prostitution harms the dignity of the individual, is against sexual virtue, and disrupts the proper morals of society."

The Japanese government passed the Prostitution Prevention Law in year thirty-one of the Showa era (1956 AD). In the name of protection and rehabilitation for sex workers, the café districts were ordered to suspend all business.

The law came into full effect in April of year thirty-three of the Showa era (1958 AD), and all in the industry were forced to find different paths. Many red-light districts vanished for good. Not even the newer café districts were safe. The Dove District suspended activity permanently on March 31st in year thirty-three of the Showa era. On the last day, they played *Glow of the Firefly*—a melancholic Japanese song that used the melody of *Auld Lang Syne*—as owners, sex workers, and patrons gathered to give the Dove District one last reluctant send-off.

It was currently April of Showa 34. By all accounts, the Dove District should have long *ceased to exist*.

"Is something wrong, Jin-san?" Aoba cocked her head, mystified as to why Jinya was staring at the neon lights. But he was the truly mystified one.

Why was Aoba here, claiming to be a lady of the night? And why did the Dove District still exist?

"Aoba…if I were to tell you the Dove District didn't exist, would you believe me?"

"Ah ha ha, that again? You really like your jokes, don't you?"

There was no point. She would just laugh off what he said. She saw nothing wrong with claiming to be a sex worker, nor anything unusual about the present situation.

It was unknown whether this was the work of Magatsume's daughter or of something else entirely. At any rate, the information provided by Jingo had proved to be a hit. Jinya had his first worthwhile rumor to investigate in a long while.

"Oh, you're that man…"

As he stood there, a woman called out to him. Hotaru, who had stepped out to see off a client, bowed her head gracefully.

"Thank you for your help the other night," she said. "Are you on your way home?"

"I am."

"I see. That's a shame. I hope I'll have your company next time." She reached out and softly held his hand.

The manager had said she was one of their establishment's most popular girls, and Jinya could see why. Her looks were fair, but more important than her physical attractiveness was her cunningness. Although she solicited herself to him, she did so without crudeness and maintained her wholesome image. She had the wiles to make one

view her as something other than a sex worker. Rather than her body, she sold dreams one could lose themselves in. She was a *proper* lady of the night.

"If the opportunity arises, I would love to," Jinya answered. This was the red-light district. Here, women used their wiles to ensnare men, but it was a man's *duty* to play along and fall for the women and their sweet lies. He wouldn't be so uncouth as to shake her hand off, not if he had any respect for that lady of the night he once knew.

The lively red-light district still felt odd to him, but he walked off into the night anyway, joined by Aoba. Hotaru watched them go, her thoughts unknown to them.

"Welcome to the Dove District. May you enjoy a pleasant dream here."

Her faint voice reached him clearly, though.

In April of year thirty-three of the Showa era, the red-light districts all vanished. Only a mere decade after the war, their golden days became simply a memory. With the passage of the Prostitution Prevention Law, most brothels became apartments and lodging houses, the buildings living out their remaining lives as ordinary residences. They've weathered like you would expect over the half century leading up to the present Heisei era and scarcely bore a resemblance to what they were before.

The sights, old feelings, and even promises once sworn—all were swept away by time.

…But every now and then, I still thought back to the Dove District that couldn't have possibly existed and the strange events that

occurred within it.

The Lost

1

PART ONE: THE MANAGER OF SAKURABA MILK HALL

I must have lost my way at a fork in the road somewhere.

IN THE PAST, WHEN TAMANOI was still only wetlands, people built their homes wherever they liked. The roads came afterward, resulting in a wild, labyrinthine sprawl of streets. This gave the pleasure district of Tamanoi a distinct atmosphere compared to the orderly layouts of other such districts and, in later years, allowed it to flourish greatly as a haven for unlicensed prostitutes.

But that all eventually came to an end. On March 9th in year twenty of the Showa era (1945 AD), the Bombing of Tokyo occurred, and Tamanoi disappeared overnight. Nearly five hundred brothels were destroyed and more than a thousand sex workers perished.

Not a trace remained of that prosperous world. Staring at what had once been the place he called home, a man wavered.

He had a choice: He could stay in Tamanoi and try to rebuild, or he could wander somewhere new. He figured he would be starting over either way, so he decided he might as well move to a residential area between Tamanoi and Mukojima's own red-light district—a residential area that would later become the Dove District. If someone asked him why he made this decision, he wouldn't know how to

respond. But he would probably eventually answer that he had simply been lost on his path.

And so, what had once been a youth working at one of Tamanoi's questionable shops became the manager of a milk hall. He named the place Sakuraba Milk Hall. The name held no deep meaning; he simply thought a garden of sakura flower trees—a "sakuraba"—had a nice ring to it. He didn't know if the place could be considered classy or not, but at least he could call it his own. He was fond of it.

"What'll it be?"

"Single malt whiskey, if you have any. Any brand is fine."

He poured the amber fluid into a tumbler glass. The ice block in it cracked sharply as it melted under the liquor. He loved that sound, as clear as the ring of a bell. He said so, and the young man leaning against the counter frowned.

"…Leg injury?"

"Hm? Ah, this? Yes, just something from when I was little."

A childhood illness had left his right leg unable to move well. The young man had managed to grasp his leg problem over the counter just from his slight movements. He had quite the keen eye.

The young man looked to be around seventeen or eighteen. On his last visit, he had promised to get a stiffer drink if he came by again. His stern, serious look was uncommon of patrons to red-light districts, but the way he drank showed he was no stranger to liquor.

He drank quietly, showing none of that tiresome wildness many youths had.

The young man savored the whiskey's fragrance, took a sip, and smiled softly. "Times have changed."

The whiskey was a domestic product. Though Japanese attempts at Western-style liquor didn't sell much in the Taisho era, they were widely popular now.

The manager found himself in agreement. Times *had* changed. It used to be unthinkable for Japanese whiskey to be so widely accepted. Once frowned upon, it was now simply normal. How strange, indeed.

"They sure have. But I don't hate change if we get better liquor out of it," the manager drawled before sighing warmly. Most customers reacted in some way when they first heard this middle-aged man speak so effeminately, but the young man showed no surprise at all and simply enjoyed his drink. Did he simply not care, or was he being considerate? The manager could not tell, but he liked the way the young man drank.

"You said it," the young man replied. He didn't say much at all, hardly acting the way his age would suggest.

Every now and then, a most peculiar guest would visit the red-light district. The red-light district turned no one away, which was why an oddity would occasionally slip in. This young man, mature beyond his years, was likely of that sort.

It was true that the manager liked to talk effeminately, but it didn't have any deeper meaning than that. He did take a considerable

liking to this young man, though.

"Hey, Mister. Why not leave the drinking behind and come play with me?" Their peaceful moment was interrupted by the coquettish call of a woman. One of the waitresses had come over to try and score a client. She was a young but fully competent sex worker. Confident in her looks, she flaunted her body.

The young man gave her a glimpse, then said, "No thanks."

She didn't back down, however. From the man and the manager's comfortable interaction, she figured they were old acquaintances and assumed that to mean he had more money than his youthful appearance let on.

"I'm sorry, Akemi-chan. This man's here for me today," the manager said. He had a decent grasp of what the young man was after. He wasn't there for women but on a search for something else.

Akemi, not knowing the young man's motives, felt offended that her advances weren't working and looked at him coldly. "Don't tell me you're penniless. Or maybe you prefer something *other* than women?"

"You got me. How'd you know?" replied the young man without missing a beat. He smiled softly, leaving the waitress flabbergasted. Her mouth dropped as she froze in shock. He lifted his whiskey glass as if to show it off, the amber liquid inside swaying.

His reply took the manager by surprise as well. He tried but failed to hold back his laughter. Who knew the young man had such a playful side to him?

"…Ah." Belatedly, Akemi realized the young man meant he preferred *liquor* over women, and her face went red with anger. Her womanly pride must have felt hurt, with her advances having failed and her own insult turned against her. She stormed away, stomping loudly.

"Don't tease my girls too much, if you could. And sorry for the bother," the manager said.

"It was no bother at all." The young man took another sip from his glass. His expression didn't shift much, but the manager thought he could understand what he felt. The same feelings ran through him as well.

"She's a good girl, that Akemi-chan. Good enough to have men falling for her," the manager said.

"But not to *make* men fall for her?"

"No. Sadly, that's not in style these days."

The Dove District was also known as the Red-Light District of the Après. "Après" was derived from the French word *après-guerre*, meaning *post-war*. The word was originally used to refer to shifting trends in literature and art, but after the Second World War, it came to describe the youths in Japan who acted unbound by traditional thought and morality.

As a new, burgeoning red-light district, many of the Dove's sex workers were young women who started the trade after the war. Unlike the pleasure districts rich with history like Yoshiwara, it was home to few ladies of the night who knew the proper art of taking customers. Many men still flocked to the Dove District anyway, taken

with the more amateur, and perhaps genuine, service its women provided.

None could say whether this change was for better or worse, but it was a bit sad to see. The pleasure districts of old were full of dreams and women worthy of dreaming with. Men would visit, knowing full well it was all a lie but still eager to "fall for" the women. The sex workers of the Dove District sold their young bodies but not dreams. Fleeting dreams of love were simply out of style these days.

"How dull," the young man said.

"Isn't it also dull to pay money for a dream?"

"There's something to be appreciated in maintaining the facade."

"Ah, like with *Shibaraku*? My, how youthful you are."

The men who visited the red-light districts knew the dreams offered there were not real. But the same could be said for *Shibaraku*, one of Kabuki theater's Eighteen Great Plays, in which Kamakura Gongoro Kagemasa appeared just as some characters were about to be beheaded. The hero arrived in the nick of time and struck a fierce pose. It was expected, and it was the whole point. It would be silly to watch the play and complain that it was unrealistic. Similarly, it was tactless to ridicule those who bought and sold fleeting dreams of love.

"Still, you could've acted at least a little flustered for poor Akemi. Girls care about what men think of them, you know?" the manager said. The young man's response to her advances was no different than saying there was nothing alluring about her. Of course, the one out of line had been her. The manager wasn't faulting the young man for anything, just teasing him for his excessive stoicism.

"I used to know this one streetwalker," the young man began with a nostalgic smile. The ice block in his glass, blurred by the amber liquid, cracked sharply. "She was a woman who could read people's hearts like nothing. I think of her as the way a lady of the night is supposed to be. I can't help but have high standards because of her."

"An old flame?"

"Sorry to disappoint, but no. Nothing of the sort." With those words, the young man downed the last of his drink and placed the glass on the counter. "Thanks for the drink. I certainly enjoyed myself."

"Glad to hear it. I enjoyed having you as well. Now if you'd just spend a night with one of my girls, then you'd be the perfect customer." The manager looked appraisingly into the eyes of the young man, who didn't flinch one bit.

"I can do nothing about that."

"Don't any my girls catch your fancy?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just more interested in you than them."

"Why, I'm flattered. My tastes lie elsewhere, though."

"What a coincidence. Mine do as well."

Hidden underneath their frivolous words, they probed one another. The young man's statement about being interested in the manager was likely true. However, he wasn't interested in him sexually —it was because he suspected this milk hall was close to the hidden truth of the Dove District. He didn't come out and directly say so,

though. Perhaps he thought it would be pointless, or perhaps he had other reasons to refrain.

"Are you sure you want to leave so soon? I was under the impression you had some questions to ask."

"My questions are a bit too heavy to pair with this liquor. I'll ask them when I feel ready for answers."

He truly was an old-fashioned young man. Enjoying his personality, the manager stifled some laughter.

"Oh, one more thing before I go. I'd have used *Moonlight Mask* as an example instead of *Shibaraku*." The young man seemed to enjoy the rapport between the two of them as well. The manager frowned, uncertain what he was getting at. The young man triumphantly continued, "Kamakura Gongoro is a bit of an antiquated character. Don't you think something from this era would make more sense?"

Taken aback, the manager's eyes widened. As if he had hoped for that exact reaction, the young man made a slight smile of victory.

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"On your way out?"

After paying, Jinya was about to leave when a waitress called out to him. He turned around and saw Hotaru trotting over to see him off.

"Yeah. Sorry, I'm just here to drink today."

"Is that so? Please do come again, for drinking or otherwise."

"Sure thing."

She drew close and leaned in, almost brushing against him. After a pregnant pause, she gave him a peck and then smiled seductively.

A scent tickled his nose—perhaps perfume? Or maybe it was simply her natural odor. Either way, Jinya was beside himself with admiration for her charm, which befitted a true lady of the night.

"…Are my advances not to your liking?" she asked curiously. She seemed to find it strange that a young man like Jinya showed such little reaction to her flirtations.

"Not at all. You're so captivating that I want nothing more than to let myself fall for you."

"Thank goodness. I'm relieved."

"But I currently depend on another sex worker. I would be remiss to ignore her and have fun with another," he said with a wry grin.

"A shame. But I suppose I shouldn't be taking another woman's man, now, should I?" She giggled and backed off easily, having expected nothing in the first place. Still, she must have approached him for a reason.

"Are you still thinking about that man?" he asked. He must have hit the mark, because her professional visage faded and was replaced with the look of a vulnerable woman. She quickly fixed her expression, but her eyes still showed some sorrow.

"…Yes."

"Like I said before, he *will* come again. Of that I'm certain."

Her shoulders trembled slightly. Jinya knew nothing of their relationship, and she probably had no inclination to share.

"You sound so sure."

"Because I am. Be careful about being alone at night," he warned.

She sighed wearily. "I can't do much there. Even when I'm in someone else's arms, there isn't a night I'm not alone."

After leaving Sakuraba Milk Hall behind, Jinya gazed out at the cluttered streetscape as he walked. This Dove District that shouldn't exist was alive and thriving. The people he saw walking to and fro showed no signs they thought anything was unusual about their location.

The manager of Sakuraba Milk Hall was a peculiar man who spoke effeminately, but that wasn't what caught Jinya's interest. The manager probably knew *something*. Jinya couldn't be sure, but his intuition told him he was on the right track.

He didn't want to overstep too soon, though. One wrong move and he could lose his only lead—and, more importantly, a place to drink quality liquor. He still hadn't found the sex worker with the name of a flower and there were many mysteries left, so he would let things play out for the time being. He would make his move once the time was right.

"Oh, welcome back, Jin-san."

On his way back, he bumped into Aoba, who had probably come out to look for him. She waved as she trotted over.

He knew where the milk hall was and didn't need a guide. That was what he'd told Aoba to get her to let him go alone. She probably wanted to complain about being left behind and about him smelling of liquor, but she greeted him with a smile instead. Jinya decided not to think too hard about why that was.

"You don't have to worry about me running away," he said.

"Ah ha ha. Oh, you. What are you talking about?"

After some light banter, they walked side by side. Their night walk was pleasant. In no time at all, Aoba's home came into view: an apartment on a street with cafés on one side and some stores on the other. Aoba was fifteen, maybe sixteen at most. Though she claimed to be a sex worker, she wasn't even in training yet and hadn't taken a customer. Naturally, she couldn't rent a room at a brothel, so instead she lived here alone. She did do odd jobs at a brothel, though, and she got a discount on the apartment through the manager's connections.

It was fairly late by the time they returned to her apartment. All that remained for them to do was go to bed—in the non-sexual sense, of course. Jinya was currently a freeloader, no better than the deadbeats who sponged off their girlfriends like red-light districts were known for. Feeling a bit guilty about that, he tried to make up for it in whatever small ways he could.

"Here."

"Oh, thanks."

They sat around a small table and drank hot tea. A few days after he started living here, he had suggested they regularly chat before going to sleep, and she'd readily agreed. They both wanted to probe one another for information, but nothing useful ended up coming out of it. Before they knew it, their chats really became just chats.

"…And that was when the hairpin took the form of a cuckoo and returned to the skies with her wisteria brother."

"Wow. What a happy ending."

Aoba had a thing for unusual and emotional stories. Fortunately, Jinya knew many of those. He recounted the strange events of his past as they happened, but she didn't need any embellishment to find them entertaining. She properly looked her age for once as she listened to his stories. Personally, Jinya didn't mind these late-night chats one bit.

"Let's leave it at that for tonight," he said.

"Oh, yeah. It's getting pretty late. What's the plan for tomorrow?"

"I'll be looking for the sex worker who's named after a flower again. Would you mind being my guide?"

"Not at all." She flashed him a smile. She took every opportunity she could get to be at his side. It was plain as day that she had some ulterior motives, but he still couldn't figure out what those motives might be.

The mysteries only piled higher and higher. Disappointed with his lack of progress, he sighed.

"But before we look, there's somewhere I want to take you," she said.

"I don't mind. I owe you, anyway."

"Good. It'll just be a quick stop by Ichikawa."

Ichikawa was the shop Aoba worked at, not as a sex worker, but as a handler of odd jobs like washing dishes, cleaning, and so on. He knew the place because she'd mentioned it before, but it apparently had no sex workers with flower names, so he skipped visiting it.

"Nanao-san, this sex worker who's basically also the manager, wants to meet you."

Apparently this Nanao was also the one who'd gotten the apartment for Aoba. Since she felt indebted to her, Aoba had wound up promising to bring Jinya without actually checking with him beforehand.

Jinya agreed to go, though he mentioned he wasn't a particularly interesting guy to meet. He owed Aoba a bit and could at least afford to help her save face.

"Sorry for the trouble. And thanks." Aoba smiled with relief—a rare honest reaction from her. Her respect for Nanao was evident. Aoba seemed truly happy she didn't have to let her boss down.

The next day arrived. Once the evening sun was in the sky and the streets took on a dark-orange color, Jinya and Aoba visited a

small, cozy shop with a sign that said “Ichikawa” out front.

This shop was different from the milk halls and cafés that were so common in the area. Ichikawa offered rooms to sleep with women in and nothing else. The walls of the building were tiled, giving it a passably modern look. But the facade was traditional Japanese-style, making it unclear what aesthetic the shop was aiming for.

“Here we are. Come on now, in you go.”

Stepping inside, he was met with a wood-floored corridor instead of an open space for drinking or dining like one might see in another establishment. It looked like this was once a normal home that was repurposed into a shop. He proceeded toward the back of the narrow corridor until he reached a wooden door. According to Aoba, this was where Nanao was.

Aoba urged him inside, and he obliged. The room had wooden furniture that matched the aesthetic of the place. A woman waited for them inside, and Jinya’s gaze went cold and sharp when he saw her.

“Oh, Aoba-chan. And who might this be?” the woman said with a seductive drawl.

“Hello, Nanao-san. I brought Jin-san like I promised.”

“Ah, so we finally meet. Sorry for all the trouble, dear.”

“Not at all. I was glad to be of help.”

Aoba’s fondness for Nanao was clear from the way they talked, but Jinya continued to stare.

Nanao had beautiful, well-groomed hair that came to her shoulders, and her looks were fair. She was pretty, no doubt, but she

wasn't a drop-dead gorgeous beauty or anything of that sort. Even so, Jinya couldn't take his eyes off her. His body felt stiff because he hadn't expected the two of them to meet so suddenly.

"I guess these things happen from time to time," he murmured.

Aoba didn't understand what his words meant, but Nanao did. The corners of her lips curved into a wicked grin.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Jin-san, was it? Aoba has told me so, so much about you…as has my mother."

She didn't even try to hide her demonic air or her identity. Now that he really thought about it, this possibility had always been on the table.

Azumagiku gained Shirayuki's exact image by taking in her skull. Jishibari took Nagumo Kazusa's image, and Furutsubaki took Saegusa Sahiro's. Except for Himawari, every one of Magatsume's daughters had to take in an aspect of a person to gain a sense of self and an appearance.

This was nothing to be surprised about at all, then. If they could consume someone to take their appearance, their voice, and even their memories—they could *become* that person. Their meeting here was a coincidence, but it was one that had always been possible. He just hadn't thought it out that far.

"Oh, where are my manners? I am Nanao, a sex worker and the temporary manager of this place."

Jinya could tell—perhaps because he'd fought them so many times or perhaps because he'd devoured a few—that this sex worker

Aoba looked up to was a daughter of Magatsume. Or, to put it more accurately, she was someone who had been consumed by a daughter of Magatsume.

2

BROTHELS HAD A UNIQUE SMELL to them. There weren't many shops specializing in bath services in the Dove District, but there was still a sweet, musty smell in the air. The smell was less like that of flowers and more akin to ripened fruit. It was a smell familiar to all red-light districts, one that hadn't changed even as the industry did.

The night grew long. Midnight passed, and the red-light district came to life. Men entered Sakuraba Milk Hall, tempted by sweet smells, and ogled the waitresses as they tried to make a choice.

The ice melted with a refreshing crack. Jinya leaned against the counter as he always did and drank indifferently.

"Just here to drink again?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

"I don't mind, but…" The manager glanced toward the waitresses and grinned.

Jinya followed his gaze and saw one of them looking his way with a huffy glare. Her name was Akemi, he faintly recalled. She averted her gaze when their eyes met. It seemed he was disliked.

"Perhaps I teased her too much?"

"It's fine. Akemi-chan is proud, but she doesn't hold grudges forever. She'll forgive you in time," the manager said with a smile.

Jinya nodded, then took another drink of his whiskey. The fragrance wafting to his nose had an elegance that Japanese liquor lacked. It had made him frown when he first tried it, but he was used to it now. One could get used to most things with time. Whether that was a good or bad thing, he did not know.

"Is tonight's drink not to your liking?" The manager's question had nothing to do with the drink. He saw something was on Jinya's mind and was giving him an opportunity to talk without pressuring him to do so. If Jinya didn't wish to open up, he could simply say the drink was fine, and the manager wouldn't push any further.

"I found the sex worker I was after," Jinya replied. He didn't have to tell the truth, but he did it anyway.

"Well, isn't that good?"

"I wonder. It might've been better if I'd never found her."

"Is that so? Why might that be?"

Jinya took another drink, then let out a small sigh. A warmth seeped through his stomach, and he formed his words before it could cool off. "This sex worker is my niece…"

The manager would probably misunderstand what that meant to Jinya, but there was nothing wrong with that. Jinya just wanted to grumble. Whether he was understood or not wasn't important.

"Ah. You didn't want to see her become a sex worker?"

"It's not that. My relationship with her mother—my sister—isn't the best. I wish I hadn't met her at all."

"But you looked for her anyway. Why?"

Jinya was at a loss when faced with that question. He fiddled with the glass in his hand as he thought. It was true that he didn't want to meet this daughter of Magatsume, but he'd looked for the sex worker with the name of a flower anyway. He was puzzled over why that was, but if he were forced to give an answer, he would say…

"…It's probably because I felt lost."

It wasn't because he wanted to discover the truth of this Dove District that shouldn't have existed. He'd looked for her because he was lost, and nothing more.

***

At the very start of it all, he lost everything. He failed to protect the woman he loved and his family, saw everything he believed in get trampled on, and took his first step forward out of nothing but hatred.

Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade? That question once posed to him had continued to haunt him ever since.

In Edo times, he surrendered himself to his hatred and lived as it dictated. He wanted to become stronger, and that desire became everything to him. But a woman whose smile was as beautiful as a flower showed him there was solace to be found along his mistaken path. From her, he learned to walk slowly again.

In Meiji times, he had a friend who was always ready to lend a hand and a daughter who said she would stay with him as family. He learned there was strength to be found in days of peace, but he ultimately failed to prove the worth of such strength. He lost all that he had gained, and hatred flared in him once more.

In Taisho times, he clung desperately to what he had. He hated his own weakness and his perpetual failure to protect what was dear to him, so he fought with all his soul and was finally rewarded with a smile at the end. That girl probably had no idea how much her gratitude meant to him.

Finally, the Showa era. Aoba brought him to this room in the brothel called Ichikawa, where he came face-to-face with someone his destiny was tied to.

"Aoba-chan, if you would," Nanao said.

"Of course. You'd better not do anything to her while I'm gone, Jin-san," Aoba warned.

"But doing things with men is my job, isn't it?" Nanao joked.

Aoba left readily, as if she'd been informed beforehand that Nanao wanted to talk privately.

It was just Jinya and Nanao now. Jinya made no move to sit and instead cautiously drew his left leg back a little. She remained where she was, sitting lazily with her legs to one side.

"Does it smell? I'm sorry, I just had a client in a moment ago," she said. As there was little ventilation, the air remained stagnant. It teemed with the scent of sweat and something else—the smell of sex. Nanao apologized without much remorse. Without moving from her seat or bothering to fix her disheveled clothes, she gave a bored yawn. She was teasing him.

"Is Nanao your name, or that body's?" Having no intention of being swept into her pace, Jinya forced the conversation forward. His

voice was firmer than it was when he talked to Aoba. Though Nanao was a woman, she was also the daughter of his sworn enemy. He didn't feel like playing games with her.

"This body's. But it's still the name of a 'flower,' is it not?" Red-light districts were also commonly known as "flower districts" in Japanese—the flowers referring to the sex workers, just as the doves in "Dove District" did. She was making a play on words.

She must have wandered into the Dove District at some point as a featureless demon with the name of a flower. She then consumed a sex worker named Nanao, thereby gaining a will and a human appearance, and had since blended in with her surroundings—effectively *becoming* Nanao.

As someone who cannibalized his own kind, Jinya couldn't fault her for consuming a human. The grimace on his face was there for a different reason. "Is it you Aoba looks up to, or the real Nanao?"

He didn't know how long it had been since this daughter of Magatsume *became* Nanao. Perhaps Aoba knew the real one, perhaps not. Knowing wouldn't change a thing. He knew his question was meaningless, but he cared enough about Aoba to ask it anyway.

"Oh my. You're a softer man than I thought. How can someone so soft hope to kill his own little sister?" She made a shrill, energetic giggle, but he felt no malice or hostility from her. This was just a sex worker flirtatiously teasing a man.

"I take it you have no intention of answering?" he said a bit strongly.

"What would it mean if I did answer?" She replied with the plain truth. The events leading up to her becoming Nanao would not change the way Jinya dealt with her. "Perhaps I deceived sweet little Aoba-chan. Perhaps her adoration for me is real. It doesn't matter, does it? This will all end the same way."

Indeed, the truth didn't matter. Jinya would end up killing this daughter of Magatsume regardless. Aoba would lose someone dear to her, no matter where the truth lay.

"So? What'll it be, then? Are you going to kill me?" Nanao said teasingly, as though daring him to become a murderer in Aoba's presence.

He shot her a cold gaze, but she was unfazed. She had guts—or perhaps she was just underestimating him. Either way, she was troublesome to deal with.

"No," he said. *At least, not yet.*

"Well, that's a relief. Oh, just to put it out there, I didn't intend for things to end up this way."

"I know."

She couldn't have planned that Jinya would grow close to Aoba. She might have been using the coincidence against him, but he couldn't fault her for that. It didn't really matter much, anyway. When the need arrived, he would kill Nanao without hesitation. He was the kind of man to put his own goals before Aoba's feelings. For the time being, he would settle for just asking questions. He could think about how he would kill her later.

"Why did you want to meet me?" he asked. It was the obvious question to lead with. Nanao was a daughter of Magatsume. By all means, she should have been his enemy. It was strange for her to take the initiative and meet him like this.

Evasively, she said, "Who knows? Maybe I thought it would be exciting to start a scandalous affair with my own uncle?"

"Take this seriously."

"Boo. You're no fun." She brought her arms up and stretched deeply, arching her back. The demon that devoured many of her own sisters was in front of her, and yet she remained so relaxed.

"…Just how are you a part of *her*?" he murmured to himself. All of Magatsume's daughters were formed from the parts of her own heart she removed from herself. The woman Nanao took in might possibly have influenced her somewhat, but by all means, Nanao should've been a side of Suzune. This bawdy woman full of composure bore no resemblance whatsoever to the Suzune he knew.

Nanao giggled scornfully. "You think you knew your sister? It's because you knew *nothing* about her that things turned out like they did."

That hit a sore spot. He and Suzune had been a loving family once, before they came to hate one another. But he hadn't really been looking at her then, had he?

"You're right. You know just the right words to say."

"Of course. I am a sex worker, after all."

He ignored her suppressed laughter. They were getting nowhere. Sitting down with a thud, he looked her squarely in the eyes. “Nanao, why did you want to meet me?”

She sensed the change in mood, and her gaze became a touch more serious. The listless atmosphere was still there, but the stagnant air seemed to drop a few degrees.

“I wanted to talk with you, I suppose,” she said defeatedly. Her coquettish look disappeared, and a faint, transient smile took its place. Now she was probably speaking her true feelings. “Well, I really had two reasons. The first is that I simply wanted to talk to you. No ulterior motives. I felt sentimental, is all. Let me guess, you probably thought my mother hatched some plot and sent me after you?”

“Yeah. I’ve just about had enough of her crazy schemes, though.”

“Ah ha ha! That’s hilarious.” She laughed from the heart, not at what Jinya said but at how silly her own mother sounded. “But, no, none of that. My mother abandoned me long ago. I have no reason to help her.”

“You… What?”

“You heard correct. My other sisters are dear to my mother, but she has no need for me. So I was abandoned, drifted my way here, and became a sex worker. An all-too-common story for those in the Dove District, really.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, showing no emotion. She was clearly different from the other daughters he’d met until now. Furutsubaki was an exception given her circumstances, and there

were differences in the degrees of their affection, but all the other daughters had loved Magatsume and followed her every command.

"But I have freedom thanks to that, so I suppose I can't complain."

"Wait, but that means…"

"Yes. I have nothing to do with what is going on with the Dove District. If anything, I'm another victim."

He had looked for her mostly because he expected a daughter of Magatsume to be behind all this, but demons could not lie. His belief had been wrong.

"Which brings me to my other reason for meeting you. These kinds of supernatural cases are your specialty, are they not? Won't you be a dear and do something about all this for me?"

As a daughter of Magatsume, Nanao knew that Jinya had dealt with these kinds of supernatural cases in the Edo and Meiji eras. How strange it was to think he would be back at it a hundred years later.

"I have a job for the master swordsman who slays demons with but a single strike. Resolve the mystery of the Dove District that shouldn't exist. Your reward will be, let's see… Perhaps my ability will be payment enough?" It was a simple deal. She would willingly give him her life if he brought an end to whatever was going on. She spoke her words off-handedly, as if she were merely continuing a joke.

His mind came to a halt; he was unable to read her intent. She must have picked up on his bewilderment, because she smiled.

"It was nice meeting you. I have little to offer, but feel free to come by again if you don't mind. If you have the money, I'll make time for you whenever," she joked.

She seemed to be in genuine high spirits. He didn't reply, not knowing what to say.

***

"…It's probably because I felt lost."

Before Jinya knew it, Akemi and a couple of other waitresses found clients, and the milk hall became rather empty. He recalled his exchange with Nanao as he took another drink from his glass.

The flavor tasted off. He finished his drink but declined a refill when it was offered. Liquor was to be enjoyed. It was wasteful to drink with his mind in its current shape.

"I see," the manager remarked and followed up with nothing more.

Jinya was thankful for the silence. Even though it was empty, he fiddled with the glass in his hand and stared down at the counter. He noticed the manager moved somewhat stiffly.

The manager noticed his gaze, stopped what he was doing, and grinned wryly. "Maybe I mentioned it before, but I had an illness when I was young. Left my right leg paralyzed."

"You don't use a cane?"

"No. It'd get in the way of my work, so I use a leg brace. I'm used to having a bad leg, though. Doesn't get in the way of most tasks."

He made small talk as he wiped some glasses. His disability didn't seem to weigh on his mind much; he could even joke about it. He had probably received more looks of pity than he cared for ever since he was a child.

"But I guess it was rough for me in the past," he continued. He squinted sadly. "Children are cruel, you know? I had friends, but I couldn't run with them. I always got left behind."

His voice was tinged with nostalgia, but he sounded more like he was getting something off his chest than anything. His expression grew softer with each word, as though whatever burdened him was being cleared away.

"I don't even know how many times I've cursed myself for having this leg, but it also meant that I didn't have to go to war. You never know what will turn out to be a blessing in life."

"You call it a blessing, but you don't sound happy about it," Jinya said.

"…I suppose not. In the end, I got left behind again because of this leg. My friends all ran and ran, rushing forward to die for the country's sake and leaving me all alone." He gazed off into the distance, to someplace else.

"Do you wish you could have died with them?" Jinya bluntly asked. He chose not to mince his words out of respect. Seeming to understand, the manager faintly smiled.

"…To tell the truth? I don't know. I don't know what I'd wish for."

The nation came together as one to fight in the Pacific War. All of the manager's friends went to battle and ultimately perished for their country.

The Great Empire will never lose!

If we don't fight, who will?

Everyone ran forward as fast as they could. He could do nothing but watch as they left him behind, and he survived because of it. How was he supposed to feel about that? Should he wish he could have fought with his friends and died? Or should he be happy to be alive? More than a decade had passed since the war ended, but he still didn't know.

"I haven't a clue what I should have done. I feel like I've taken a wrong turn somewhere." He made a wry, tired smile. Though he was in his forties, he looked helpless like a child. A child trying to run but unable to catch up as he begged in tears for others not to leave him behind.

"We're not too different," Jinya said. No matter how hard he ran, he was often too late when it mattered. That was why he could see the pain hiding underneath the manager's ambiguous smile, and why he could now guess the reason for the Dove District's persistence. "Sorry. That'll be all for me today."

"Oh? I understand. Feel free to come by again."

As Jinya stood, the heavy atmosphere fell away. The two returned to being strangers, two ships passing in the night. But as

they passed, they had glimpsed each other and seen they were not alone.

Two lost men wandered into this place and stayed. That was the kind of anomaly he was dealing with.

3

BEFORE HE BECAME the manager of Sakuraba Milk Hall, he felt small and inferior. During the war, almost every adult man was conscripted, and even students were mobilized for labor. He was spared the battlefield because of his bad leg, but he was just as useless elsewhere. He lacked the education to work a desk job, and he wasn't shameless enough to stay home and leech off his family, so he left home as if he was running away.

That was how he came to work as an assistant handling odd jobs in one of Tamanoi's questionable shops, and his decision proved wise. Even in those times, Tamanoi was flourishing. Men sought dreams to forget the fears brought about by the war.

He had to work hard to earn his place, but that was better than being useless. He was happy to be one of the many who kept the dream of the glamorous, neon-lit world alive. His boss and the women who worked at his place liked him. He wasn't the fastest at his job, but a man's help was still rare with most being conscripted. He worked earnestly, and though his bad leg sometimes got in the way, he never slacked. His efforts were recognized by those around him, and he, who had always thought of himself as a lesser person, found fulfillment in this dingy red-light district alley.

But every day, after he worked himself dead tired and took a moment to breathe, he would be gripped with an indescribable unease. Where it came from, and why it worried him so, he did not know.

On March 9th in year twenty of the Showa era (1945 AD), the Bombing of Tokyo occurred, and Tamanoi disappeared overnight. Nearly five hundred brothels and more than a thousand sex workers perished.

As he stared at the burned remains of what had been his home, his former boss made a suggestion. *"The Tamanoi folks are going to buy up this one residential district. Why not try running your own shop there?"* And that was how he came to be in what would later become the Dove District.

Perhaps he went with it because he figured he would rather try something new if he was to toil all the same. Perhaps he was simply happy to have his previous efforts recognized and be entrusted with a business of his own. To tell the truth, he did not know. Any reason he came up with sounded like no more than an excuse. For reasons even he didn't understand, he came to the Dove District and settled down as the manager of Sakuraba Milk Hall.

But nothing changed. He worked earnestly and tirelessly as the manager, but in his spare moments the unease returned.

"…I must be lost as well." With resignation in his voice, the manager let out a similarly feeble murmur. The young man had already left and the waitresses were busy with their work, leaving him

alone downstairs. It was quiet enough to hear the ticking of the clock, giving rise to all kinds of unwanted thoughts. The receding figures of his friends always came to mind in moments like this.

Age had given him wisdom. As he was now, he felt he understood why he had come to this place.

"I…"

He was likely the first to realize the truth behind the Dove District.

***

"Heading home?"

Jinya exited Sakuraba Milk Hall and encountered Hotaru right outside the entrance, gazing up at the night sky. She pushed her hair back to show flushed skin, an alluring action. She seemed a bit older than most of the Dove District's sex workers, but she had the grace and charm to make up for it.

"Yeah. Were you seeing a customer off?"

"Stargazing. Or is that a little too pretentious a claim?" She smiled, as though to make Jinya quickly forget about another man being with her. She never dropped her act. Being a lady of the night was ingrained in her.

"Sorry, were you waiting out of consideration for us?" asked Jinya. He figured she'd stayed outside after seeing off her customer so she wouldn't overhear his conversation with the manager.

She looked momentarily bewildered, perhaps because he had guessed right. "I suppose… I wasn't sure if I should be around to

hear.”

“If it was something I minded people overhearing, I wouldn’t have brought it up in a place like this. The same goes for your boss.”

“You’re too kind… But the thoughts of a lady of the night are like an open book to you, huh? I guess I’m still too green.” She seemed amused rather than offended by their exchange.

“Have you been working here long?” he asked.

“Yes, ever since I decided to become a sex worker. The manager has taken good care of me.”

“Then you were here around spring last year?”

“Of course. I have no home to return to. I’m here in spring, and in summer, fall, and winter as well.”

“I see. Oh, by the way, would you happen to know what year of Showa it currently is?”

She giggled and answered, “Year thirty-four, of course.”

To her, his question probably sounded like a lousy attempt at being considerate by changing the topic. But no, he was probing for information, and the result was what he’d expected: She, too, saw nothing strange about the current year or the fact that the Dove District still existed.

“Can I ask you something too?” she asked. “Are you an old acquaintance of the manager?”

“No, it hasn’t even been a month since we first met. Why?”

“No reason. It’s just that I haven’t seen him show that kind of weakness to anyone before.”

Jinya only knew the manager as a strange man who talked like a woman, but he had seen how earnest he was toward his work and what a calm character he was. He also kept his walls up high, something that likely came with running a brothel. Hotaru must have had a similar impression of him, and so it surprised her to see him act so vulnerable in front of Jinya.

"Weakness, huh…" mused Jinya.

"Not the word you'd use?"

"It's not. He's realized his truth but is on the fence about how he ought to be. I don't think it's fair to call him weak for trying to figure that out."

Just as women experienced the pain of labor when they brought life into this world, people would always feel pain when they reached for something new. That was a fact of life. Jinya didn't want to call such a thing weakness.

"He's trying to come to terms with himself. It might be a bit too late for him, but he's trying." He stopped himself short of adding *That's why he's here.* Jinya couldn't speak for others. He still had to come to terms with things himself.

"He lets his walls down for you, huh?" said Hotaru.

"Pardon?"

"The manager. You understand him well, so he opens up to you."

"Ah, I wonder. Some things are just easier to tell a stranger."

"Perhaps," she said after a pause. "But I'm sure this time it's because you two can relate to one another."

She was right. Jinya and the manager both had pasts they were helpless to change. They couldn't help but understand each other's pain. They shared a bond built not out of time but of sympathy.

Hotaru's expression clouded briefly. She had said too much. She hardly knew Jinya; he wasn't even a client of hers. This was shameful behavior for a lady of the night.

"At my age, it's no surprise that I have a few memories of bumping my toe into dressers." He smiled thinly, confirming what she said out of courtesy and keeping things vague out of consideration. No one could truly understand another person's pain. One's lived tragedies were no more relatable than a story of bumping one's toe. In a roundabout way, he was telling her not to worry about her overstepping. She grasped that and nodded.

"Does your toe still hurt?" she asked hesitantly, not as Hotaru the sex worker but as just some woman. Her gaze, as though fleeing his, turned to the sky. Her face in profile appeared forlorn.

"From time to time," Jinya answered. He hesitated to say anything further and looked up at the sky with her instead.

It was a curtain of black velvet, with sporadic shards of twinkling silver. Jinya felt like there were fewer stars than there used to be. With all its street lamps and neon lights, the nights of the Dove District were made bright with man-made light, and the twinkling stars shone less prominently in turn. What he saw now was a far cry from the dazzling night sky he had seen with Shirayuki so long ago.

But Hotaru didn't feel the same way. "I like gazing at the stars," she said, looking up at the sky with eyes full of nostalgia. "We didn't

have the money to spend on things, so instead the two of us would gaze at the stars for fun."

Her voice was frail, as though a passing breeze would scatter her away. She didn't say it directly, but Jinya understood she was talking about the man he'd seen her with many nights ago.

"Do you regret coming here?" he asked.

"Of course not. This place accepted a straggler like me. I have nothing but gratitude for it." But the slightest bit of lingering regret followed her wherever she went. "Kajii Takumi was his name. He was my boyfriend, and before I became a sex worker, I promised to marry him." Her voice was lifeless as she continued, "I don't regret coming here, but…I think not telling him how I feel was a mistake. I couldn't do it, though. I was too scared. Too sad. And I haven't changed since then one bit."

Her words weren't meant for anyone in particular. Maybe they were only for herself. Jinya, who knew nothing of Hotaru, could not read what emotions lay behind her thin smile. But he listened to what she had to say, making no attempt to offer his own words of comfort.

Hotaru exhaled a sigh, then donned the face of a sex worker once more. "Sorry for oversharing a bit there."

Not a trace of the frail image she'd shown remained. Even her tone changed, as though to highlight that she was finished. Her sharing her past unprompted must have been her apology for overstepping.

"You're rather earnest," he said.

"You've got to be in my line of work."

Their exchange was lighthearted again. Now that they were strangers once more, they had no reason to linger.

"I think I'll take my leave here," Jinya said.

"Is that so? Sorry for taking up your time."

"Not at all. I got something worthwhile out of it." Her expression showed she wasn't sure how to respond to that. He smiled lightly and walked along. "There might be no point telling this to a woman of the night, but do be careful going out this late."

"Thank you for your kind words. Please do visit again."

He didn't need to look back to know she was seeing him off.

Hotaru had known it was year thirty-four of the Showa era but saw nothing strange about the Dove District's existence. The same went for Aoba. The manager of the milk hall seemed to feel something was off, though. There must have been some significance in the difference between them.

"Damn you, Nanao…"

Annoyed, Jinya sped up his pace. The light of the bright neon signs felt irritating just then.

The following day, after the sun dipped down and night arrived, Jinya returned to the brothel Ichikawa. When he entered, he called out to the first sex worker he saw and gave his name. Nanao must have told her workers about him, because she smiled in bemusement and led him to the back room. He didn't know what exactly she told

them, and he didn't particularly care. He sat himself down across from Nanao, who was just as listless as before.

"Oh, you've come again for me? Why not spend the night? I'll cut you a special rate."

"I'll have to decline. I'm here to talk about the job you offered me yesterday."

Unfazed, she merely smiled as he shot her down. Her offer for him to stay wasn't serious in the first place; she only meant to tease him.

He continued, "There are some things I'd like to ask."

"Oh dear. Is this going to be a serious talk?" She didn't bother sitting up. Her movements were sluggish, but at least she was listening.

She acted unguarded and lazy, but she didn't brush Jinya off. He didn't know whether this was because she was a fragment of Suzune or because of her own disposition, but she was an undeniable outlier among Magatsume's daughters.

"You want me to resolve the mystery of the Dove District, and you claim not to be a perpetrator of it but a victim, if anything. Is that correct so far?" he asked.

"Yes, you've got it."

The job she offered was to resolve the mystery of the Dove District. The reward was her life. She had already parted ways with Magatsume and had no intention of supporting her. She had nothing to do with the mystery and was only another victim of it. That about

covered everything she claimed…but under further scrutiny, it didn't logically stand up.

"Nanao, you're lying, aren't you?"

Hotaru and Aoba didn't have the slightest doubt about the way things were. The manager of Sakuraba Milk Hall had an inkling something was off, but he continued to run his shop as usual. The other waitresses, like Akemi, went about their work like normal. In other words, none of the people caught up in this mystery were directly aware of it.

"No, maybe 'lying' is a bit much. You're hiding something. Many things," Jinya said.

"Oh? Am I now?"

"From the start, you've been unaffected by whatever is going on in the Dove District. And I'm willing to bet you already have a general idea of what it is."

Jinya was certain he was right. Nanao could only claim she was another victim here if she had a fair sense of what was really going on. However, she still went out of her way to request that Jinya resolve things for her. There had to be a reason why.

"Oh my. You saw through me rather quickly." She showed no guilt, likely because she had no reason to feel that way. Even though she knew what was going on, that didn't mean she was behind it. In that sense, she truly was another victim.

In other words, she knew what the cause was but had no interest in doing anything about it herself. That was why she instead

pushed that duty off onto Jinya. Or perhaps she had other reasons for entrusting things to him. He was sure those reasons wouldn't bring harm to him, but if they were what he thought they were, then he had no choice but to play along.

"I take it you came to refuse my request, then?" she said.

"Not at all."

"Oh? Well, that's a surprise. I was sure you would."

"I'll dance to your tune for now. It's a fact you're not the cause of all this. Moreover, this whole mystery will come to an end on its own if it's left alone. I might as well accept your request and claim my free reward."

"My, my. You're rather shrewd," she joked. Smiling in satisfaction, she added, "Thank you. You'll come by again, won't you?"

"Of course," Jinya said with a firm nod. "When the time comes to collect."

The sun fully sank below the horizon, and the night grew deeper. The room's only source of light was a single lamp, and the flame inside it flickered and swayed as it illuminated Jinya.

By now, he had just about fully recognized the nature of the mystery surrounding the Dove District. The only real issue at hand was Nanao's motives.

He would not run from her. The time had finally come to confront what he had been avoiding.

Some days later, Jinya visited Sakuraba Milk Hall again. He intended to have a serious conversation but still ordered whiskey. He wanted to keep the lightheartedness of a small chat over a drink.

"Why'd you come to this place?" he asked. He was essentially here to double-check his conclusions.

"Though I managed to survive the firebombing of Tamanoi, I couldn't feel happy about it. The choice I had to make was just that anguishing." The manager of Sakuraba Milk Hall wearily shut his eyes. "I didn't have any grand reason for coming here. I didn't come here because I chose to; I came here because I was lost."

He began recounting his past to Jinya. He told him of his youth, of how he never tried to chase after his friends as they ran ahead. He knew he couldn't keep up, but he never asked them to slow down for him either. He felt as though they would stop being his friends the moment he did so.

He was a child who tried to be as agreeable as possible and was quick to give up on things, but he had the brains and sense to still get by. And he did get by for a time. But eventually the day came when he grew up and had to watch all his friends be sent to the battlefield. There was nothing he could say to them. He believed a man who couldn't fight for his country had no right to speak.

The years passed, and he continued to age, now alone, but he was still the same lost boy on the inside. He didn't regret not dying with his friends. Rather, he regretted not saying anything to them, instead using his leg as an excuse to say he had no right to.

Every time he had been presented with a difficult decision, he'd wavered as though he was lost. But he always told himself there was nothing he could do and gave up, allowing himself to drift along into whatever was easiest. He'd worked hard up until now, no doubt, but he'd never once actually tried to overcome his difficulties.

His move to the Dove District was no different. He simply thought it would be easier to start from scratch than rebuild. He lacked the firm will to make bold decisions and could only compromise. It was only natural that his constant indecision would lead him to this place.

Others may have seen him as a sharp, capable man, but he had carried an inferiority complex his whole life. The identity of the unplaceable unease that had tormented him since he was young was the fact that he had drifted through his life leaving the important decisions unmade.

"I've known for a long time now that I have to eventually confront this side of me, but I've held off on doing so. And before I knew it, I've reached this ripe old age." He smiled wryly as he took his own glass of whiskey and gulped it down. Perhaps he felt he needed the liquor to speak. Jinya didn't say a word, instead taking a drink of his own to match. "That's why I made one small decision, a promise to myself, when I came to the Dove District: I swore to remain the manager of this place until the very, very end. Even though it's somewhere I drifted to, this place is my castle. I want to do right by my girls and my customers for as long as I can."

At the end of his lost journey, he finally made his first decision. That was why he, and Sakuraba Milk Hall, remained there to that day. For as long as the Dove District existed, he would continue operating this place as its manager.

"Ha ha, or something like that. I'm trying to dress things up, but really I'm just reluctant to part with this place." He spoke in an emotional tone, and his expression softened.

He accepted that he was lost and tried to move forward, little by little. It was because he was such a man that he, someone with little connection to the supernatural, realized sooner than anyone else that the current Dove District was not right.

"So that's why you stay here," Jinya said.

"Right. Like I've said before, we all have things we can't bring ourselves to leave behind."

That was why the Dove District continued to persist. Time passed, and laws changed. Red-light districts were outlawed, but everyone in this place was unable to leave it behind, so they simply remained.

This was a place that didn't exist anywhere, formed from somebody's lingering regrets. There was no real need for Jinya to do anything. These attachments would fade away on their own, taking this place with them. When that time came, this would all be nothing more than a dream.

"So, what will you do, young man?" the manager said knowingly.

Everybody in this place had something they were reluctant to part with, a truth they had to confront, and Jinya was no exception.

"I suppose I have to confront a part of myself as well."

He didn't say what, and the manager didn't ask. His answer was enough.

The manager's expression suddenly turned impish, like a naughty child who had thought of a prank. Teasingly, he asked, "Is tonight's drink not to your liking?"

It was the same question as before, but this time it bore a different meaning. To Jinya, who had to confront something in himself, the manager jokingly asked: *Can you?*

To tell the truth, Jinya didn't know. The hatred that smoldered in him was still there, and his hands were stained in far too much blood. But if this place was formed from lingering regrets, then he would have to do it.

Jinya drank his glass dry and grinned slightly. "It tastes far better than last time."

It was time to come to terms with the hatred he bore. Now that he'd wandered into this place, that was the only way he could leave.

Interlude:
What's Your Favorite Food?
1

PART TWO: AKEMI, SEX WORKER OF THE DOVE DISTRICT

I've never once liked how it tastes.

THE CHARCOAL SOOTHINGLY crackled as the mochi on the earthenware grill began to expand.

"Okay, it'll be just a little longer." Motoharu attentively adjusted the mochi's positions every now and then to make sure they didn't burn. Using a hand fan, he sent a steady flow of air onto the grill, a serious look on his face.

"Oooh!" Jinta couldn't help but exclaim. After all, isobe mochi was his favorite. He and Suzune were originally from a fairly well-off merchant home, so their father would make him isobe mochi from time to time. He wouldn't make any for Suzune, though, so Jinta would always hide a few pieces to eat with her later.

They couldn't eat isobe mochi as much after they ran away from home. Kadono was one of Japan's few iron-manufacturing villages, but it wasn't a wealthy place by any means. They wouldn't go hungry, but not even the family of a shrine maiden guardian could afford much luxury. Still, that only made the rare occasions they could eat isobe mochi all the more enjoyable. Jinta would come right up to the grill and eagerly watch as Motoharu prepared the mochi.

"Jeez, Jinta."

"Wh-what? I'm just watching."

"Hee hee. Calm down a little first."

His face turned red out of embarrassment as Shirayuki chided him.

Amused by the children's exchange, Motoharu laughed. "She's got you on a tight leash, huh?"

From Motoharu's perspective, Shirayuki was the one who called the shots between the two, and Jinta had to admit that was the case. Nine times out of ten, she was the one to start some trouble, and he was only haplessly dragged along.

Jinta was starting to sulk a bit when he suddenly felt something tug on his arm. Surprised, he looked next to him and saw Suzune had joined him in waiting for the mochi.

"Jinta, look! It's getting bigger!"

"It is, it is." He roughly tousled his sweet sister's hair, which made her smile. He smiled as well because she looked so happy. Shirayuki and Motoharu watched the siblings warmly.

"Do you want some mochi too, Suzu-chan?" Shirayuki asked.

"Yeah! Jinta and I used to eat mochi together a long time ago." Suzune grabbed Shirayuki's hand. She wanted to eat together with everyone. Though she didn't say so directly, her actions made it clear.

"It's done!"

A fragrance that whetted the appetite wafted through the air, and the three children cried out cheerfully. It seemed Shirayuki had

been looking forward to eating too. They enjoyed a wonderful meal together.

This was a distant memory from days when he could still smile without a care in the world. He would probably remember the taste of the isobe mochi he ate then for the entirety of his life. That was why, if someone asked what his favorite food was, he would grin slightly and answer that it was isobe mochi.

***

A peculiar smell filled Sakuraba Milk Hall. Akemi, one of the waitresses there, yawned. She hadn't found a client yet that day. A few men were present and ogled the girls in the electric light-lit milk hall, but business was slow. She felt that was an ongoing trend; day by day there were fewer clients around…and fewer girls too.

"Hotaru-chan, a moment, please?"

"Coming."

It was nothing surprising by this point, but Akemi raised an eyebrow out of irritation anyway. Making no effort to hide her displeasure, she leaned against the wall and stared coldly at Hotaru.

"Hotaru-san got picked again? Ugh. What do they see in a hag like her?" A nearby waitress of the same age as Akemi grumbled. Hotaru was twenty-four, making her the oldest woman here. She was already a hag to the other girls, who weren't even twenty, and yet she was still somehow the most popular among the clients. The waitress's complaints came from a place of jealousy.

Though not as many as Hotaru, Akemi got quite a few clients herself. She wasn't jealous of her like the other waitresses around her were, but she wouldn't step in and defend her either. She had different reasons to dislike Hotaru.

"I'm going to step out for a breath of fresh air."

"What's wrong, Akemi?"

"Just not feeling too great today."

One could only blame themselves for their inability to get a client. Akemi disliked the other waitresses, who hid their ineptness behind jealousy, even more than she disliked Hotaru. Not wanting to be lumped together with them, she stepped outside the store. In a way, she was lucky not to be chosen. Sleeping with a man when her heart wasn't in it was boring. She was done looking for a client that night.

Akemi came from a completely average middle-class family. They couldn't afford every luxury under the sun, but there was always food on the table. She lacked little in life. Still, she became a sex worker anyway. It simply suited her nature.

She believed having to slave away for money was pathetic, but it was obviously better to have money than not. She was pretty enough for men to come to her on their own, and young too. So why shouldn't she use her youth while she still could? She had no special skills or education, but she didn't need any of that to sell herself. That was why she drifted to the Dove District.

In other words, she was not a *true* sex worker but what was called an après girl—one of many reckless young girls who came to

this place not because of hardship but because it was in vogue to do so. That being the case, whether or not she worked at all sometimes depended on her mood that day, and she did not see eye to eye with the old-fashioned ladies of the night like Hotaru.

The idea of selling dreams was stupid to her. Men only cared about sleeping with a young, pretty thing and nothing else. Only withering hags needed to pretend they were in love. That was why Akemi hated it.

The whole idea of putting on a fake smile and pretending to be someone you weren't reminded Akemi of a woman she loathed. She probably hated Hotaru so much because she reminded her of that woman. Hotaru wasn't at any real fault. Akemi was just venting frustration. Hotaru only happened to remind her of her awful mother.

"Ugh. Why'd I have to remember her now?" The stroll did nothing to clear her gloom. If anything, the image of her mother's face only grew clearer in her mind. She tended to think about her mother more often lately. Her hate for her was genuine, but for some reason, the expression her mother had made just wouldn't leave her mind.

A heart-shaped neon sign dimly lit the street. The pink light, a poor fit with the night, made her feel so uneasy as she looked at it now.

She began to feel irritated by her own thoughts. Ever since she came to this place, she had been prone to these strange bouts of sentimentalism. Was she simply tired? She couldn't sort through her thoughts, and her gloom remained.

She stepped off the street, went into a dim alley, and leaned against the wall of an old photo studio to take a breather. It was good to stop when one was tired, so she decided a short break was in order.

"What're you doing here?" a voice suddenly said.

Akemi looked up and clicked her tongue. People used to believe there were days of good luck and bad. It looked like today was a bad one.

Standing in front of her was a tall man with an annoyingly sharp gaze and a stern look. It was the cocky young man who had had the nerve to rebuff her advances before.

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Jinya saw Akemi crouching against a wall and called out to her. Together, the two went to eat.

"The Dove District hasn't been around long, but the nightlife is thriving. There's plenty of spots to eat even this late," Jinya commented.

They passed a street of brothels and came to a shopping district. There were many bars here, some specifically open late to cater to sex workers getting off work. Though these were places mainly meant for drinking, they still served basic meals.

The bar they entered was lively, but Akemi remained stone-faced as if she was not too pleased with what was going on. She mused out loud, "Why the hell am I eating here with you…?"

"Because I invited you?"

"No, I get that. Ugh…"

Jinya recalled their exchange back at Sakuraba Milk Hall, where he had jokingly turned down her advances and hurt her pride as a woman in the process.

He ordered an appetizer to go with his drink, then took a sip. The manager of the milk hall had said Akemi was nineteen, but Jinya thought the way she wore her heart on her sleeve made her seem younger.

"Why'd you invite me, then?" she asked. "It's not like you want to sleep with me, right?"

"Just because. It seemed like you'd come along if I asked."

She frowned distastefully at his ambiguous answer.

He explained, "You'd probably have refused me as you were before, but you don't have the energy to even bother doing that now. That's why I invited you."

Even a stranger like Jinya couldn't leave her alone when she looked so down in the dumps.

She clicked her tongue. "I didn't ask for your help."

"No, but your boss did." The manager of the milk hall had asked Jinya to check on her if he could, and Jinya just so happened to spot her. That was all.

Akemi tried to keep glaring at him but eventually gave up, her shoulders going slack. "Is that so?"

"And with this, I've fulfilled my obligation to him. I'll leave you alone after this."

"You'd better." Akemi began to eat. Her first impression of Jinya had been bad, but she was warming up to him. Turning down his kindness would reflect poorly on the manager of the milk hall by extension, so she let herself indulge.

Seeing her eat, Jinya started drinking again. The mood was peaceful. Akemi started to talk more as she got drunk and her guard lowered. "Oh yeah. Was it your niece, or something? The one who's here in the Dove District."

Jinya's brow twitched. She hadn't been in the milk hall when he talked to the manager about that. He gave her a look, and she indifferently told him that the other waitresses were talking about it.

"Isn't gossiping about stuff like that generally taboo?" he asked.

"Who cares? If you were trying to hide it, you wouldn't have brought it up at a place like ours." It might've been because she was drunk, or it might've just been her nature, but Akemi was quite ill-mannered. Women like her would've been rare in the pleasure districts of old, but here in the Dove District, these kinds of sex workers who lacked business sense were the majority. Traditional ladies of the night like Hotaru were few and far between.

"So, tell me: What do you think of that niece of yours?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You know… What did you think when you heard someone in your family became a sex worker?" She put on a show of indifference,

but her gaze was serious. The atmosphere stiffened, and her eyes seemed almost fearful of his reply.

"I didn't think anything in particular," he answered. He could have changed the topic, but he didn't. He had no reason to. He felt nothing about the fact that Nanao was a sex worker. In fact, his biggest worry concerning her involved Aoba.

Nanao was his niece in name only. Just thinking about her mother made hatred smolder inside him. A man with such hate in his heart had no right to tell others how they should be, not that he cared enough to say anything to begin with.

"What the heck?"

"Unfortunately, my relationship with my sister isn't the best. I met her daughter, my niece, for the first time here in this place. We have too little to do with one another for me to feel anything toward her. So I'm sorry, but I can't give you the answer you're seeking."

Akemi frowned in annoyance.

She had asked what he thought about a family member becoming a sex worker. From that alone, he could guess what her circumstances were: She was probably a runaway. She wanted to hear what Jinya thought of his niece, who she presumed was in a similar situation to her. Perhaps she wanted him to say he still thought of her as family even if she were a sex worker.

"You saw right through me, eh?" she said.

"Did you have some issue with your family?"

"Duh. I wouldn't be here selling my body if I didn't, now, would I?"

Jinya knew what words she wanted to hear, but he couldn't give them to her.

Akemi scoffed, then returned to eating. There was shishamo smelt, croquettes, fried tofu, rolled omelet, and some pickled vegetables. They had gone through five decanter bottles of liquor already.

Since this was a bar, the food only played second fiddle to the liquor, but the flavor was still passable. The speed of Japan's recovery after the war had been spectacular. It was hard to think people had even been eating the vines of sweet potatoes just to get by only a decade earlier. As young as she was, Akemi probably thought nothing much of it. She bit into a shishamo smelt and wolfed it down.

"But I can't really complain," she said. "I make good money, and sleeping with men is, like, the easiest job in the world. So long as I make enough to eat well every day, I'm happy."

Perhaps such callousness was typical of youth. There wasn't a shred of sadness in her sunny voice. She was a lady of the night who could not lie. To Jinya, who was already over a hundred, her way of being was an incomprehensible thing.

But what was wrong with that? The times had changed. No matter what Jinya said, he would just be a preachy old man complaining about how things weren't the way they used to be. He had no right to tell others how to be. So instead, he took a sip of his

drink and let her words pass by. One little thing did bother him, though. “Was it not to your liking?”

“Huh?” Akemi didn’t get what he meant at first. She followed his gaze, then grinned. “Oh, no. I just don’t like croquette to begin with. Never have.”

It was about time to go, since they had been there for a while. Their bottles were nearly empty, and the plates were picked clean. Only the croquettes Akemi had ordered were untouched.

He let the matter go. “I see. Shall we be off, then?”

“Right. Sorry for the trouble today.”

“I didn’t mind. The drink tasted better with you around.”

“Well, of course it did. Any drink would taste better when it’s shared with a beautiful woman.” She kept things light, perhaps to thank him for not prying too deeply just then.

She stepped outside while he paid. Jinya looked back over his shoulder at the plate left untouched on the table. If this Dove District were formed from lingering regrets, then the thing Akemi had to confront likely involved those croquettes.

“What’s wrong?” Wondering what was taking so long, Akemi peeked back into the bar.

“Nothing. Let’s go,” Jinya replied. She responded with a smile.

“Thanks for treating me today. Eating with you wasn’t half bad.” Her smile, like everything else about her, was genuine. She was young, a sex worker of the ripe age of nineteen. But she too was stuck in the Dove District that shouldn’t exist, trapped by her lingering

regrets. He had no obligation to help her, but the manager of the milk hall had asked him to. What's more, he sympathized with her. He felt the two of them weren't so different. The words were out of his mouth before he knew it.

"Would it be all right if I invited you again sometime?"

Her eyes went wide. Neither of them had expected him to suggest such a thing.

2

AUGUST 2009.

The Jinta Shrine, where Miyaka lived, hosted a yearly festival on the fifteenth of August. The festival was quite popular, with several stands setting up shop every year, but that also meant there was a lot of garbage to clean up afterward every time. The stalls at least cleaned up their own trash, but there was always some stuff left over, and going around and picking up that trash was a yearly practice.

The mid-August sun was dizzyingly strong, even before noon. The heat certainly didn't make trash-collecting any more fun.

"I've finished up over here."

"We've used up quite a few trash bags. I'll go bring some more."

At least Miyaka had some extra help this year. A school acquaintance had offered to help. She had refused at first because she felt bad, but her parents insisted it'd be a waste not to take them up on the offer, so she was half forced to accept.

She was thankful for the help, but she felt like she was always on the receiving end of things with Kadono Jinya. He didn't seem to

mind, though. He claimed he was acquainted with her parents and wanted to drop by to say hello anyway. It wasn't clear whether that was the truth or just something he said to stop her from worrying, but at any rate, it seemed like he didn't want her to mind, so she tried not to.

"Thanks for the help. Things are looking a lot cleaner now," she said.

"No problem. Looks like we're almost done."

"Yeah. Why don't we take a short break first before we tackle the rest?"

After two hours, they had collected a fair amount of the garbage and moved under the eaves of the shrine to take a breather. The heat weakened as they entered the shade, making her exhale a sigh.

Even after working under the blazing sun for hours, Jinya didn't look tired in the slightest—there wasn't even a bead of sweat on him. His stamina surprised her, but when she really thought about it, this kind of work was probably much less taxing than all that leaping and jumping around with a sword that he did.

She realized then that it would be impolite not to give him something as thanks, so she had him wait while she went inside her home and dug around her refrigerator. They were out of juice and only had barley tea, but that would be a bit uncool to serve. She checked the freezer, thinking there should be some ice cream there, but only found some cheap soda-flavored popsicles. She remembered that her dad had eaten the expensive ice cream yesterday. Still,

popsicles were better than nothing, so she took two and went back outside.

The sun was still going strong when she stepped out. She heard the ear-splitting cries of cicadas and smelled the thick scent of greenery. It was so humid that the air shimmered. Summer was in full swing here at the temple, and it was blazing today. She sped her pace up to return a bit faster to the shady spot where Jinya was waiting, then handed him one of the popsicles.

"Sorry, this was all we had."

"I don't mind. Thanks."

"It's the least I can do when you're helping me out."

The two sat eating their popsicles in the oppressive heat, and the cold treat chilled them nicely.

Jinya's expression didn't change at all, but he was probably enjoying himself. He gave a long, comfortable sigh, as though to exhale the heat in his body. "These kinds of things taste a lot better in summer."

"They sure do. Oh, but I'm sure you'd still rather be eating isobe mochi, huh?"

"Ha. I do like mochi, but it isn't *all* I eat."

Could've had me fooled, she thought. He was so crazy for isobe mochi that he even brought it to school for lunch. It was comforting to see such a childish side to an otherwise overly serious person.

He rubbed his cheek sheepishly, which made her giggle.

"Well, what about you? What's your favorite thing to eat?" he asked.

"Huh? Me? Well… Nothing really leaps to mind. I'm not really particular when it comes to food." Of course, she would hesitate if she was served something like seasoned grasshopper, but she could eat anything you'd see on a normal dinner table with no problem. She wasn't averse to particular vegetables like some people were, and she enjoyed the strong flavors of mutton and black carp. There was little she couldn't eat, but also not much she could recall especially liking.

"What about gyuudon?" he asked.

"Mm, I do get the urge to eat some every now and then, but I wouldn't call it a favorite of mine. Oh, come to think of it, we got gyuudon not long ago, didn't we?"

"Yeah. I assumed it was a favorite of yours or something."

"Nah. I guess I could say Japanese food is my favorite? Or rather, just rice. I can't work up much of an appetite without rice."

"I feel the same way. Bread tastes good, but it just doesn't fill the stomach."

"That comes first, huh? You're such a guy."

They kept up their trivial chat. Miyaka wasn't the social type, but she enjoyed talking to Jinya. The only other person she could talk to like this was her best friend since junior high school, Azusaya Kaoru.

"Oh…" Then she remembered that there was something she liked eating, though it wasn't exactly a favorite of hers.

Seeing her go stiff all of a sudden, Jinya gave her a questioning look. Feeling bashful from being stared at, she quickly smiled and said, “Oh, sorry. Going back to what we were talking about earlier, there is this one thing I remember I liked eating, though I wouldn’t necessarily call it a favorite.”

“Oh?”

She was a bit hesitant to say it. The girls in her class had told her it was weird to like something like that when she mentioned it before—which was likely why it hadn’t come to mind earlier.

Somewhat interested, Jinya waited for Miyaka to speak. She could change the topic if she wanted. She had only known him for a while, but she knew he was considerate enough to let it go. But she decided to say it anyway, even though she was a bit embarrassed.

“Um, it’s something called…”

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“Nice to see you,” the manager of Sakuraba Milk Hall said. As Jinya visited to drink practically every night, the manager’s greeting gradually became more friendly.

Hotaru was there in the milk hall, but she only gave him a small bow. They were little more than strangers, after all. Still, the fact that she remembered to greet him as one of their regulars showed that she was a proper lady of the night.

“What’ll it be today?” the manager asked, already reaching for a glass. Jinya drank mostly whiskey these days, but he was there on different business today.

"No drink for me this time, sorry. Is Akemi in?"

The manager's jaw dropped. Even Hotaru looked a bit surprised, her mask as a sex worker slipping slightly. As if she'd been waiting for just that moment to appear, Akemi walked up with a beaming smile.

"Wow, you really came," she said.

"I'm not so rude as to go back on my offer."

"Just be honest: You missed me."

Their banter overflowed with friendliness. The others seemed shocked by that, but who could blame them? The man who didn't so much as glance at the waitresses and only came there to drink was now close to a woman he had previously rejected.

"I'll be stepping out for a bit," Akemi said.

"Okay, take…care?" replied the manager, still flabbergasted.

Enjoying her boss's reaction, Akemi laughed. "Ah ha ha ha. Everyone's stunned! Hotaru-san even made a face I've never seen on her before. Serves her right!"

Apparently, she wasn't on the best of terms with Hotaru. She continued to laugh after they left the shop, remembering everyone's reaction. Jinya didn't feel put off, though. While Akemi was an overly frank woman, she wasn't malicious and was just being honest about her feelings. He certainly wouldn't join in on laughing at everyone, but he did not hate the way she wore her heart on her sleeve.

"Oh, sorry, sorry. You're close with Hotaru-san, right?" she asked after laughing. She seemed worried she might have offended him. Though it wasn't very sincere, it was still an apology.

"No, not particularly. She's a woman of the night through and through, after all." Whispered nothings and a lover's embrace would amount to nothing but a dream with her—all gone once the night was done. That was the kind of sex worker Hotaru was. Getting truly close to such a woman would be a grand undertaking. Jinya thought of his friend who had somehow won the heart of the Streetwalker and felt a bit warm inside.

"I suppose that's true. What kind of woman do you see Hotaru-san as?" asked Akemi.

"A clever and dutiful one. She is graceful while still being charming to her core."

"Is that so? You men are all so stupid, falling for her cheap tricks and all." Akemi stuck her tongue out and grumbled, acting childish for her age. By this point, Jinya was used to seeing her act in a way unbefitting a sex worker.

"You seem to have it out for her."

"I…" She hesitated. "I guess I do."

"Or perhaps you're just not good with her type?"

"I'm like an open book to you, eh?" She pouted and ended the topic there.

The light of shop lanterns swayed faintly across the dark street, and their destination came into view.

"That's the place. I hear they have good soba," Jinya said.

"Wait, what do you mean you 'hear'?"

"People tell me things?"

"What the heck? If you're inviting a girl out to eat, the least you can do is try the place beforehand!" She complained, but a brimming smile filled her face.

The meal shared by the unlikely pair ended up being fun in its own way.

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The coating was always too thick on the croquettes sold by the local butcher, and they were always cold by the time Akemi's family ate, so they did not taste good at all. Even so, they ate them often. Her father was a stern man, but he never complained about her mother's cooking—not even when she simply served what she had bought outside. Akemi hated the croquettes they had for dinner, but she hated her mother even more.

Akemi's father was an ordinary company man, but he came from a family of high standing. Her grandmother would always say things would've been so different for them if it weren't for the war.

Akemi's mother was from an ordinary family. The father's family had been against their marriage because of their difference in social status.

Akemi saw her mother as a boring woman, always at her husband and mother-in-law's beck and call. Akemi thought little of it as a child, but once she grew up, she understood her mother wasn't servile—she was just enduring her position. Her status weighed on her. She was financially dependent on her husband and conscious of the fact she was an outsider who had been accepted into a household far greater than her own. It didn't matter that the family she married

into was a shadow of its former self; her sense of inferiority remained. That was why she tried to play the role of a good wife and mother as best as she could. As a result, Akemi had very few memories of her mother ever getting mad at her, but she also lacked many memories of her mother ever showing her real kindness.

She always tried to put her daughter before herself, so in that sense, she was a good mother. But despite being so subservient when it came to the wishes of her mother-in-law, she was strict with Akemi, always reminding her to learn how to do housework for her future husband's sake. Young Akemi thought this meant her mother was a pathetic woman who could only be firm with those beneath herself.

Akemi wanted to earn money herself, even if it meant becoming a sex worker. She probably had her mother to thank for that. She didn't want to end up financially dependent and stuck like she was. That was why Akemi decided to leave home.

She told her mother so, and that was the first time she had ever become mad at her. Her mother raised her voice for the first time, telling her she was speaking nonsense. Losing patience, Akemi argued back.

Why was she only getting angry now when she hadn't cared enough to do it before? She wasn't a child anymore; she could stand on her own. She didn't want to live her whole life putting on an act to try and stay in somebody's good graces. *I don't want to end up like you!*

She said everything she could think of, hurting her mother in the process, then left without looking back. She settled down in the Dove

District, where she lived a comfortable life.

Men paid handsomely to sleep with her there. She earned her food and clothes herself, something her mother could never do. That alone made it all worth it.

But from time to time, Akemi would recall her hated mother's face.

Ah… Come to think of it, they'd had croquettes for dinner the day she left too.

***

"You can be awfully mean sometimes, Jin-san," said Aoba with a grumpy look.

Jinya had been going out frequently to eat meals with Akemi. They went for soba one day and yakitori the next, and they even tried out a fancy-looking Western-style establishment. The one who told him about all these places was Jinya's self-appointed guide, Aoba.

"I can't believe it. I look away for one moment, and you go and find yourself a woman."

"It's nothing like that. Really," Jinya insisted.

"Even so, think about how I feel as the one giving you guys ideas for your dates." Aoba feigned tears. She probably wasn't actually angry, but it was true that he hadn't been making time for her lately. He made sure to make food for her before he left, but that was only the bare minimum he ought to do as a freeloader.

"You're right. Why don't we go somewhere together, then?" Jinya offered.

"How about you make that kitsune soba of yours again instead? It was pretty good last time."

"You're fine with just that?"

"Yeah. I thought the broth was a bit thin at first, but it's grown on me."

The difference in broth was a regional thing. Because he used to have a restaurant in Kyoto, Jinya mainly cooked with white shoyu and dashi soup stock. The taste was less pronounced than the darker udon and soba broth of the Kanto region, which Tokyo belonged to. Kitsune soba was a dish dear to Jinya's heart, so he was honestly ecstatic to hear that Aoba liked it.

"All right. I'll make it again sometime."

"Thanks. While we're at it, can I ask why you're spending so much time with this woman? Have you fallen for her or something?"

He shook his head and grinned, amused by the idea. He had no romantic inclinations whatsoever toward Akemi. But if this place was truly made of lingering regrets, then, as something of a kindred spirit, he wanted to help her by giving her a little push. "No. I'm with her because I'm stuck in this place too."

"What? So cryptic. Is that supposed to be a riddle?"

"Nothing that elaborate."

He wanted to help mostly out of sentimentalism, but it wasn't just Akemi he wanted to help. It was also the other residents like Aoba—and even Nanao as well. Everybody in the Dove District had

something they couldn’t bring themselves to part with. Since he was no different, Jinya couldn’t ignore their troubles. That was all.

“I don’t really get it, but don’t do anything too reckless or whatever,” Aoba said offhandedly.

“I appreciate your lack of concern.”

“Heh heh.”

He was genuinely thankful she didn’t pry too far. He thought he should make it up to her with something extra sometime; she didn’t seem to mind much, but it was still true that he was meeting another woman while freeloading off her.

Making plans to do something as an apology, he left and headed for Sakuraba Milk Hall.

***

At the soba restaurant they got tenzaru soba, at the yakitori place they tried different things, and at the Western-style restaurant they got omelet rice. Akemi ate with Jinya at many places, and they went to a new one today as well. She ordered the same thing as he did, and they chatted pleasantly over food. Before she knew it, their meal was over, and it was time for work. She returned to the milk hall to seek clients.

She enjoyed her new daily routine. That was probably why she’d become much more amicable lately and had been picked more often by clients.

“We’re going for Western food again?” she asked.

"Yeah. This place is a bit dingier than the one we went to last time, but apparently their fried foods are to die for."

"Another place you heard about from someone else, huh?"

As reluctant as she was to admit it, she probably had Jinya to thank for her newfound success. She'd only seen men as sources of money ever since she arrived in the Dove District, but this unexpected, non-sexual bond she shared with him allowed her to let her guard down and relax some more—and she knew that directly tied into her work performance.

Life was smooth sailing, but occasionally *her* face would come to mind at random moments, and those moments had only become more frequent ever since she started eating with Jinya like this.

"I'll have this," Jinya said to the employee.

"…Oh, sorry. I'll have the same thing as him." Having been caught zoning out, Akemi got flustered and just ordered the same thing as Jinya. He didn't seem to think anything of it, since she often matched orders with him. He sipped his water as they waited for their meals.

"There's been a lot of these Western-style restaurants around lately," he said.

"Yeah. I guess they're popular now. Japanese people love their new trends, you know what I mean?"

Curry, hamburger steak, Napolitan spaghetti, omelet rice. None of these foods were completely Western, but they certainly weren't Japanese either. Instead, they were a unique fusion of tastes. They

appeared everywhere after the war and were things that the common man could splurge on every now and then. By this point in time, the Japanese were no strangers to these new foodstuffs.

"Actually, the history of Western food in Japan goes back surprisingly far," Jinya said. "Curry was already a thing by the Meiji era."

"No way? *That* far back? I totally thought it was a new thing."

"It feels that way because you didn't see it around much back then, and it's hard to make your own curry at home too. It didn't really take off until instant curry came about."

"Interesting. You know a lot of really random stuff, huh?"

They continued to chat about unimportant things until their food arrived, carried over by an employee.

"Here's your order: two mencoro meal sets."

A fragrant smell came from the fried foods, whetting their appetites. The meal came with white rice, miso soup, and some pickled vegetables. The main dish was fried minced cutlet with shredded cabbage, as well as a plate of Akemi's dreaded croquette.

"Huh…?"

"Let's eat," he said. "Oh, come to think of it, didn't you mention you don't like croquettes?"

He wasn't even trying to hide his intentions. It was clear to her that this had been his goal with going to all these restaurants all along. But she didn't address that, instead freezing up. Her expression contorted with memories she didn't want to recall.

"Yeah… I hate croquettes."

"How about changing them out for something?"

"No, that's all right…"

She didn't want to be too insistent when he was the one treating her, so she hesitantly reached her chopsticks out to a croquette, cut off a mouthful, and ate a bite.

"I couldn't eat them at all before, but I'm not a kid anymore. I can at least put up with them even if I don't like how they taste." That was what she said, but she stopped after one bite and hung her head.

Jinya didn't eat or say a word but waited patiently instead. Akemi more or less knew what he was waiting to hear.

"I've hated croquette ever since I was little, because my mother would always buy them." As though trying to escape the awkward silence, she kept going, her voice no more than a faint murmur. "She never talked back to my grandmother, not even when she complained about her skills as a wife or about her being a commoner. She let my grandmother walk all over her and kept playing the part of a good, obedient wife and mother. I hated that about her. She could cook better than most people because of that, but she would still always buy these ready-made croquettes."

Akemi still remembered those croquettes, bought at the local butcher and gone cold long before they were put on the table. Her father and grandmother ate them without a word of complaint, but Akemi hated them. She always thought it was strange that her

grandmother never said anything about her mother buying ready-made croquettes, as strict on her as she was.

"Our local butcher fried them, but the coating was always too thick and they never tasted good. I'd tell my mother I wanted to eat something else, but she'd always just say 'I'm sorry, honey' and buy them with a smile. I hated that. It felt like she wasn't listening to me."

Akemi hated the croquettes and their overly thick coating, but she hated the smile her mother made when she bought them just as much. After she left home, croquettes became a sort of symbol that tied her back to her mother and the unpleasant memories of her youth. That was why she couldn't enjoy eating them even at restaurants like this one.

"But even though I hate them so much, I started being able to eat them at some point." She reached out for another bite of croquette. She didn't like how it tasted, as she expected. She hated the crunchy fried coating. "I still don't like them. I don't, but…when I eat them now, even though they taste completely different, I feel… nostalgic."

Her chest felt tight as she swallowed.

Her mother could cook well, but she never made croquettes herself. Was she just being lazy? If she was, why didn't Akemi's grandmother ever say anything? Why didn't her father, for that matter? Akemi's childhood was far, far behind her, and yet she still hated croquettes, even though she could eat them now. So where was this feeling of nostalgia coming from?

"Your parents must be in their forties by now, right?" asked Jinya, finally speaking up. His seemingly random question was asked with great calm, which made him feel worldly all of a sudden. "Croquettes are a cheap dish now, but they used to be plenty expensive in the past. They were a luxury eaten only in Western restaurants, up there with pork cutlet and hamburger steak."

"Really?"

"Really. I think it was around the start of the Showa era that they became a common side dish. There was even this famous shop that had customers lined up out the door for their croquettes. Me and Kimiko, this acquaintance of mine, wanted to try it, so we lined up ourselves once. I'm sure your parents remember that era, though I've never met them myself," Jinya added with a grin. "It may be a bland side dish to you, but your parents probably think of it as a nostalgic treat. Who knows, they might've even stood in line for it together themselves a long time ago."

"…You think so?"

"I have no idea. Again, I don't know your parents; I'm just talking about what-ifs here. But just as you have your own story, your mother has one too. Maybe there's something hidden behind that demeanor of hers you hate. Something you couldn't see when you were young."

There was a limit to how much one person can know. No matter how sagacious or studious someone was, they can only see the world they see. Perhaps there was something more to the way Akemi's mother always tried to play the role of a good wife and mother.

Perhaps there was something more to the croquettes they always ate. Who could say?

"Of course, maybe I'm wrong and she just bought ready-made croquettes to save time," he said.

"What the heck?" Akemi was a bit exasperated by his noncommittal conclusion.

Then he started to eat, slathering his croquettes in sauce and stuffing his cheeks with it and rice. Though his expression was as flat as ever, he seemed to be greatly enjoying himself.

"Pfft, ha ha. Aren't you using a bit too much sauce?" she said.

"You think so? The son of that acquaintance I mentioned says croquettes taste better like this. He claims it pairs extra well with the rice this way."

"The heck? That's so lame."

"Don't say that. It may be lame to you, but it's a nostalgic memory to me."

She saw how he ate up the now-soggy croquettes and thought to herself: *Oh, so that's how it is*. Even something as seemingly trivial as this had something dear behind it. But she hadn't even tried to understand what that might have been for her mother before she ran away from home.

Akemi exhaled a sigh and murmured. "A nostalgic memory, huh… Maybe my mother has some of her own from before she became my mother."

Jinya didn’t stop eating and replied like he was just making small talk. “I’m sure she does. Memories of worrying when she was young, memories of being happy on all-too-ordinary days, and memories of falling in love too, I’m sure. Most mothers were once normal girls, and becoming a parent doesn’t change that fact.”

“I never thought of that when I was young. That’s why I could only fault her for the way she was. I even ran away from home to become a sex worker. Ah… What a terrible daughter I’ve been.”

The truth was, Akemi knew her mother only got angry at her for wanting to be a sex worker because she was worried. But out of a desire to rebel against her mother, she ran away and became one anyway. If she had just stopped and listened to her mother a little then, maybe she would never have come to the Dove District.

“I disagree,” Jinya said. “You managed to eat the croquette you said you hate, didn’t you? Children who hate certain vegetables one day grow up and discover they can eat them. Some even come to like the sharpness of things like wasabi and ginger. Tastes change as one becomes an adult, but not all change has to be dramatic. It takes time to accept the things one hates.”

Children became less picky with time. Similarly, the day might just eventually come when one found something precious that had been overlooked, and the unbearable past became bearable.

“You just needed a bit more time to eat croquettes and confront the thing you overlooked in your past. I’m sure that, one day, you’ll look back on all this as a pleasant memory too.”

Her time in this place was necessary, and so she didn't need to hate herself for what she had become.

Akemi hung her head after she heard Jinya's ordinary words of comfort. He continued to eat like nothing had happened, so she followed suit and gingerly took another bite.

"Well? How is it?" he asked, a bit mean-spiritedly.

This was all just idle chatter made during a meal. None of this would change anything. She still hated croquettes. She had still hurt her mother. She still became a sex worker. She didn't know if she could accept her mother even if she did confront her past—she didn't even know if her family would accept her. Even so, she felt some of her lingering regrets clear away.

"Gross," she answered, a broad smile on her face.

Jinya sighed with relief; he'd hoped for that exact reaction.

***

The next day, Jinya visited Sakuraba Milk Hall again and found the manager at the counter cleaning glasses as usual.

"Nice to see you." The manager gave Jinya his usual friendly greeting.

Hotaru could be seen around. Jinya asked her, "Excuse me, is Akemi in?"

Even though he went out for meals with Akemi almost every day, Hotaru replied with confusion. "Pardon?"

The confusion on her face spoke a thousand words: No such woman worked there. Hotaru had no recollection of Akemi.

Jinya had somewhat expected this. With her lingering regrets gone, Akemi couldn't stay in the Dove District. The small push he had given her had been enough.

"If you're looking for Akemi-chan, she's already left," the manager said. Jinya was surprised at first, but he figured it made sense. This was his shop, after all. If anyone would remember who worked there, it was him.

"I see. You remember."

"Of course. I promised I'd do right by both my customers and my girls until the end." With a small shrug, the manager sadly added, "I can't recall her face anymore, though."

The Dove District was a place that shouldn't have existed. No matter what happened there, it would all end up being no more than a dream. Like the manager, Jinya still remembered Akemi as well. But when it came time for this place to meet its end, his memory of this dream was sure to fade with it.

"I wonder where she went," the manager mused.

"To her family, I assume."

"Her family?"

Jinya nodded. He couldn't know for sure, but he *wanted* it to be true. He thought of the young woman he had encountered by chance here in the Dove District that couldn't exist. Even if it would all end up no more than a dream, he wanted to pray for her happiness.

"Why don't we share a drink?" Jinya offered. "I'm in some high spirits for once."

"My, I quite like that idea. Let's have ourselves a toast, shall we?"

In both their hands was a glass of amber whiskey. It needn't be said who the toast was for. Saying it outright would spoil half the fun and be embarrassing too. But they definitely had the same person in mind as they clinked their glasses together.

"Cheers."

He wondered if he would ever happen across her again. If he did, and if he still remembered her, he wanted to be a little playful and ask her a slightly mean-spirited question: "What's your favorite food?" It'd be nice if she answered croquette.

With those thoughts in mind, he took a sip from his glass. The whiskey tasted even better than usual that day.

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August 2009.

"Um, it's something called ketchup yakisoba." The thing Miyaka recalled as they talked about favorite foods was the ketchup yakisoba she ate in junior high school. Jinya made a face that showed he didn't understand, so she continued, "It was back when I was in junior high school. I think it was a Sunday. Kaoru and I were studying for a test together. Noon rolled around, but we were too lazy to go anywhere, so we took some bagged noodles from the fridge and grilled them to make yakisoba."

They'd added cabbage, fish paste, pork, and egg. That much was normal enough, but when it came time to add some flavoring,

they realized they were out of sauce. They scoured the kitchen as hard as they could but came up empty-handed.

"That was when we got the idea to use ketchup. We figured that ketchup spaghetti was a thing, so ketchup yakisoba couldn't be that much worse."

"Interesting. How was it?"

"It was incredible. We called one another geniuses and ate our plates clean." She still recalled the excitement she'd felt then. It was nothing more than an ordinary lunch, but the memory of it was still vivid in her mind. "It's still the most delicious thing I've ever eaten. I try to make it again every now and again, but I just can't make it taste as good as it did then."

Realizing that she was being wordier than usual, she blushed. She smiled wryly and tried to play things off, probably because her classmates had called her ketchup yakisoba weird before. She looked at him, afraid of the way he might respond. "Ah ha ha, sorry. It's a bit weird, isn't it?"

"Weird? Not at all."

"Really? I mean, people usually say it sounds gross and stuff." Though it was something she liked, she didn't think most people would.

Jinya smiled and looked off into the distance. "Both my birth father and my foster father would grill isobe mochi from time to time."

"Huh?"

"I still remember being around the grill, waiting eagerly together with the whole family. But food didn't keep as well as it does now, and the mochi we grilled was stiff and hard. To be honest, it wasn't that great a thing to eat." He sighed softly, speaking with tenderness. "But it tasted amazing. I still remember that day we three kids ate mochi together, all smiles. But, you know, the isobe mochi that Chitose made me probably tasted better."

Miyaka couldn't see what Jinya recalled at that moment, but she understood the emotions he felt.

"It must be something like that. Even if it isn't really that amazing, we remember the flavors that reach our hearts."

And for Miyaka, it was the ketchup yakisoba she ate that day.

She felt a smile come onto her face. She was happy he understood how that trivial meal that came about for silly reasons was something dear to her.

"I see… Um, thank you," she said.

"Not at all. I'd say we've rested enough now. Shall we finish cleaning?"

"Right. Wanna get something to eat when we're done?"

Having finished their soda-flavored popsicles, the two stood up. There was still some more trash to clean, and their meal was sure to taste all the better after they were done and had worked up a sweat.

"Sounds good."

"It's settled, then. You can pick what we eat this time."

"Really? In that case…" Jinya thought for a bit and quickly came up with something, the corners of his mouth rising slightly.

Time stopped for no one. Though he had gained much, he had also lost much in the process. Such was the sad truth he was helpless before.

"I'm in the mood for croquettes today."

But he would probably never forget the flavors that reached his heart for as long as he lived.

Under Starry Skies Together

1

PART THREE: KAJII TAKUMI, HOTARU'S FORMER BOYFRIEND

I've searched so long just to see you once more.

All I want is one more chance to say what I couldn't before.

KAJII TAKUMI SAT on the veranda, taking an evening rest surrounded by the flowers of his garden. By his side was a woman dear to him. The wind gently brushed her hair as she looked up. Following her gaze, he saw that the sky was turning from orange to indigo and the stars were starting to sporadically twinkle.

True night still had yet to arrive, and the stars in the light-indigo sky were far from bright. Their modest shine reminded him of her. He looked back down to her soft face in profile and was entranced.

"Takumi-san? Is something the matter?" She noticed his gaze and asked him that question. Her large, moist eyes made his heart skip a beat. To think he, a man eight years older, would be so flustered by her.

"No. I was just captivated by the sight of you."

"Oh, you." She giggled and covered her mouth as she smiled. His heart began to race.

Looking back on it all, it might have just been him who was in love.

Two years had passed since the war ended, and Japan was going through difficult times. But Takumi could still enjoy comforts like this evening rest on his veranda because his family ran a successful clinic in Yamagata that had been largely unaffected by the war. The love of his life lost her parents during the war and was taken in by the Kajii family because they had known her parents. However, she wasn't adopted as a daughter but accepted into the home as the eventual daughter-in-law. She was grateful to Takumi and his family for welcoming her, but even without such an obligation, the two were close.

He held her dear and believed she felt the same way about him. But what she held in her heart must not have been the same love he felt but the kind felt for family and friends instead. She never returned him the answer he wanted to hear.

"Ah, right. I brought you a gift," he said.

"Oh? What is this?"

"Star sand. I thought you might like it since you always love looking at the night sky so much. Maybe it's a bit bland?"

But he was willing to wait. He believed love needed time to blossom.

"No, it's wonderful… I'll treasure it."

In the end, she never answered his proposal, and they parted without a single goodbye.

***

Hotaru recalled an evening shared on a veranda somewhere. She fiddled with a small bottle of star sand in her hand. It wasn't a valuable object by any means, but it was a gift from him. The small, star-shaped grains looked like sand, but apparently they were actually the husks of deceased tiny organisms… His gift would have been a lot better if he hadn't tacked on that explanation, but being a little foolish was very much like him.

She would gaze at the small bottle from time to time. It had a calming effect on her. Etched in the star sand were nostalgic memories of hers: the starry sky they looked up at together, his sheepish smile. She'd left many things behind, but this bottle was the one thing she couldn't bring herself to part with.

"Hotaru-chan, a customer's here for you."

"Coming." She put the bottle of star sand in her breast pocket and smiled softly. She would sleep with a man she didn't know again today, but there wasn't a trace of hesitation in her. She was used to this line of work.

She passed by the bar counter and, out of the corner of her eye, saw the young man who had become a frequent customer lately. He didn't come to sleep with any women, however, but to drink liquor and chat with the manager. He showed some interest in Hotaru, but apparently not enough to buy her services. That was fine by her, though. He was several years younger, but he was sharp and knew how to hold a conversation. Talking with him was pleasant.

She swore there had been a waitress he was quite taken with, but he made no attempt to talk to any of them now. Perhaps she

simply misremembered? She looked around, thinking to herself there were both fewer customers and fewer waitresses around than before.

"Heya, Hotaru. Hope you don't mind me coming by again."

"Of course not; I'm delighted to see you. Please, allow me to lead you upstairs."

Tonight's client had already come by a few times to sleep with her. She was pleased to know she was liked so much. The man, used to the process, followed her up to the balcony room on the second floor without hesitation.

They spoke little, having no need for words. They took their clothes off and got on the bed. She lightly brushed his hand and guided it to her chest. Snuggling close, she could feel his warmth and his breath.

Ah… So cold. His skin was warm, but the hotter it felt, the colder a place dear to her became.

She did not hate sex. She had abandoned her old self and become Hotaru in full, which was what allowed her to play the role of a sex worker and grant these ephemeral dreams of love. The smile on her face and the feverish moans she made were all real. The man loved her, and she loved him back.

But nights in the Dove District were long, and sometimes it felt like she was gasping for air.

***

Jinya received some rather worrying news from the manager of the milk hall.

"Is that true?"

"It is. A man's been going by several brothels looking for a certain woman. From the sound of things, he seems to be searching for Hotaru-chan." The manager jokingly added, "Reminds me of a certain somebody, don't you think?"

"That's a very interesting tidbit you've given me. Thank you."

"You're very welcome. I must say, you're a rather strange man as well," said the manager, who seemed endlessly amused by Jinya. He wasn't one to call others strange, however, being a man in his forties who talked effeminately. Jinya questioned the manager with his gaze, prompting him to answer, "You clearly have eyes for Hotaru-chan yourself, but you have no interest in buying her services. Am I wrong?"

"She's a charming woman, but yes, her services aren't what I'm after." Hotaru weighed on Jinya's mind, not because she attracted him as a sex worker, but because the way they first met was so unusual. "The reason she's caught my eye isn't that sort of thing."

"Then why?"

"It's just an old habit of mine from a previous job."

The reason he stepped in when he saw that man hassling her was mostly because of his previous occupation. He couldn't stand idly by when someone was in need, and he believed he had a responsibility to see things through once he started. The main reason why he came so frequently to Sakuraba Milk Hall and why he continued to search the Dove District, had to do with that man.

"That kind of man will definitely come again. I may not have been asked to work this case, but I'll lose sleep if I don't do anything." That was the way he lived during the Edo and Meiji years.

Handling spirits was a shrine maiden guardian's duty.

Several days passed. A pale moon hung bright in the sky, casting the night in a metallic sheen.

"Mm, delicious. Freshly made soba is hard to come by, even at restaurants."

Jinya freeloaded at Aoba's place, an apartment one street over from many brothels. In exchange for the roof over his head, he took care of the household chores. Having been a caretaker for many years, he enjoyed their living situation, even if most people would say he was no different than a deadbeat sponging off a woman.

At Aoba's request, he made kitsune soba for dinner, recreating the same dish he made back when he ran a restaurant in the Meiji era. Soba soup broth was generally made thicker in Tokyo than in Kyoto, so Aoba was a bit surprised at first, but she found the taste suited her palate and ate it eagerly.

"I'm glad you like it."

"I was surprised that the soup was so thin at first, but it's great. How'd a guy like you get so good at cooking?" she asked. It was a bit odd that a rugged-looking man like Jinya was so good at something so domestic. He could cook, clean, and even do the laundry well. It was all thanks to his past, of course.

"I used to run a soba restaurant," he answered.

"Ah… So it comes down to experience, after all." Her expression turned serious. It sounded like she wasn't very confident in her own cooking skills. Having lived alone, she could handle domestic chores decently well, but when it came to cooking, she could only manage simple dishes that involved stir-frying or stewing everything together; more delicate cooking was beyond her.

Jinya watched Aoba go into deep thought and smiled wryly to himself. He looked like a young man no more than eighteen years old, but she saw nothing strange about his claim to have run a soba restaurant in the past. It was as though she already knew he was more than he appeared to be.

Of course, he wasn't surprised by her lack of reaction, because he already knew she was plotting something. He was just a little amused that she would give herself away like that. He let it go and started a new topic with her as he prepared their after-meal tea. "Hey, Aoba. Why'd you decide to become a sex worker anyway?"

"Oh? What a surprising question for you to ask."

He wasn't trying to fish secrets out of her or anything like that. They'd lived together for a while now and had grown fairly close. He asked his question out of honest curiosity alone. This was just an idle chat over tea. She could deflect if she wanted to, and she was smart enough to know that. He sipped his tea and waited for her to decide if she wanted to talk or not.

"It's because I didn't want to inherit my family trade." She sighed and made a tired, resigned face. Her voice was weak, telling

him her words had to be honest. Her usual pep was nowhere to be found, and a frail girl took her place. She looked her age for once. "My family's been running a certain trade for generations, and my grandfather's terribly strict about it. He's the kind of person who demands that everyone put the household first."

"Is your father not around?"

"No, he is, and he's doing his best with the family trade. But he doesn't meet my grandfather's expectations, so I was picked to inherit things instead of him. I didn't like that, so I ran away."

"That must've taken quite some guts."

"Ah ha ha. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, really. But it's hard to get by on your own as a woman. That was when I read in a magazine about the Dove District and how all the young girls were flocking here to be sex workers. I saw no other option. Kind of silly of me, huh?"

She spoke cheerfully, but Jinya saw an equal measure of sadness in her. Though she didn't let her bubbly air fade, it was a fact that this woman of tender age had run away from home. It must have been a difficult decision. There were few jobs women could find, and perhaps it was only fate that she found her way here to the Dove District.

"So I came here, nervously looked for work at Ichikawa, and met Nanao-san. I was planning to become a real sex worker at first, but she had a few things to say about that."

"A girl like you has no business being a sex worker."

"Watch us for a while first if you still insist."

"If seeing how we live doesn't change your mind, then I'll allow it."

Aoba was surprised to hear Nanao so flatly tell her a sex worker wasn't something to aspire to be. However, she understood it was said out of kindness, and she decided to stay in the Dove District because of Nanao. She had known the place would have darkness to it, but Nanao showed her it contained warmth as well. Aoba aspired to be a woman like Nanao, someone who had turned her back on society but still lived with integrity.

"Nanao-san didn't want me to become a sex worker, but she still looked after me by giving me this room and odd jobs to do." That was how Aoba became a sex worker in name only, one who didn't take clients and wasn't even an apprentice.

Nanao was against the young Aoba becoming a sex worker, and Aoba looked up to Nanao and idolized the job. They shared a strange bond, but it was a bond Aoba was clearly fond of. Her respect for Nanao could be felt in each of her words.

She finished, "So, yeah. My reasons are nothing grand. I came here because I rebelled against my grandfather. Oh, and I'd rather keep what my family trade is a secret, if I can. It's a bit embarrassing."

"I see. You've never thought about returning home?" Jinya asked. He assumed Nanao kept Aoba from selling her body to leave her that option, but even after the Prostitution Prevention Law came into effect and the Dove District neared its end, she didn't leave—and

that was why she still remained here. Hidden behind her carefree smile were lingering regrets that kept her here like so many others.

"I'm too ashamed to," she said.

"Why? I'd figure Nanao stopped you from becoming a sex worker so you wouldn't have to feel any shame."

"I'm sure she did. But while I was away, my grandfather died." She said it very offhandedly and averted her gaze, preventing him from getting a good read on her. "A letter came from my father. Apparently, he knew where I was. I still can't bring myself to go back, though."

She ran away because she didn't like how her grandfather ordered her to inherit the household. She didn't know how much her actions hurt him, but he probably passed away with deep worries over the future of the family, and that fact haunted her. She betrayed his expectations, then denied him a peaceful death. How could she be so shameless as to return at this point?

"I keep thinking about how I should have done things. What if I had at least shown him the family trade was in good hands with me before he died, so he wouldn't have had to pass with such regret? Would I have given up and gone home by now? I really wonder sometimes."

The Dove District she drifted to was a more comfortable place to live than she could have possibly imagined, but she wasn't mature enough to completely leave her old home behind. She was stuck, unable to decide whether she wanted to return home or not, and had remained in the Dove District ever since.

"Just kidding. Who do I think I am, the heroine of some tragedy?" Aoba tried to clear the air with a joke. It worked only a little, the oppressive mood turning a touch softer.

Jinya had enough tact to tell she wanted him to play along to help clear the air, so he said in his usual indifferent voice, "You can be the heroine of some tragedy if you want, but your story's incomplete without a male lead."

"That's what you're here for, Jin-san! The girl with a troubled past soothes the lost man. It's a classic trope." With a broad smile on her face, she spread her arms wide for an embrace. She was mostly joking, but just a tiny bit serious. She wanted someone to comfort her just then.

Jinya sighed with exasperation, reached out, and flicked her on the forehead.

She flung her head back, pretending to be hurt. "Ouch!"

"A girl your age shouldn't be doing such things," he scolded her with mock anger.

"Er, you know I'm still technically a sex worker, right?" She hid her face and feigned tears. "Boo-hoo. Jin-san, you're so cold."

"As if. Oh, we're out of tea. Shall we call it a day here?"

"Oh, sure. I'll wash the teacups. It's the least I can do."

"No, it's fine. I need to earn my keep here. Just go ahead and take it easy for me."

"Well, if you insist… Thank you."

Jinya took the teacups and went to the sink. Aoba sprawled her arms and legs out and lay down on the ground. Her thanks wasn't for washing the cups but for playing along with her silly acting.

After putting away the teacups, he called out to her once more. "Sorry, but I'll be heading out for a bit. Go ahead and sleep first without me."

"You're not just trying to be considerate of my mood and give me space, are you?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not *that* tactful a man." His reasons lay elsewhere. He picked up the leather sword bag containing Yarai and made to leave.

A pale moon hung in the sky. Spirits liked to stir on nights like this.

***

Kajii Takumi came to the Dove District in pursuit of his former sweetheart. It was an acquaintance who told him she was working there as a sex worker. He knew this acquaintance from his school days but didn't think of him as a friend, particularly because he always said things that got under his skin.

The friend said that he met his old sweetheart in the Dove District and that she had grown into a proper woman, her breasts and hips fleshing out. He even claimed that he'd paid money to sleep with her.

Takumi was furious, but he didn't care to waste energy on a lowlife like that man. He knew she would never be in such a place…

But what if she were? The faint possibility drove him to the Dove District.

His mind was broken, the same thought repeating within it: *I want to meet her one more time. Just once more.* He was haunted by lingering regrets, trapped by feelings he left unsaid. He had continued to search for her ever since, all for the sole purpose of meeting her. He believed that if he could find her just once more, they would stay together for good this time.

He was in his mid-thirties now and beginning to develop conspicuous wrinkles. He was tall and thin, but in an emaciated and lanky sense. His face was pale, and his gait was unsteady. He looked like he had become a ghoul. Even so, he continued his search, shambling through the night.

He saw a figure appear from the darkness and came to a stop.

"We meet again," the figure said in a voice as stiff as steel. He was a young man, about seventeen or eighteen years of age. He had a sword bag slung on his shoulder and a well-trained physique that was visible even through his clothes. The rugged young man, who looked out of place in this red-light district, stood before Takumi as if to block his path.

Takumi recognized the man's face. He had been the one who got in his way when he reached out for his sweetheart that one time. Remembering that moment put Takumi in a foul mood. The young man's composure only irritated him further. Filled with bile, he glared at him.

2

HOTARU SLEPT IN BED with her skin pressed against her client's. The sun was already at its peak. Bright beams of sunlight shone in from the window and roused the man beside her. She met his gaze and smiled passionately, then snuggled closer against his chest.

In the old pleasure district of Yoshiwara, it was customary for men to be roused at eight in the morning—beaten awake, if necessary—but things were lax in the Dove District. Since it was a relatively new red-light district, rules were lenient, and many customers slept in until noon. Hotaru lazily welcomed the morning with her client from the previous night. By the time she saw him off, lunchtime was long past.

"Whew…" Spending the whole night with a client took quite some stamina, but she couldn't let her exhaustion show while the client was around. Only after confirming he was out of sight did she exhale deeply.

She'd never once hated her job as a sex worker. She worked hard to be a woman worth dreaming with, but the nights she spent in the embrace of others were terribly cold. Before she realized it, her hand was reaching for the small bottle in her pocket, seeking warmth.

She must have still been exhausted, because the bottle slipped through her fingers and rolled on the ground. Luckily, it didn't break. She followed the bottle, but someone reached for it before she could.

"Is this yours?" It was the rugged-looking young man who came by the milk hall just to drink. He picked up the bottle with a blank expression, glanced at it for a moment, and then nonchalantly handed it to her.

She sighed with relief when she touched the bottle's familiar glass. She thanked him with a genuine smile, forgetting to don the mask of a sex worker. "Thank you very much."

"Not at all. That's star sand, isn't it?"

"It is. I got it as a gift some time ago."

To Takumi it had been merely a simple gift, but to her it was so much more. When she held it, her heart felt warm and full.

"Must be quite the old gift. The glass is all dull," the young man said.

"I suppose I've had it for a few years now."

"You seem to treasure it."

"I do. I've left many things behind, but this was the one thing I couldn't bring myself to part with." The truth slipped out all too fast. It appeared she still hadn't fully woken up fully, and she forced a smile as though to chastise herself. "Oh dear. A lady of the night shouldn't spoil the mood so."

"Nonsense," he said. "We all have things we can't bring ourselves to leave behind."

He meant to say he was no different in that sense. Understanding this, she said nothing in reply and looked at her feet.

She was interested in the young man, but only as an odd patron who stirred some curiosity. Conversely, the young man liked the way she handled herself as a lady of the night, but he had no desire for her services. Their interest in one another only went so far. That was why, even when they both revealed some of their true self, there

would be no attempt to pry deeper. It was an unspoken rule that such things weren't done around here, and he had to know that.

Her assumption lowered her guard and made his sudden sharp words feel like they clawed at her heart. "Do you cling to that thing because you can't bring yourself to forget Kajii Takumi?"

Her heart ached painfully.

"A bottle containing traces of bygone days… Is that the form of your lingering regrets?"

He was not mocking her. He took the tone with which one might chastise a child, a tone full of gentleness. But her damaged heart throbbed violently.

"You're awfully mean-spirited today," she said.

"Forgive me, but it's in a man's nature to turn jealous when a woman shows off a gift from another man." He made a light apology and shrugged. He clearly didn't mean what he said about being jealous, based on the way he was brazenly gauging her reaction. "I happened to meet Kajii Takumi last night. It seems his feelings for you haven't changed."

She knew this, too, was just another jab to get a reaction out of her. Still, she couldn't stop herself from trembling. With moist eyes, she stared back at the young man, but he said nothing further. Satisfied with what he saw, he excused himself and began to leave.

There was much she wanted to ask him, so she tried to call out. However, her voice wouldn't form. All she could do was watch as he faded from view.

***

Jinya had spoken with Kajii Takumi the previous night. What they shared was less of a conversation than it was Takumi laying his emotions bare.

"Who is she to you?!"

"She isn't the kind who belongs here."

"I'll make her happy this time for sure. We'll be together forever. I won't let go of her twice."

"So please, I beg you. Don't…don't take her from me."

As a fellow man, Jinya could somewhat understand how he felt. On an emotional level, he was on his side. But he couldn't fully approve of his actions, so he was left conflicted.

"These things happen, I suppose." Jinya walked away from the man, then mingled with the crowd and murmured to himself. He had thought it was just Takumi who was clinging to Hotaru, but despite the way she acted, she was attached to him too. They both held lingering regrets toward one another, and the Dove District had welcomed those regrets.

It was a strange situation, but it presented a good opportunity. The two likely already understood it was time for them to confront their regrets, but they wouldn't have been in this mess in the first place if they could take that first step themselves.

"It's not like me to play matchmaker, but…" Surely nobody would fault him for giving them a little push?

Jinya didn't mind playing the fool from time to time, especially not if it meant a heart entranced by what was lost could come to face tomorrow.

***

It was year twenty-two of the Showa era (1947 AD). Two years had passed since the defeat in the war, and poverty was still rampant in Japan.

During the war, Tokyo endured repeated firebombings, and many buildings and people perished. It was the end of winter when the parents of a certain thirteen-year-old girl passed as well. Unable to survive on her own, she was entrusted to relatives.

She did not have an easy life in her new home, though. Goods were in short supply after the war; every household barely got by. Her relatives forced many chores on her, claiming they had no food to spare for hands that didn't work, and they rewarded her exhausting efforts with meager amounts to eat. The children of her new home bullied her and called her parentless. She could not defy any of her relatives, having no choice but to depend on them, and she spent most of her time crying.

It was a tough life, but most of all, it was suffocating. She hated how she was only treated like a waste of space. She didn't want to feel so useless and pathetic. The days continued to pass, but she still felt like she couldn't breathe. She thought she might actually suffocate to death if this went on.

But those days didn't last long. She wasn't freed from her hardship, however, but kicked out by her relatives after a few months. She was passed over to other relatives but received basically the same treatment there. She was unwanted. A burden. She came to think that it must have been a mistake for her to survive, that she would've been better off dying with her parents.

In time, she grew accustomed to her new life, and, as a result, she lost all expectations for anything to change. But two years later, when she turned fifteen, a change finally occurred.

"…-chan. I'm sorry I took so long."

A man named Kajii Takumi came along. Their parents were friends, so she had known him as a family friend who was eight years older than her. He had moved to Tokyo from Yamagata and lived alone. Out of worry for her, he came by her relatives' place several times to meet her. His visits came to an end when she left Tokyo, but he had somehow found the new home she had been passed off to.

"It's been a while. You've gotten a little thin, huh?" He sadly patted her head with his soft hands. It had been a long time since she'd felt the warmth of another.

The two talked at length as though to make up for lost time. He had graduated from medical school and passed his medical license exam, and he was set to move back to Yamagata. He wanted to take her with him.

"Was that a bit confusing? I'm saying I love you. I want you to be my other half." His awkward smile made him seem a little childish.

He planned to introduce her to others as his fiancée and claimed he wanted to repay her parents for the kindness they had shown his family before.

Happy to be wanted as a wife, she felt her face heat up, but her mind was in disbelief. She believed an adult like him couldn't possibly want her—much less *love* her. Having been treated as unwanted for so long, she thought it was too good to be true.

She turned him down, but he came back the next day and the next, asking the same thing every time. No matter how much she refused him, he wouldn't give up. She knew he was just being kind. Making her his wife had to just be an excuse to save her poor pitiful self from being tossed around between her relatives. She felt stupid for getting her hopes up, even if it was just for a moment, and she felt guilty for all the trouble she was causing him.

He visited over and over, asking her to marry him, but his words no longer moved her heart because she knew his true intentions. "I want to make you happy," he would say. Those words proved he only saw her as an object of pity. His undeterred kindness was enough to eventually break down her walls, though. In time, she took his hand with a smile. However, she didn't smile out of joy but out of an obligation to reward him for trying to save her worthless self.

The feelings in her heart were likely not those of love, but there *were* feelings of some sort in there, ones meant for him. That alone, she could not deny.

Despite that, she became Hotaru anyway.

A few days had passed since her conversation with the young man, but discomfort still lingered in her heart. But she still had work to do, so she forgot what he said for the moment and entered the milk hall as a waitress.

"Huh? Somebody is looking for me?"

In a spare moment with no customers around, the manager had called her over. His words made her tense up. "That's right, sweetie. A man's been visiting other brothels looking for a girl of your exact description. You wouldn't happen to be involved in something, would you?"

She knew who the man was right away. Though it had been formed out of pity, her relationship with Takumi had been a good one. He'd probably come because he didn't want it to end.

"It's fine." She inadvertently reached for the small bottle in her blouse's chest pocket, placing her hand over her clothes. Just pressing against it gave her warmth. To tell the truth, she didn't want things between them to end either. Even so, it was too late for her to return to his side. "You taught me yourself, remember? The Dove District is what it is because it accepts all: lust and greed; man and woman. I'm Hotaru now, anyway."

If he came to meet her, then she would face him—but not as the girl she once was. She would be Hotaru.

"If you say so," the manager said. "But come to me if something happens. I'm here for you."

"I will. Thank you."

Out of respect for her wishes, the manager didn't pursue the matter further, and she appreciated that. She'd been in his care ever since she drifted to the Dove District. Her memories of the parents she lost when she was young had already faded to the point where she couldn't recall her father's face. That was why the kind manager felt like something of father to her.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. "A client has requested you."

…On second thought, a father would never readily pair her up with a client like this.

She was told that the client came in while she was away and had already been led to her room, which was unusual. The manager didn't like it when the proper procedure wasn't followed. Even if it meant making the client wait, he usually kept them downstairs so the waitress could start by greeting them.

Thinking that something felt off, she climbed the stairs and made for her room. The floorboards of the hallway creaked. She turned the cold metal doorknob of her room, opened the door, and froze.

The only light in the room was that of the lamp. The man's shadow swayed as the flame oscillated, and the air of the room smelled stagnant. She recognized him.

"I hope you don't mind me waiting for you here," he said. It was the young man who came to this milk hall to drink almost every night. He sat on the bed, a cold look on his face. It was unexpected of him to seek the services of a sex worker and to appear in front of her so brazenly after their previous exchange.

She was shaken, but not enough for it to show on her face. She did not mind. The young man was the sensible sort. He would be a fine client.

"Of course not. In fact, I should be the one to apologize for making you wait… I am Hotaru." She introduced herself, as was customary, but did not ask for his name. If he wanted her to use it, he would tell it to her of his own volition.

"Right," he replied. That was it for pleasantries, then.

She sat down next to him on the bed, leaned against him, and reached out to touch his chest. He stopped her before she could, though.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Not at all." He took some money out of his pocket and put it on the bedside table, then turned to face her. His eyes were calm, absent of the feverous desire she had seen in so many of her customers. "I must start with an apology, however."

"For buying a woman you don't intend to sleep with?" she interjected without missing a beat, putting him at a loss for words.

He put his hands up to show surrender and said, "You got me. But I really mean no offense."

"No offense taken. I can at least pride myself as a lady of the night in having read your intentions."

She had surmised that he didn't intend to sleep with her, and she was fine with that. Quickly, she recovered from her earlier surprise. The stiffness she had felt since their argument a few days

earlier faded as well. The young man smiled wryly, having been seen through.

"You're free to buy my time if that's all you want," she said. "But I'd like to know why you're doing it. It's not the way of this world to ask about one's past or circumstances, but it is strange that a man as young as yourself would pay a far from insignificant price for a woman only to not sleep with her."

His action confused her. Moreover, she couldn't readily accept his money without having done any work to deserve it.

"I want to gaze at the stars with you, and maybe talk about love… Or is that a little too pretentious a claim?" He said his words as though delivering a pickup line, perhaps to get back at her a little. The kindness in his eyes made it clear he was kidding.

They passed rows of café-style buildings with fancy tiling. One wall had the words "Off Limits" written on it in English, a remnant from the time the American occupying forces were around. The street, lit by a blindingly bright heart-shaped neon sign, was wide enough that people could easily stop and gander at the shops on either side. Night had just begun. Men walked to and fro, and women stood in front of shops to try and call them in. Hotaru and the young man bore witness to the red-light district's unique vitality as they walked down the street.

The young man had brought her out, and she followed him without a word. The two avoided the shopping district and the area

with densely cluttered brothels as they headed for the outskirts of town.

"This should be far enough," he said as they left the street and reached the Sumida River. It was quiet. The distant hustle and bustle was faint, and the bugs by the riverbank were silent. The stillness made it the perfect spot to gaze at the stars.

The two found themselves staring up at the sky. Luckily, there was not a cloud in sight, and they were far enough from all the neon lights that they could easily see the twinkling of the stars. She had looked up at the stars like this in the past, together with Takumi. She had surely known happiness then.

"Is something on your mind?" asked the young man.

"Yes. I was wondering why you didn't sleep with me." She lied, hiding what was really on her mind. He probably saw right through her, but she kept up her mask as a sex worker and smiled anyway. "Do you hate women who spread their legs and whisper sweet nothings to anybody for money?"

"Not at all. If I were a man who couldn't appreciate the value of dreams, I wouldn't have come here."

The young man claimed she reminded him of the more antiquated ladies of the night, but he himself felt very old-fashioned. Most people these days laughed off the prospect of paying to fall in love for a night, but he understood the allure that a dream brought.

"You're a charming woman, one well worth falling in love with for a night, but I've brought you here for other reasons. It's time for you to settle things."

"What… What do you mean?" She was slowly realizing the young man's intentions, but she continued to play the part of a dumb, clueless woman.

"I told you I wanted to talk about love, didn't I?" He smiled slightly and looked back up at the sky. His gaze was distant, seeing something that wasn't there. "I used to look at the stars more often in the past. It must be all the street lamps now, but they look dimmer than they used to."

It was strange for such a young man to talk about the past like it was far behind him, but she could tell he meant what he said.

"I fell in love once, back when the stars shone brighter… Hey now, don't look so surprised. I'm a person too and I've had feelings for others, especially when I was young."

"Oh, er, of course. I apologize," she said.

"Away from the village, there was a small hill next to the river where I would look up at the stars together with the girl I loved. We even promised to marry when we got older."

His story felt reminiscent of Hotaru's own. The starry sky he looked up at now must have contained memories of a distant love just like it did for her.

"She was the daughter of an important family in the village and was chosen to become the shrine maiden. I swore to be her guardian, to stay with her in at least some form."

"But things didn't end well between you two…"

"They did not, and I have remained a bachelor ever since."

"I see…"

They had loved one another but did not wed, their promise leading nowhere.

Hotaru squeezed her bottle of star sand. Like her, the young man knew the feeling of love that couldn't bear fruit. Her heart ached hearing his story, but the young man showed no such sadness himself.

"But when we met again, she told me I couldn't stay fixated on what had happened because I had a life ahead of me to live. I had been dragging out the past up until then, recalling it to let it hurt me. I felt like doing that would let me stay connected to what I once lost. It was pathetic of me, really." Despite his self-disparaging words, his soft smile showed no such contempt for himself.

"I don't blame you," said Hotaru. "You can't replace the things you've lost. It's only natural to want to stay connected, even if it's through regret."

"You're right. There really is no replacement."

With heavy sadness in her voice, she asked, "Then why can you still smile like that?"

He replied in a gentle, parental tone. "I suppose it's because the woman I loved taught me that even if you come to forget the feelings you once thought were everything, *something* will remain. But you can't live only looking back at that something."

People could not live in their dreams, and memories were doomed to fade. Some things must come to an end for people to continue walking forward again.

"I've lived my life weighed down by lingering regrets," he continued. "I have no right to tell you to forget your past, but I do believe you need to come to terms with it."

"By settling things?" she asked after a pause.

"That's right." His eyes dropped down from the stars to something. She followed his gaze and froze, her heart skipping a beat when she saw the man standing there: Kajii Takumi—the object of her lingering regrets.

To be honest, she'd expected this. She'd had a feeling the young man was bringing her out to meet Takumi, and she was fine with that. She had been ready to bid him farewell as Hotaru.

But now that she was actually in front of him, her body turned stiff. The fact that Takumi had followed her to this place terrified her.

"I was once a shrine maiden guardian," the young man said. "I served as demon hunter as part of my duties, which included the exorcising of spirits."

With that, the dots came together for Hotaru. It finally made sense why the young man claimed he didn't like to meddle in a couple's affairs but did so anyway. It was both because something inhuman was present and because an unfulfilled love similar to his own had come to pass. He wanted to give a proper conclusion to the feelings both she and Takumi were experiencing.

"A grim fate awaits those entranced by spirits. What happens from here is up to you." The young man looked Hotaru squarely in the eyes. He believed she would make the right choice. Even though the

two were little more than strangers, he trusted her, and so he left without saying another word.

She and Takumi were the only ones left by the riverbank. They stared at one another, unmoving.

"…-chan," he said. Even his raspy voice brought back memories. The two were to be married one day, but she couldn't bring herself to stay with him, so she had fled.

The young man was right. She had to settle things once and for all and bring an end to what they used to have.

3

THE LONG WAR came to an end with the Empire of Japan's surrender. In the final years, when Japan began losing ground, many men were conscripted and sent to the battlefield. Those who weren't nobility or of a similar social class were generally chosen for conscription, but Kajii Takumi was lucky enough to be exempt from the draft because he was a medical student and doctors were always in short supply during wartime. However, Takumi didn't linger much on his good fortune. Any focus he had was dedicated to his studies.

A young girl he knew like a little sister had lost her parents to an air raid and was now living with her mother's relatives. He couldn't bring himself to ignore her plight, but he understood there was only so much he could do. He could not bring her parents back from the dead, and even if he stayed by her side, he had nothing to offer. People liked to say the comfort of one's presence alone could mean

the world, but talk was cheap. One's presence could not fill the stomach, nor could it provide a roof over one's head.

Japan was poverty-stricken after the war. If he wanted to help her, he needed money. That's why Takumi decided to become a doctor—not to take over his family business but to become someone capable of helping her. To put it in another, less flattering way, one could say Takumi was such an awkward man that it took years of preparation for him just to approach a girl eight years his junior.

He believed that the two of them were always connected through the starry sky. Most people feared the sky during the war because they never knew when the next air raid might occur, but she alone would gaze at the stars and call them beautiful, smiling as she expressed the hope that everyone else could appreciate their beauty someday.

That smile of hers was probably what Takumi first fell in love with. He believed he could overcome any hardship if it meant she would smile for him again.

"…-chan. I'm sorry I took so long."

The first thing he did after becoming a doctor was go meet her. Softly, he patted her head. She was thinner now that she'd been passed between the homes of relatives for a while, and her eyes were hollow and devoid of hope. But he wasn't powerless anymore. He now had what it took to help her.

"Was that a bit confusing? I'm saying I love you. I want you to be my other half."

He told her that he had always loved her and he wanted to introduce her to his parents as his fiancée. Out of embarrassment, he couldn't help but sheepishly add that he felt like he owed her parents and wanted to return their favor—something he probably would've been better off not saying at all. But at least he managed to tell her the full extent of his feelings.

She was greatly surprised by what he had to say, which was understandable. It had taken him a long time to come to her, so he wouldn't have been surprised if she turned him down. But he staked everything on the small chance she would have him anyway and visited her almost daily to ask her to come to Yamagata with him.

No matter how many times he told her his feelings, she always flatly replied that she wasn't a fitting match. He became dejected, but his desire to help her didn't change. So he came to a decision: He would make one last attempt, and if she rejected him once more, then he would give up and support her as a mere friend.

"…Why are you going so far for me?"

"Like I've said, it's because I love you. But the last thing I'd want is to trouble you. If you happen to hate me, then…"

"No. I could never…never hate you…"

Tears suddenly began to fall from her eyes. As she cried, she finally showed him that smile he had been waiting for.

"I know I've turned you down so many times already, but is it not too late for me to change my mind and come with you?"

Her soft, gentle voice brought back memories of the days when she was younger and treated him like an older brother. Overcome with joy, he hugged her. His action flustered her, but he held her tight as though it meant he would never lose her again.

That was probably the happiest day of his life. Seeing her smile again was all he needed to be happy, and yet he lost that happiness all too soon.

"She's…gone?"

He proposed to her once more on her eighteenth birthday, but she disappeared without giving him an answer.

Somberly, his father told him she'd chosen to leave. Takumi didn't understand what he was saying at first, but his father's grim expression cooled his head and made the words gradually settle in. She had left him.

It dawned on him that she must have hated him enough to run away. He felt plunged into darkness.

He knew she didn't love him romantically at first, but they'd spent much time together since then. When they looked up at the stars and their fingers brushed, she would blush. The way she called his name turned endearing at some point, and the eyes with which she looked at him had become warm and moist. His waiting hadn't been in vain. She had come to love him as a man—or so he had believed. In the end, he was mistaken.

He felt as though the ground had disappeared beneath his feet. Everything he'd believed in was a lie. She had smiled so happily when

he gave her that bottle of star sand, saying she would treasure it. But that smile hadn't been real.

And so the two became separated.

Eventually, he followed whatever lead on her he could find and, knowing he was simply pursuing a dead love, set foot in the Dove District.

***

From Hotaru's perspective, things had been over between them for a long time. But the Dove District that couldn't exist had brought them together again.

"Takumi-san…"

"Come on, let's go home. You're not meant to be in a place like this."

"Takumi-san, please listen to what I have to say."

"I will, after we go back home. To *our* home. I won't let go of you twice. I'm taking you back with me, no matter what you say."

"Please, just listen to me," she pleaded. Tears streamed from his lifeless eyes as he reached a shaky hand out. She shook her head and sadly said, "I'm sorry, but I'm Hotaru now."

"None of that matters. You're my wife," he insisted. He still clung to her, or rather to the woman she had been. He couldn't let go of what was already long in the past and was left desperate to regain it somehow.

"Why are you going this far?" she asked.

"What do you mean why? I love you, I…I really, really loved you…"

She saw his desperation and, all too late, regretted what she had done. But that was why she needed to end things here, for good. He had always been there for her, but they couldn't stay together any longer. He simply wasn't meant to be in a place like this.

"I've always thought," she began, "that you only saved me out of kindness."

"No. I was happy to be the only one who would save you. I thought it meant we could be together forever."

He didn't try to reach his hand out to her anymore. Instead, he drew near and threw his arms around her. The embrace of others always felt so cold to her, but he had the proper warmth.

"I knew you didn't love me that way," he said, "but I was fine with that. So long as I could be with you—so long as you smiled—I'd have been happy."

She'd thought he was trying to save her, a girl with no place to belong, under the pretense of making her his wife. But the truth was the exact opposite—he wanted to make her his wife so badly that he went so far as to offer her a life that lacked nothing. The two had misunderstood one another from the start.

"I'm sorry. I told myself you only ever saw me as a sort of little sister and never doubted it," she said.

"That's fine. I didn't care if I was loved back. I just wanted you to be happy."

"But you misunderstood me too, Takumi-san. I *did* love you."

Even now, she still remembered the starry sky they looked up at. She'd left so much behind, but she still couldn't bring herself to part with the star sand he had given her. He may have been no more than a brother figure from the neighborhood when she was a child, but time could change hearts. The little girl had grown up to find love.

"But then why did you leave…?" he asked.

"What I felt for you wasn't love at first. But as the days passed, my feelings turned into love. That's why I couldn't bear to stay by your side any longer."

She would only cause trouble for him if she stayed, so she left everything behind and became Hotaru, sleeping with different men every night with only the star sand to soothe her. That was who she wanted to become.

"I wanted to make you forget me and find somebody else to marry. To let you be happy."

She wanted to become the worst kind of woman imaginable, one who was ungrateful for all the kindness he had shown her, so he could be left with no lingering regrets.

"But why? Just seeing you smile made me happier than anything," he said.

There had been a fatal misunderstanding between the two. The happiness she thought he deserved was different from the happiness he actually sought. If only they had opened up more, then things might have ended differently.

"If you really love me, then let's start over from here. Please stay with me. That's all I want," he said.

"I can't, and I know you know why. Please, forget my foolish self."

It was all far too late. Their only option now was to end things as cleanly as possible and maybe make one last beautiful memory. She pushed against his body. His arms went lax and dropped from her side. A distance appeared between the two again.

"I could never forget you. I want to be with you forever."

"We can't. I know your feelings are real, but I can't stay by your side."

With unfulfilled love in her heart, she spent many years alone and came out a little stronger and a little kinder than she'd been before. She looked at him, not as the girl she once was, but as a different woman.

"You've clung to my memory long enough, but you can't let a dead woman weigh you down forever." She bared her heart to the man she once loved.

"No. Stop it."

"You searched for me the whole time, didn't you?"

Takumi had looked for her from the very day she disappeared, but he hadn't found her in time.

"I'm sorry. For not living long enough…and for not staying with you."

A year before the Dove District met its end, there was a sex worker who passed away. Because her disease wasn't infectious, she was allowed to work at Sakuraba Milk Hall up until her last moments. She never lived to see the end of the red-light districts.

That was why, though she could guess it was year thirty-four of Showa, Hotaru knew nothing of the Dove District's end. She did not live to see it.

"I'm sure you would've insisted on marrying me even once you learned I was dying. That was why I wanted you to forget about me instead. I wanted you to remember me as a terrible woman who would spread her legs for money, not a wife who died before her time."

It hurt her to stay with him. His father had examined her body and told her she didn't have long to live. She hadn't been afraid of death, but of dying in front of him. Not wanting to hurt such a kind man, she fled to where he wouldn't find her.

She was sure her ungratefulness would be enough for him to hate her, but if by some chance he actually came looking for her, then he would only find a whore. That, she had been certain, would be enough for him to forget about her and move on.

"But even so," he said, "even if this was all for me, I still want to be with you. Even if it's just for a little longer."

He was still haunted by the bygone days of the past.

What the young man had said was true: A grim fate awaited those entranced by spirits. Takumi would never move forward again if

he kept clinging to the memory of the dead. That was why she needed to end things between them for a second time.

Because she had truly loved him, she would bring an end to their lingering regrets.

"Takumi-san. I loved you both as a kind brother figure and as the man who helped me. So don't think to yourself that you could make me happy if you had another chance. I was *already* the happiest woman in the world with you."

Her words were a half truth. The more she came to love him, the more it hurt her to be with him. But she would see this lie through to the end for the feelings of the man who gave her a place to belong. Surely God would forgive such a small white lie.

"It's your turn to find happiness. I won't be able to rest in peace otherwise."

"No, don't leave me. I still—"

"Thank you for loving me. You gave my unwanted self a place to belong. You were the one thing I could consider true." This time she fully meant what she said.

The bottle of star sand was still in her hands. It would be enough for her to bid him farewell with a smile.

"Goodbye. Make sure you don't fall for such a worthless woman next time."

She showed him no tears, nor even tenderness. She ended things with a joke so he wouldn't need to feel burdened as he moved forward again.

The stars still twinkled in the sky. The refreshing breeze was reminiscent of a night long ago. In the Dove District that shouldn't have existed, the two parted for good under the same starry sky they once shared.

***

"Is your goodbye over?" A monotonous voice called out to Takumi as he groveled on the ground. A figure approached—it was the young man who'd set the stage for tonight's meeting.

"Yeah. It's over. It's all…over. She's gone…" Takumi said.

"I see. The wind's cold tonight. You should get going," urged the young man.

Takumi made no effort to move. Nothing was on his mind but thoughts of her.

He truly loved her and had wanted nothing more than for her to be happy. But the red-light districts were already a thing of the past by the time he had reached the Dove District. The woman of the night called Hotaru passed away even a full year before that, and so their love had never reached a proper conclusion.

"I had no idea what she was thinking when she left, and she never understood how I felt up until the end. Maybe the two of us weren't looking at one another at all."

Hearts could not communicate if both sides only forced their feelings onto each other. Perhaps they had just been selfish, claiming they acted out of love without ever stopping to consider what the other really wanted.

"You said just being by her side made you happy, and she wished for you to be happy even if she couldn't be by your side. I'd say you were both looking at one another just fine." The young man's voice was uncharacteristically gentle. "So don't be so down. The two of you definitely loved one another."

The kindness in the young man's voice made Takumi look up, only to find him gone.

Lingering regrets faded and become no more than memories. But from time to time, Takumi would surely recall the beautiful stars he had seen that night together with her.

***

Thus ends the story of Kajii Takumi, Hotaru's former boyfriend.

For the most part, things went just as Jinya expected they would. Only one abnormality remained.

"Thank you very much. You made it so I could settle things."

Just as he left the Sumida River to head back to the shopping district, a woman called out to him. He had assumed those who abandoned all their lingering regrets would disappear from the Dove District, but here Hotaru remained.

"Not at all. Sorry for forcing something so difficult onto you," he replied.

"It was necessary. For Takumi-san, and for me as well. You knew the truth from the very start, didn't you?"

It only took a glance for Jinya to understand that Hotaru was dead and Kajii Takumi hadn't moved on from her. That was why he

intervened when he first saw them, even though he didn't like to meddle in a couple's affairs. It was easy to see that only a grim fate awaited the two: a woman who couldn't fully discard her feelings and a man who remained entranced with the dead. From the start, the one Jinya had been saving wasn't Hotaru, but Takumi.

"You hung around where I was for his sake as well, I assume," Hotaru said.

"More or less. I'd rather not see what becomes of a man entranced by the dead." It could be said that Jinya himself became a demon because of lost love. He felt an obligation to stop them from meeting the same fate, even if it meant doing something unthinkable. "You really needn't thank me, though. I intended to kill you if things had ended differently."

If Hotaru shared Takumi's wish to stay together, then Jinya would have killed her to free him. That was why he couldn't readily accept her gratitude.

"Even so, I'm thankful." She smiled genuinely, not as a sex worker but as herself. "Thanks to you, our feelings could reach a conclusion. We managed to identify the thing we held between us as love, despite all our misunderstandings. That wouldn't have been possible without you."

"I see," he said, finally accepting her gratitude.

She nodded, then said, "I can only hope he manages to forget me."

There was still quite a distance before they reached Sakuraba Milk Hall, and the two walked side by side as they chatted.

“Don’t ask for the impossible. Some women stay unforgettable no matter how much time passes.”

“Even for you?”

“Of course. I’m sure I’ll never experience a love as vivid as my first.” Jinya looked over at Hotaru; he’d remembered to ask her something. She was unlike anyone he had ever met before. She was old-fashioned, clumsy with her feelings, and sometimes couldn’t bring herself to say what she truly felt, but something about her made her easy to talk to, especially now that she had parted with her lingering regrets. “Say, Hotaru…”

“Yes?”

After ending things cleanly with Takumi, she should have had no reason to cling to her life in the Dove District. So why did she stay?

“Why are you here?”

Did she still carry lingering regrets?

She understood Jinya’s question and thought about it with a childish look on her face. “Hmm, well…” She trotted forward a few steps, spun around, and impishly put a finger to her lips. “That’s a secret.”

She truly was a lady of the night. Her smile was so perfect one wouldn’t mind letting themselves fall for her.

Heart of a Flower

1

PART FOUR: NANAO, DAUGHTER OF MAGATSUME

HOTARU WAS GRATEFUL to the young man, but she also felt a bit bad that he'd done so much for her. He had helped resolve the rift between her and her old boyfriend, and paid a sizable amount of money in the process. Sure, he did it all of his own volition, but she wasn't so shameless as to do nothing in return. That was why she insisted on at least giving him his money's worth in companionship. Understanding she would feel indebted otherwise, he accepted her offer. Maybe there were some other emotions involved, but neither could identify what those might have been.

"I assumed your skin would feel cold," the young man said as he quenched his thirst with the water left on the side table. They were on the second floor of Sakuraba Milk Hall, in the room with the balcony—Hotaru's work room that doubled as her personal bedroom. She had spent several nights here in the arms of other men for her job. The room was dim, lit only by the shaky flame of a lamp.

Hotaru didn't grasp what he meant at first, but she quickly put two and two together. He more or less knew what she was. The dead had no warmth, so it was strange that she did.

"Oh. Perhaps that was rude to say?" he added.

"No, I don't mind. I felt warm to you, did I?" she mused.

"You did."

"Mm. Good." With the sheets wrapped around her body, she smiled. She knew he meant no offense. A mean-spirited man wouldn't have anything to do with a strange woman like her in the first place. He was simply making a passing remark and trusting she wouldn't take it to mean anything more than that. His trust was mainly in Hotaru the sex worker, though. The fact that that bothered her proved her heart was changing somewhat.

"I thought you were warm too," she murmured, hanging her head with a soft sigh. He felt warm, unlike her other clients, not because he was particularly different but because she had changed. The lingering regrets in her heart had faded, and she could now allow herself to freely indulge in the warmth of others. She said, "Any warmth you felt in me must have been your own."

The young man smiled faintly. She spoke more familiarly with him, foregoing the stuffy formalisms as a show of affection. She was just a companion bought with money. No matter how you dressed it up, her sweet nothings would all end as a mere dream; her affection would disappear once night gave way to day. But there was nothing wrong with that. Some things were beautiful precisely because they were ephemeral.

"I'm flattered." The young man, knowing fully well her love wasn't real, allowed himself to fall for her anyway.

The two held no special feelings for one another, but for these brief moments, they were in love.

"I think I'll take my leave here." He started to dress himself. The sun still hadn't risen, and the sky was the color of twilight. He could

sleep in until morning if he wanted, but he showed no tiredness even though he'd just risen and got ready to leave.

"So soon?"

"Yeah. Thanks for tonight, though. I enjoyed myself." He smiled, and she could tell it was genuine. She was reluctant to part with him, but it would be unrefined of her to try and make him stay.

She quickly dressed herself as well in her Western clothes, then held his arm and led him back down to the entrance. After she let his arm go, they went back to being strangers.

"Thank you for your patronage," she said as she saw him off.

But after a few steps, he stopped.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. She knew nothing of his past but could see how he tensed.

"Just recalled a bit of the past; that's all." Elaborating no further, he left.

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Jinya had momentarily stopped in his tracks because he was thinking of his old home. His one-night romance had dredged up the memory of a loved one from his past.

The memory of this distant love was precious to him, but it wasn't a lingering regret within him. He could say with pride that he had said his farewells to Shirayuki, and so his reasons for wandering into the Dove District had to lie elsewhere.

"I can't stand in place forever…" He exhaled the air in his lungs to soothe his stirring heart.

It was unlikely to all be a coincidence. The daughter of his mortal enemy must have been there for the same purpose.

The streets of the red-light district had grown quiet, their unique vitality nowhere to be seen. There were visibly fewer women seeking to bring customers into their shops and fewer men wandering around than before as well. Everywhere Jinya looked, he saw brothels with their lights out. This gaudy neighborhood felt empty without its people. The Dove District was gradually becoming deserted, similar to what happened when the Prostitution Prevention Act came into place.

The air of this dying district was growing stagnant, like the air in an abandoned building. This place would eventually meet its end if it were left alone. Time was all it took for lingering regrets to be buried by memories; regrets faded naturally as one lived out their days. But there was something he needed to do before that time came.

Jinya arrived at Ichikawa early in the evening, a time before most customers patronized it. The women were familiar with him by now and immediately guided him inside to the one he was there to see.

"Oh, you came." Waiting for him in the back of the room was a listless woman wearing Western clothes—Nanao, daughter of Magatsume. "Take a seat. I was just thinking it was about time you showed up."

He sat as she requested, which made her giggle. There was teasing in her voice, and weariness and resignation as well, but that

all faded in an instant. She looked at Jinya appraisingly, nodded to herself, and then fixed her posture.

"So what brings you here today? Maybe you've finally come around to purchasing my services?" she asked.

"Drop the jokes. You know why I'm here. It's what you've been after this whole time."

"My, how rude. You make it sound like I'm scheming something, even though we're after the same thing."

"Hmph. I suppose you're right."

The two kept their eyes locked on one another. There was neither hostility nor passion in their gazes. They were too tense for things to be called peaceful. Jinya tried to act like he usually would, but the stiffness was still there. He felt no discomfort, however, likely because his goal was clear now.

"Everyone's beginning to move forward," he said. "It's time I do the same."

"And I as well. We have to do this eventually or it'll never end, will it?"

The job Nanao gave him was to resolve the mystery of the Dove District that shouldn't have existed. She knew how this place operated but didn't make any effort to do anything about it herself. She likely didn't care what happened to this place. She was a daughter of Magatsume, a discarded part of Suzune's own self. For better or worse, that meant her motives had to lie with none other than Jinya himself.

The same was true for Jinya—his motives for coming to the Dove District lay with her. Their lingering regrets had to do with one another.

"I consumed the woman named Nanao and entered this place. I had no particular goal; it was just mere coincidence. I was abandoned by my mother and simply happened to drift here. But while life here's been good, at the end of the day, I'm still my mother's girl." She held Jinya's gaze squarely, not looking away once. She knew that if she backed down here, she would come to regret it. "My lingering regret is you. I don't care about doing anything for my mother at this point, but I'm still a fragment of her. A fragment of the Suzune who loved you long ago."

He recalled his hundred-year journey up until now, a journey both short and long. He had found many precious things along the way, but his hatred had been a constant companion throughout it all.

"It's the same for me. I need to confront my feelings toward all of you sooner or later," he said. His voice was uncharacteristically weak. He had meant the cruel words he directed at Magatsume after he lost Nomari. He had come to hate her, not because he had to do so as a demon, but with his whole heart.

He had delayed deciding what to do with her, believing he might find it in him to forgive her one day, and that was what came of it.

"I despise her. I still hold her dear and I've lived a hundred years, but I can't part with the hatred in my heart. She's no longer the Suzune I knew either, but Magatsume now. The two of us have long passed the point of no return."

Jinya's lingering regret was that a part of his heart was naive enough to still think things would turn out all right. He believed that he might find it in himself to forgive her in the end and she might have a change of heart too. He had been putting off deciding what he would do, unable to give up on a happy ending.

But Suzune had become Magatsume, and his hatred for her still persisted. The fate that had been foretold for the siblings seemed inevitable by this point.

"That's why I need to confront her and the feelings she once held for me."

Kadono Jinya needed to determine his answer: At the end of his journey, what would he choose? The day had come to give firm shape to his wavering heart.

"In other words, you want to understand us, the discarded pieces of our mother's heart, before you decide whether to kill or spare her? You're a rather foolish man. Killing her would be so much easier the less you knew."

She was right. Still, he didn't want to take the easy route.

"If I kill her, it'll be with full knowledge of her feelings. If I accept her, it'll be together with all my hatred. That's what it means to confront something."

"What an exhausting man you are."

"Sorry. It's in my nature."

She sighed with exasperation, but there was some joy in her expression. Jinya was, at the very least, a man who wouldn't kill her

mother without some thought. Knowing that made her less tense. "You're certain to end up fighting to the death, but you want to understand her anyway. Do I have that correct?"

"I'd say that's about right."

"I see. My own goal was to confront you, or to put it more simply, I wanted to make you understand a small part of my mother's feelings. What a lucky girl I am for us to both be on the same page."

In a sense, they had been on the same page since their first meeting. Even though she knew the Dove District would meet its end on its own, she asked him to resolve its mystery so things would end on both their terms. He agreed to her request to show he accepted that. They didn't say it directly, but they had both been hoping to confront one another like this.

"Well then, why don't we dive into things…is what I would like to say. But a professional has a price for everything, even just talking," she said.

Jinya frowned somewhat disappointedly. He had thought they were after the same thing, so why was she stalling here?

"How about this?" she said. "Bring me gifts. For each one that pleases me, I'll tell you something you want to know."

"…Gifts?"

"Yes, women love their gifts. You don't mind, do you?"

"What is this? Your version of the Five Impossible Requests?"

"Ha ha ha, I'm no princess. Just think of this as your cute niece asking you to play along with her."

He couldn’t help but feel irritated. They both wanted the same thing, so why was she being so difficult? But she didn’t cower at his cold gaze; instead, she broke out into laughter. She seemed to be taking this all as a joke, but she too was a demon. She wouldn’t suggest such a thing and then flippantly back down, so he saw no choice but to play along.

“Fine.”

“Oh? That was easier than I expected. I suppose you’re too stubborn to threaten killing me.”

The fact that she called him stubborn, and not naive, proved she was appraising him correctly. He’d killed many people up until then and had no hesitation over killing others, but he had no desire to kill her here. He had already chosen to confront her and the feelings of Suzune she held, and he wasn’t going to walk that decision back.

“I told you, didn’t I? I intend to confront you all. Besides, I don’t think you’re the type of woman to mess around for no reason.”

“Ha ha, I’m flattered. You’re right, of course.”

That was good enough for him.

“I’ll come by again.” He got up and moved to leave, feeling her gaze follow him as he departed. He didn’t look back once.

Their conversation had lasted for quite some time. When he stepped out of the brothel, the sky had already turned indigo.

He had taken the first step, but he was far from thrilled. Nanao had said she would talk if she got gifts that would please her. In other words, she wouldn’t say a peep if his gifts weren’t to her liking.

In “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter,” five men came to ask for Princess Kaguya’s hand in marriage, and she asked each of them to obtain a treasure. These were the Five Impossible Requests: the stone begging bowl of the Buddha, a jeweled branch from the mythical land of Hourai, a robe made from fire-rat skins, a jewel from a dragon’s neck, and a cowry shell birthed by a swallow. They were all treasures impossible to obtain, so, naturally, none of her suitors succeeded.

Compared to the Five Impossible Requests, Nanao’s request for him to bring her something that pleased her was terribly ordinary. He suspected there might be more to this, but he figured he might as well do what she wanted at this point. Still, he felt a bit weary and exhaled a sigh.

2

JINYA PAID HIS USUAL VISIT to Sakuraba Milk Hall and sipped his drink as he tapped into the manager’s wealth of knowledge.

“You’re looking for a present a woman might like?”

“My niece asked for something. Any idea what I should get?”

“Ah, that one niece of yours, huh?”

Jinya had tried on his own to think of something Nanao might like, but he couldn’t come up with anything. He came to the manager for advice and got some right away.

“How about something like sushi or some baked sweets? Your niece is a sex worker, right? I’m sure she’d be happy with a snack before work.”

A gift that was *too* much could backfire. For a member of the opposite sex with whom one wasn't particularly close, store-bought food was enough.

"I'll try something like that, then. Thanks for the help."

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me afterward, if she likes it." The manager seemed in good spirits; his expression was softer than usual.

Jinya finished his whiskey in one go. With one less thing to worry about, he could enjoy the flavor.

"Ah, finally. I've been waiting."

After picking the milk hall manager's brain, Jinya returned to Ichikawa with a gift in hand. He found Nanao waiting listlessly for him in her usual room.

"Here." He handed her his gift. She accepted it carefully as if she were handling a baby, brushing a finger across it lovingly like a mother.

"Sorry for making you go to the trouble," she said.

"Weren't you hurrying me just a few seconds ago?"

"Only boorish men bring up the past like that. Are these cookies?"

A box packed with expensive sushi was something of a customary gift for a sex worker, but Jinya brought her cookies instead. The cookies made liberal use of nuts and looked rather filling, so they would be perfect for a quick snack before work. A varied and high-

quality assortment like this must have been fairly expensive, and the packaging looked nice too. It was a good gift.

"My, you really splurged for this, didn't you? Thank you. I'll eat some later." The gift appeared to be to her liking, and she accepted it happily.

Jinya breathed a sigh of relief.

She smiled and looked at him with kind eyes, seeming amused by the sight of a master swordsman worrying so much over how his gift would be received. She fixed her disheveled clothes for once, and then her expression changed completely. "Then let's get to it as I promised."

With her Not-So-Impossible Request out of the way, they could get to what they were really after. They locked gazes, the room's peculiar smell still surrounding them.

"Let's see… Why don't we start with my mother's present situation?" she suggested.

"Should you be leaking such juicy information?"

"I told you, I've no interest in being her ally at this point. I couldn't care less whether you know what she's up to or not."

Jinya was meeting with Nanao to learn whatever he could about Magatsume and her daughters, but he hadn't thought Nanao would start by revealing something so grand.

She said, "My mother can't move for the time being, so you can rest easy. I doubt she'll pull any schemes until we get closer to the fated year."

"She can't…move?"

"Yeah. She's, how do you put it… She's gone and hurt herself. She's cut away too many pieces of her heart and left herself with nothing but her hatred. If you change what's inside, the vessel changes too. Her body is turning more and more into a monster. She's gotten stronger, but I think it was at the cost of her presence of mind. She doesn't have what it takes to come and meddle in your affairs anymore."

Now it made sense that he hadn't seen Magatsume causing any trouble during the Taisho and Showa years.

Nanao continued, "That's why she'll only make her next move when her ultimate goal is in sight. I'm sure you're thrilled to hear that."

In other words, he could be sure the people of Koyomiza wouldn't be targeted. He was, indeed, thrilled to hear such a thing.

"That about covers it. What's left… Ah. Say, how much do you know about my mother's goal?"

"I heard that it involves creating hearts," he answered, "and that she hates the world and wants to bring ruin to everything."

"Those are both about right, I suppose. But that's all just part of the process. There's a *place* my mother is seeking, a place she's been seeking from the start and will only keep seeking from here on out. Creating hearts and bringing ruin to everything is merely the groundwork for this ultimate goal—no more than the ingredients prepared for a recipe."

Everything she said was news to Jinya, and the more he heard, the more eager he was to keep learning. Intensely, he asked, “What is this ultimate goal of hers?”

But just as they were approaching the heart of the matter, she raised her hand to stop him, saying in a teasing tone, “Oh no you don’t, Mister. Your gift this time only gets you that much.”

He couldn’t hide his irritation. “What?”

“If you want to hear more, you’ll have to bring another gift that’ll please me.”

“What about those cookies? You seemed plenty satisfied with them.”

“Oh, I was. But they weren’t a gift for *me* so much as they were for a sex worker. Am I wrong?”

She wasn’t. He’d chosen those filling cookies because he thought they would make a sex worker happy, not Nanao specifically. She’d accepted them with a smile, but he hadn’t truly fulfilled the conditions of her request.

“Ah, it seems you agree,” she said. “Then let’s end things here for today. I’m looking forward to your next gift.”

“No, wait—”

She ushered him out of the room with a smile, not bothering to hear his complaints. To be honest, he didn’t really know what he would say if she even gave him that chance. She had outplayed him well.

The women outside the room looked at him and, having seen him get chased out, regarded him with equal measures of pity and amusement. He had spent less than a half hour inside before being shoved out, giving rise to all sorts of sad but humorous possibilities.

"Fine. I accept your challenge." He clenched his fists, his shoulders trembling with humiliation. He silently vowed to bring a gift that would render her speechless.

"A gift Nanao-san would like?"

He didn't care about maintaining appearances, so he went to Aoba, his best bet among his acquaintances to learn about Nanao. He questioned her the very moment he returned to her apartment, rendering her a bit surprised.

"Er, I guess I don't mind telling you, but what brought this on?"

"I need a worthy tribute to speak with her."

"Uhh…"

Seeing she was still confused, he filled her in on what was going on, leaving out the important bits.

"Wow, so Nanao-san's your niece? Wait… So you're Nanao-san's mother's older brother? Is that right?"

"It is. Why?"

"Well, it's just that Nanao-san told me a little about her mother before. She said she was the kind of woman who'd get jealous of her own brother's lover and throw a fit."

"That's about right."

"Wow. You must've had it rough, Jin-san." She smiled wryly out of exasperation, or perhaps sympathy. "I think Nanao-san likes collecting combs. She once told me she likes ones with flower designs on them."

"Combs, huh? Thank you. You're a big help."

"No worries. Oh, and she apparently likes yellow flowers. She also mentioned that she and her mother don't like white flowers because they hate snow."

Jinya avoided commenting on that last bit. He'd gained some valuable information, though. As he made dinner for them both, he thought about his plans for the next day.

"Oh? A boxwood comb. Is this fretwork of a lily of the valley? It's quite a good make."

Jinya paid another visit to Ichikawa, and his gift for Nanao this time was a boxwood comb. Boxwood was a popular craftwork material that was used for stamps, furniture, decorations, and the like, but it was best known as a material for combs. Boxwood combs had been a popular gift for women since olden days and were even the subject of many love poems. Gifting a boxwood comb was even considered a discreet way of expressing love.

Of course, Jinya held no romantic feelings for Nanao whatsoever. But she was a lady of the night, so he assumed she would appreciate this gift that promised ephemeral affection.

"My, my, I'm flattered," she said, her cheeks slightly flushed. "You've chosen a gift that suits my interests *and* my line of work."

"Anything to please you."

"Oh, I'm pleased, don't you worry. Now, for your reward…" With her face still flushed, she bashfully continued. "Let's see… Ah, I know. Why don't I tell you about us daughters of Magatsume? That's what you originally wanted to know, right?"

He nodded, which made her smile. Her voice was more cheerful than before, perhaps thanks to the boxwood comb gift.

"We daughters were originally faceless spirits, created from the discarded parts of our mother's heart. By taking in an aspect of a person, we gain individuality. I myself ate the sex worker known as Nanao to become who I am. However, I am not a copy of Nanao, but a mixture of her and the fragment of my mother's discarded heart. The only exception to all this is Himawari-neesan."

Jinya had always suspected Himawari was different from her sisters, and now he had firm proof he was right.

"Himawari-neesan is the eldest of us daughters. She was formed from the first thing our mother discarded from her heart: the love she once held for her brother. She didn't need to take in an aspect of a person to form individuality; the emotions from which she was formed were already strong enough. That's why she alone is special. Oh, of course, she's also special because of her final duty, no doubt."

Her final duty? That tidbit immediately caught Jinya's interest, but Nanao moved along before he could get a word in. He had a

feeling she was toying with him.

"Now, to explain *why* she created us," she said.

"The 'why' is obvious, isn't it? She needed pawns to do her dirty work."

"Ahh, I had a feeling you thought that. But no, we weren't created because she needed us as pawns. It's the very opposite. We were created because we were in her way." A heartbroken look filled Nanao's eyes. She'd mentioned she was abandoned by her mother and was through with her, but she clearly wasn't fully over her. "My mother loved you, her brother. That's why she had to create Himawari-neesan first. She couldn't stand against you with her love for you still in her heart."

The daughters of Magatsume weren't made to oppose Jinya; they were a mere byproduct of what she had to discard to oppose him. That was why Himawari looked so young even though she was the eldest of the daughters—she was born from Magatsume's most precious and most impeding emotion.

"Of course, the same goes for the rest of us sisters. Our mother single-mindedly discarded the parts of her heart that got in her way, forming us. We all bear flower names and abilities that share that name, to represent what we were formed from."

"How so?"

"Through the language of flowers. Himawari, or sunflower, means 'I only have eyes for you.' That's why her ability lets her remotely observe a set target. She was formed from our mother's

wish to watch you at all times, so she could go to you wherever you were. Perhaps that matches what you know of Himawari-neesan?"

Jinya recalled how Himawari acted. She had warmed up to him abnormally quickly the first time they met, as though she already knew him. Now, understanding why, he gritted his teeth. An emotion he couldn't identify welled up inside him.

"Jishibari means 'to restrain.' Her ability allowed her to restrict movement and abilities with chains. She was created from a desire to bind you, to keep you by her side, unable to leave, even if it meant chaining you down… Ha ha. She has some rather kinky tastes, that mother of mine."

Jinya recalled Jishibari, the demon he met back in Edo times who had taken Nagumo Kazusa's image. She had mentioned being unwanted by Magatsume and never once referred to her as her mother because of it. Jinya had pitied her.

"Azumagiku means 'brief respite.' The ability to erase memory was formed from a wish to make you forget her…or perhaps the troubled history you two share. I'm not sure. At any rate, I'm sure there were many things she both wanted to forget and wanted to make you forget. My sister Azumagiku was the manifestation of a faint wish to return to the way things were with you, but she wasted any chance of that on a rather silly scheme."

As an aside, Nanao mentioned that Magatsume had personally adjusted Azumagiku to make her look more like the woman whose aspect she absorbed. Jinya already knew that, of course. Azumagiku had essentially been *her*.

"Furutsubaki means 'I will always love you,' which sounds nice on the surface, but she had the rather twisted ability to control others. But then again, I suppose that's a form of affection too. When you love someone, sometimes you want to control everything they do. It's improper, but such is the nature of a woman's heart."

Jinya recalled that pitiful daughter of Magatsume, captured and manipulated by Nagumo Eizen. She had taken Saegusa Sahiro's image and left a rather poor impression on Jinya, but her ability *Furutsubaki* had allowed him to save Ryuuna. For that, he was thankful to her.

"All of us sisters come from something our mother felt toward you. Even after she discarded us from her heart, she keeps us dear. Most of us, at least. You see, my flower name represents a desire my mother didn't want to acknowledge. That's why I wasn't made one of her pawns and got discarded in the truest sense, eventually ending up here."

"…And your flower name is?"

"You'll know in time, when all is finished and I've given you my ability as payment. Just. As. Promised." She brought the topic to a close and giggled, enjoying the face Jinya was making.

He had known the daughters of Magatsume were discarded parts of her own heart, but he hadn't stopped to seriously think about what that meant. This newfound knowledge changed how he saw the daughters he had faced so far. His chest tightened with the realization that he had mercilessly devoured every single one of them he encountered, Himawari aside. He even knew why Magatsume had hurt

herself so much now. An unplaceable emotion welled up inside him together with his hatred.

"Thank goodness. I was worried you wouldn't be affected by all this," Nanao said.

Magatsume was currently left broken because she had cut away the parts of herself that cared for him. Put another way, the feelings Suzune had held toward him were so deeply rooted in her heart that cutting them away had damaged her essential self.

"I'm relieved you are the man you are. Do you understand now? My mother truly loved you. Even after you both became demons, her feelings for you were so strong that she had to do away with them in order to stand against you. But no matter how much she cut away, more and more of her feelings for you appeared. You are, in the truest sense, everything to her." Nanao sincerely hoped he would never forget that. Even if the day came when he killed her mother, she prayed he would at least never doubt the sincerity of her feelings.

Jinya was speechless. He saw the love his sister and her daughters held for him, but his hatred was still there.

"Let's call it a day, shall we?" Nanao said. "Next time we'll talk about my mother's ability and her ultimate goal. If you bring me a worthy gift first, that is. I'm looking forward to your next visit."

Unable to calm the emotions inside him, he could only manage a nod in reply.

3

NANAO TOLD HIM the next visit would be the last. He couldn't come up with a fitting gift for the occasion, though. Learning what lay in Magatsume's heart had daunted him. His thoughts were leading him nowhere, so he decided to get a drink and visited Sakuraba Milk Hall.

"Nice to see you."

"Welcome."

He was greeted by both the manager and Hotaru. The latter acted slightly differently now, perhaps because the matter of Kajii Takumi had been resolved. She was still as graceful as before, but there was also something more to her now.

"Hey," Jinya greeted.

"Is something the matter? You seem to be in low spirits," Hotaru said.

"Do I?"

"You do. Quite obviously so too."

"I see…" He couldn't even be bothered to deflect it.

She looked at him and thought for a moment, then grabbed his hand. She turned to the milk hall manager and asked, "Is it all right if I step out for a bit?"

"Go for it. Make sure you treat our best customer well."

Without even waiting to hear Jinya's wishes, she pulled him out of the shop. A demon like him could've resisted if he wanted to, but he trusted her enough to go along.

She took him to the bank of the Sumida River, a place they'd been before and a good spot to see the stars.

"You're rather aggressive today," he said.

"You could have resisted me if you wanted. The fact that you didn't means you don't mind, right?"

"I suppose so."

She'd seen how troubled he was and brought him out here as a way to return the favor he had shown her. But she struggled to find the right words to say next, even though she was usually such a smooth talker. That proved she was trying to help him as herself, not a sex worker. Understanding that, Jinya relaxed greatly.

"…Do you find it funny to see me so tongue-tied?" she asked.

"Not at all. It's heartwarming, if anything."

"Somehow, I'm not too flattered."

He let out a warm sigh and looked up at the night sky, where a curtain of stars was sprawled out above. Starry nights were something special to both of them.

"Sorry for making you worry about me," he said.

"Not at all. Would you mind if I asked what happened?"

"I was just reminded of how pathetic I am, that's all." He avoided giving a true answer, which made her frown.

"All right. But if you ever need anything, come to me. I can't be on the receiving end of your kindness forever. A woman's got to save face."

"I appreciate your kindness." But he would never actually seek her help if it came to it. She was a woman of the night, and he was a client. The line in the sand was clear, and crossing it would do neither of them any favors. "This is a good opportunity. Can I have your opinion on something?"

"Of course."

"I can't think of a good present to give this one sex worker I'm acquainted with. Can you recommend anything?"

She frowned. It was discourteous to ask one sex worker to think of a present for another. But she quickly guessed who this gift was for, and her frown faded. "Oh. Is this sex worker the one I've heard so much about?"

"My niece? Yes. I've gifted her food and a comb already, and she liked them, but they don't seem to have been quite what she was after."

"I see. Are the two of you close?"

"Good question. I'd like to believe she's fond of me, at least." He shrugged.

Hotaru couldn't see what he was so stumped by. She replied not as a lady of the night, but as herself. "Just about anything should be fine, I'd think. It'd be one thing if you were getting a gift for any old sex worker, but I'm sure your niece would be happier with one that you had to come up with yourself instead of asking around for. All the more so if she likes you."

"…Is that really true?"

"Absolutely. At least, that's how it was for me," she said, fiddling with her bottle of star sand.

The value of a gift didn't lie in its price or how it matched the receiver's interests. The value of a gift lay in the thoughts it was chosen with.

"Was I of any help?"

"Yes, very much." Jinya thanked her, then looked up at the stars with her.

The stars were less numerous than he remembered from the past, but they certainly shone a little brighter than they had a few moments ago. The night sky was not so bad in this neon-lit part of town.

The act of wrapping gifts in paper is called origata. In Edo times, paper was a precious commodity, and using it to wrap objects was an act of both etiquette and prayer. One could not fold paper without it coming from the heart. A gift could be a transient thing, but the sincerity with which it was prepared and given always lingered.

The gift Jinya brought this time was not wrapped in anything. However, that wasn't because he lacked sincerity; instead, he believed his sincerity would come across even if he didn't dress his gift up.

"Is that your gift for today?" Nanao asked.

"It is," he answered without a hint of shame, which seemed to please her. The gift in his hands was a small flower he had found along the street as he made his way here—a dandelion.

"I saw it on the way here. You like yellow flowers, right?"

"I do. Thank you, it's a wonderful gift. You pass." She accepted the flower from him with great care, as though it was a fragile thing.

He had given her expensive sweets, a boxwood comb, and now a flower picked off the street. Most would think his last gift was intended to slight her, but Nanao was beside herself with joy and wore a broad smile. Seeing her smile reminded him of a much younger girl —Suzune used to smile like that for him, long ago.

"Of course, all your gifts so far have been passing ones. Or rather, there isn't a single gift you could give that wouldn't be. I am part of my mother's heart. It's only to be expected that any gift from you would please me."

From the start, this had been nothing at all like the Five Impossible Requests. The gifts themselves were unimportant; it was the effort he put into making them that mattered. That was why the gifts he had help in choosing, like the sweets and the comb, didn't reach her heart as much as the flower that caught his eye on the way here.

Nanao smiled victoriously, full of relief and satisfaction. "You understood what I was after."

"It took me a while, but yes. You said you weren't the type to mess around for no reason. It took me a few days, but I finally figured things out."

In the past, Magatsume…*Suzune* used to be happy to receive the trifling gifts he had brought her. As a child, he had no money. The best he could manage to give her were things like pretty stones found

on the riverbed or flowers, but she would treat them like little treasures anyway. Any gift from him was a precious thing. Such happy times had once existed between them, and that was what Nanao wanted to remind him of.

"Good. I may have been abandoned, but I'm still my mother's girl. I wanted to do at least something for her." With this, Nanao's lingering regret—the fact that she hadn't done anything for her mother—was resolved. Though she had been abandoned by Magatsume, she still regretted not being able to do anything for her. But now that Jinya had learned a little of how her mother felt, the lump in her heart cleared away like ice melting in the spring sun. She had fulfilled her purpose and was in high spirits. "Let's get to our final topic, then: my mother's ability and her ultimate goal. But promise me one thing before we continue. Once we're done, make sure you accept my payment."

Once it was all over, he was to use *Assimilation* to devour her and her ability.

"Nanao…"

"It's what we agreed on, isn't it?" she said with a smile. "I have nothing to tell you if you can't uphold your end of the bargain."

"Why go so far?"

Jinya's arm had to devour others whole in order to take their abilities. He couldn't steal someone's abilities and nothing else. To take someone's ability was to take their life. She had to know that, and yet she still insisted he kill her.

"Because. I may be my mother's girl, but I am myself first and foremost," she said resolutely, as though to suggest there needn't be any further reason.

He couldn't manage a word in response, but her feelings reached him, so he slowly nodded after a moment's hesitation.

"Thank you. I'm ready to tell you everything now. I only ask that you not get caught up in what I have to say and instead make the choice you believe to be right. I'm sure my mother will accept whatever future you choose." As if she was entrusting her last wishes to him, she began, "My mother's ability is *Mahoroba*…"

Jinya listened to Nanao's explanation in full. He learned of the truth behind Magatsume's regeneration and the wish that formed it. Her pitiable feelings made his heart feel constricted like it was being wrapped in soft silk. He would no longer hesitate now that he knew everything. No matter how painful an ending it would lead to, his answer was set in stone.

Nanao said, "I've said it already, but I'll say it again: You are the only one who can stop my mother at the end of it all. A demon's ability can grant anything but their one dearest wish. Don't forget that."

"I know."

If what she said about Magatsume's ability was true, then the only one who could stop Magatsume—in terms of both ability and

emotion—was Jinya. Of course, even if there were somebody else who could fill his shoes, he wouldn't let them. This was his responsibility.

"With that, I've told you everything. I'm satisfied. Are you?" Nanao asked.

He had confronted what lay in Magatsume's heart and learned of her goal. Though it had taken him many years, he finally had an answer to what he would do at the end of his journey. He could proudly say he had no more lingering regrets—which meant it was time to bid farewell.

"Thank goodness," she said.

The time to fulfill their bargain had come. There was no fear in her eyes; in fact, they were full of joy. That must have been because she was made from Magatsume's emotions. She was more than glad to give her life for Jinya.

"Don't look so glum. This is what I wanted," she said. She drew close and put her hand against his chest. Her warmth was comforting. He had let his guard down toward her enough that he could indulge in such a thing.

"You're really fine with this?"

"Of course. Believe me when I say I'd be the happiest woman in the world to become part of your strength."

The other daughters of Magatsume up until then had only been enemies because they obeyed their mother. Having become estranged from Magatsume, Nanao instead placed Jinya first in her heart. She

wanted to become his strength and was readily willing to throw her life away to do so.

"You'd better not back out now. Not after forcing a lady to make such a shameful display of herself," she said, speaking flirtatiously in the manner of a lady of the night.

A natural smile formed on his face. "Ha. Fair enough."

The tension in the air dissipated. Taking advantage of Jinya's lowered guard, Nanao made her move and stretched forward, stealing his vulnerable lips. It was a kiss without passion, crude and forced. Her cheeks flushed lightly.

"Hee hee. Looks like I beat my mother and Himawari-neesan to it." As if to say that action alone made all her efforts worthwhile, she took Jinya's left hand and put it at the base of her neck.

Jinya would likely never understand this woman's heart. He couldn't fathom the depth of her emotions—he dared not even try. But this was the end she wished for. Even if he couldn't understand her desire, he had a responsibility to grant it.

He put strength into his left arm and tightened it around her thin, pale neck.

And so, behind closed doors, the story of the mysterious sex worker of the Dove District came to a conclusion. Her end was far from a happy one, but she smiled in her last moments.

Jinya left Nanao's room and stopped, sensing a change in the air. It was already night, work time for the brothel, yet the place was

silent. Not a single light was on in the corridor, and the air was dry. He couldn't see any of the other sex workers around. The place was abandoned. This was a dead building, absent of its caretakers. Without any fanfare, Ichikawa had met its end.

Nanao had been this place's manager. With her gone, many of the other sex workers must have lost their reason to linger. This place had never existed to begin with, so perhaps this was only a fitting end. Jinya felt a little disheartened, but he couldn't stand still forever. He looked back once and committed the sight of Nanao's room to heart. It was no funeral service, but he had a feeling it was enough.

He left the brothel behind. It was late in the night, but the unique vitality of a red-light district was absent. The end was palpable. This place that shouldn't have existed would meet its proper end soon.

Jinya stood alone on the empty street and stared at his left arm. He had devoured Nanao. He'd gained almost none of her memories, as had been the case with the other daughters of Magatsume. However, he'd gained her ability and therefore learned her true name and the meaning behind it.

"*Suisen*… The ability to redirect something meant for another to oneself."

Suisen was Nanao's true name, and her ability's purpose was to force feelings meant for another onto oneself. In the language of flowers, *suisen*—the Japanese word for "daffodil"—meant "narcissism." But Nanao had said she liked *yellow* flowers, and in the language of flowers, yellow daffodils meant…

"…'Love me once more.'"

That was why Magatsume abandoned Nanao. She alone represented a feeling she could not accept as part of herself.

Magatsume could acknowledge her feelings of love for her brother, but her desire to be loved by him was another matter. Jinta had loved Shirayuki, so Suzune stopped her own growth to at least remain by his side as his sister. However, a sister could not hope for anything more than familial love. Out of love for her brother, she gave up on being loved back. That was why she spurned Nanao, who represented her unbecoming desire to steal his feelings for another and make them hers.

Nanao lived her whole existence unwanted. She had no place to go or belong, and she only found meaning through being devoured by Jinya and passing her ability on to him. To provide at least a little help through self-sacrifice was the only thing she could wish for.

"Nothing's sadder than feelings with no place to belong," he said. For her sake, he would walk forward carrying the feelings she had shown him. He caressed his left hand and committed her warmth to heart. "Thank you. Your feelings are with me now."

He would not forget the way she had loved her mother, nor the way she had helped him. His murmur might fade into the night, but a part of her would remain with him. He closed his eyes and prayed: Even if the Dove District had to end, even if his memory of this fleeting dream would be lost, may the warmth that had come to rest in his heart remain.

With that, he began to walk again.

Silence echoed down the dreary street, and he could not see what lay ahead in the darkness. But, much like a lantern, Nanao had lit the path awaiting him. He had a feeling the destination he sought would be brighter than he'd previously expected.

Dream's End

1

SHE THOUGHT BACK to the night they slept with one another. Things came to be out of indebtedness and compromise; their hearts weren't in the act. But to Hotaru, it was still an unforgettable night.

"I've whispered sweet nothings to many men in this room," she had said.

The young man listened without interrupting. She found him strangely easy to open up to. The two gazed at the night sky as they cooled their flushed bodies out on the balcony.

The wind was a bit warmer than she'd have liked, but plenty of stars twinkled overhead. She felt peaceful as she exhaled the hot air in her lungs.

"The other girls have issues with how I talk to men. They say that my words are insincere and I can't get customers without humiliating myself."

The starry sky was connected to her memories of a distant romance. This room and its balcony were only given to her as part of her job, but she liked them. Her life at Sakuraba Milk Hall had not been a bad one, and being a sex worker had turned out to suit her nature well. She had lived as a traditional lady of the night, as Hotaru, all the way until her disease took her.

"But I think lies suit a lady of the night just fine."

Surely she had earned the right to break the rules a little? She had departed the mortal coil long ago, and this was a place that didn't

exist. Her night with the young man was something that shouldn't have been possible, a dream born out of coincidence piled on top of coincidence. Surely she could be allowed to indulge for a few seconds, for the short time they cooled their bodies and looked up at the stars, and be somebody other than Hotaru, the old-fashioned lady of the night?

She laid her heart bare to the second man who'd shown care to the girl she had once been. "Love from the heart demands too much in return. That's why insincere sweet nothings that last for only a night are just right… Everyone has times when they find life too much to bear. What's wrong with giving others a moment of comfort to help ease their pain and let them sleep the night away?"

True love was demanding and cold; that was why ladies of the night deceived men with cheap lies and shallow imitations of love. A lie's warmth would disappear without a trace by the time one woke up, but at least they would be comforted through their otherwise sleepless nights. As a fatally ill person who could not hope to live long, Hotaru had desired the ability to grant those kinds of comforting dreams.

"Just kidding. I'm sure I don't really mean any of that," she said.

"Why not? I thought it was wonderful."

"No, I…I probably just wanted to comfort myself. I thought becoming such a lady of the night would let me use the warmth of others to ease my own cold heart."

She saw herself as a foolish woman. She fled from Kajii Takumi but still sought somebody's warmth and, even more than that, longed

to be wanted. She lived and died a foolish woman through and through.

"Doing what is 'right' isn't always what's best," the young man said. "You might've started sleeping with men for the wrong reasons, to use them to comfort yourself, but there have been people you helped. Even if the love you gave others ended up being no more than a dream, the comfort you provided was real. I'm sure of it."

Sometimes, good could come from doing something considered wrong.

There's a saying that went "Dead flowers bear no fruit." Once you're dead, nothing was left. But here Hotaru was, in a red-light district that didn't exist, experiencing a warmth she never found in life. It was too minor a thing to call a miracle, but it was one of the few things to occur in this district that she could call genuine.

Her first love was long over. If there was any lingering regret to be found in her at all, it would have to be this warmth she felt now, she thought. She concealed her feelings and smiled.

"…That's a nice line. What kind of woman did you pick it up from?" She was too embarrassed to just thank him, so she joked back instead.

"You can tell?"

"Of course. It's obvious from the tender look on your face."

The young man awkwardly touched his face; he hadn't realized the expression on it. "I learned it from the poster girl of this soba restaurant I used to frequent."

"An old lover?"

"Nothing like that. She was a friend, maybe. Or perhaps an older sister figure. I'm not quite sure what's the right word. But she was someone dear to me." His eyes overflowed with affection. He had nostalgic memories he treasured. Hotaru was happy for him, but her chest felt tight.

"I'm jealous." The words inadvertently slipped right out of her mouth. The young man's expression didn't shift, but his brow did move slightly, and he questioned her with his gaze. She smiled and said, "I'm jealous of the way you can say you treasure old memories without a hint of hesitation."

She wasn't jealous of the woman he spoke of, but of him. From the sound of things, he clearly hadn't met this woman in a long time. But there was no sadness in his gaze, only tenderness.

Hotaru had had much taken from her and left behind many things herself. She could do nothing but grieve about all that. That was why she felt jealous of the young man and how he could look back on bygone happy days and say without a hint of grief that they were precious to him.

"Unlike you, I can't do anything but feel sad over what I've lost," she said.

"I see. I'm rather blessed, then."

The young man didn't push her to explain. She appreciated his kindness, but a small part of her wished he had. Perhaps that

would've been asking for too much, though. She went back to talking about unimportant things.

After some talking, the young man abruptly made a slight smile. "There's nothing romantic about this at all, huh?"

Having moved on from the soba restaurant's poster girl, they only talked about inconsequential things like past work, what kind of alcohol they liked, Hotaru's daily life, and good places to eat. It was fun, but it lacked the spice that would typically follow a night of passion.

"No, there really isn't. But nights like these aren't bad," she replied. The night wore on with no words of passion being exchanged. They were far from the image of lovers, but she didn't mind.

"Indeed." He didn't seem to mind either.

She looked at his face in profile and felt he had become mellower than when they first met. He, too, must have confronted his lingering regrets at some point here in the Dove District. That meant the time to bid farewell was approaching. Although she saw that their end was near, she pretended not to notice. Part of her wanted to, but she hesitated because speaking one's mind was not the way of a lady of the night.

Ah… In the end, she couldn't let herself be an ordinary woman.

A wry grin formed on her face. The stars twinkled, as indifferent to her worries as always. Neither of them said those damning words that would end it all.

From time to time, she thought back on this night and how she couldn't take that last step no matter how hard she tried. That was fine, though. Words left unsaid and feelings never brought to light—both eventually faded like snow. But some things were beautiful precisely because they ended as no more than a dream.

***

He woke up rather peacefully. The remnants of his dream still lingered, threatening to lull him back to sleep.

He was living a decadent life, sponging off a sex worker without doing any labor outside of housework. As ashamed as he was to admit it, he liked this life; after all, he had lived driven by his hatred so far. By no means did he regret the painful path he walked, but ordinary peace like this was nice.

"Up and at 'em…" Jinya forcibly kept his consciousness from slumbering again and got up. It was time to prepare breakfast.

"Thanks for the meal. Your food's always delicious, Jin-san."

Ever the voracious eater, Aoba enjoyed two servings of rice with her breakfast, then sipped her after-meal tea. A healthy appetite was a good thing, and watching her eat was satisfying enough to make the effort of cooking worthwhile. He thanked her, then washed the bowls in the sink. They chatted afterward like they always did.

He had grown accustomed to his freeloader life, as embarrassing as that was to admit. He would miss it.

"Is something up?" Aoba asked.

"Yeah…" He had an answer to what he would do at the end of his journey now. His lingering regrets were gone, and so was his reason for staying. "I'm thinking it's about time I left the Dove District."

Her expression stiffened for a moment, and he could tell she wasn't acting. She was genuinely flustered. "Huh? You're…leaving?"

"I am. My objective is complete, and I have others waiting for my return. Also, I don't want to impose on you any longer than I have to."

"I…I see."

"Thanks for all the help you've given me, Aoba. I mean it."

She had taken him, a stranger, out of the rain and given him a place to stay. He never learned what she was hiding from him, but whatever her reasons may have been, he was still grateful to her.

"That's a shame, but I guess it can't be helped. Are you leaving soon?"

"I want to say my goodbyes to a few people before I go. I'll leave after that." He reached for Yarai's sword bag. The Dove District was almost empty by now, so it would no longer be a problem if he walked around with it. The only place he had to visit was Sakuraba Milk Hall, specifically to see the manager and Hotaru. He wanted to say his goodbyes properly, since it would be his last time seeing them.

"You'll come back, though, right…?" Aoba's voice was weak, like a child left behind by parents. Her sudden change bewildered him. She noticed his reaction and quickly tried to smooth things over. "Er,

I’m not trying to stop you from leaving or anything like that. It’s just that it’d kind of suck if you left today and never came back, you know…?”

“I’m planning to come back tonight, at least. I’ll be leaving tomorrow. That is, if me staying another night is all right with you.”

“Why, but of course, sir!” Aoba answered with good humor and pep. Her earlier flustered manner was now completely hidden. She likely wouldn’t answer even if he pressed her on what was bothering her.

“Thank you. I’ll be heading out, then.”

“All right, take care. Don’t stay out too late.” She saw him out with a superficial smile.

The two of them were undoubtedly on good terms, but they both kept each other at arm’s length. They were not close enough to divulge their secrets, but he couldn’t help but wonder something after having spent so much time with her.

Aoba still remained in the Dove District. That meant she’d come this far without confronting whatever her lingering regret was. Such a young girl was frozen in her tracks by whatever it was she couldn’t leave behind. Jinya wasn’t so cold as to not feel anything for her. But as vexing as it was, he couldn’t offer her a hand.

“No point even thinking about it,” he murmured to himself, then shook his thoughts free from his mind.

No matter what he wanted, his confrontation with her would only come when she was ready. Until then, he could only wait.

"Looks like rain…"

The skies were cloudy, as though reflecting Aoba's heart.

He passed by a number of eateries and soba restaurants, a photo studio facing the street, a bathhouse near the center of the district, and the brothel called Ichikawa. Not a single soul was to be found anywhere. The brothels were all quiet, and because it was still daytime, the pink neon signs weren't lit. The Dove District was deserted. All that remained were the carcasses of moths under street lamps.

The barren streets brought out some sadness in him, but he felt it was wrong to mourn what was gone. Rather than cling to what was and ruin its last moments, one should let the dream end as what it was—a dream.

That was why he set foot into Sakuraba Milk Hall.

"Ah, nice to see you." The manager greeted him from the bar counter with a warm smile. He had been polishing glasses, presumably because he had nothing better to do. There were no customers or waitresses to be found.

"Single malt whiskey if you have any, two fingers. Any brand is fine."

"Any brand, huh? Then I think I'll bring out some special stuff I've been saving, seeing as you're our regular and all."

"I appreciate it. How about sharing a drink with me?"

"I'd love to."

The manager set two glasses onto the counter and poured the amber fluid out. The ice in the glasses cracked sharply as it melted.

Come to think of it, the manager had mentioned that he loved the sound of ice cracking before. He said it sounded like the ring of a bell. Jinya hadn't agreed with the example then, but he saw what the man meant now.

The two clinked glasses and took a sip. Not many places had such good liquor. Jinya would miss this milk hall—not enough for it to be a lingering regret, but enough. He drank with that thought in mind. The liquor was good enough to stand on its own.

After they drank silently for some time, the manager spoke up and said, "Everyone's gone and disappeared, huh?"

If the sex workers were in the business of granting dreams, then the two of them must have been in the vestiges of those dreams just then. They drank face-to-face in the milk hall that had once given happy nights to many men. There was nothing romantic between the two, but things were far from dull.

"Do you wish they stayed?" Jinya asked.

"Hardly. Everyone left because they were satisfied. I'm happy for them."

The manager took a hearty sip from his glass. The way he drank told Jinya he was being truthful.

"In the past, I hated how I was always saying goodbye as everyone left. I felt like I was being left behind."

He looked down at his bad leg. To others, he seemed like a capable man, but he'd once been stricken with inferiority complexes. He had been lost for a long time, but he eventually climbed out of the hole he was in through his own strength.

"I've changed, though. Everyone's gone, but I don't feel any sadness. Because this time, I *wanted* to stay here. I wanted to see this shop through to the very, very end."

The Prostitution Prevention Law almost stopped him, but by wandering into the Dove District that shouldn't have existed, he managed to follow through on the first decision he had made for himself.

"That's why I'm happy. I've been able to see my choice through to completion."

It might seem like a small thing to be proud of, but to him, it was everything.

"I see," Jinya replied. He didn't say it outright, but the manager could tell he was happy for him. The two shared a smile and drank, comforted by the warmth gliding down their throats. Jinya mused, "In the end, just what was this place?"

He'd known how the Dove District worked from the very start, but he couldn't find its core no matter how much he searched. Even Nanao's ability turned out not to be the cause. The Dove District that shouldn't have existed had to originate from *something*. Even now that this place was moments from unraveling, that last mystery still evaded him.

"A dream, perhaps," the manager said. He, who had no special ability or connection to the supernatural whatsoever, didn't even need a second to think before he answered Jinya's question.

"Why a dream?"

"Because the real Dove District was never such a wonderful place. The girls were always on edge, fighting for clients, and there were men who looked down on sex workers and treated them as nothing more than outlets for their desires. Girls were even sold into the business by their parents, and countless men tried to exploit those who lived here. Yet life in *this* Dove District was fun, like only the beautiful parts had been gathered."

There was more to the gaudy world of red-light districts than what was on the surface. But not a hint of what might've once lain beneath that surface could be found here. This beautiful, spotless Dove District was something like a dream.

The manager continued. "That's why I'm sure this is all a dream. The Dove District was praised as the finest around, only to be abandoned suddenly. Not wanting to change, it must have wished to remain as it was and slumbered ever since. The first to carry lingering regrets might just be the Dove District itself."

The Dove District was once an icon of its era, but time saw it abandoned. Perhaps the district itself had wished for its glory days to continue and invited in those women and men who couldn't live anywhere else while it was at it. That was why this place had none of its former darkness, only a bright, ephemeral dream lit by pink neon signs.

“An abandoned district’s dream, huh?” mused Jinya. It was a theory with no evidence, something said carelessly over drinks and impossible to verify, but he felt it would be fine to simply let that be the answer. The truth would remain unknown, but letting cold logic explain everything was dull. He had wandered into the Dove District’s dream and found something precious there—wasn’t that good enough? “Not bad,” he said.

“Right? Being able to say you met someone in a dream is romantic,” the manager said. “Oh, but I’m sure you’d rather have met somebody more charming than I.”

“Nonsense. You’re a good man, and I was lucky to meet you.”

“Why, I’m flattered. My tastes lie elsewhere, though.”

“What a coincidence. Mine do as well.”

Their exchange was smooth, almost like it had been arranged beforehand. They broke out into laughter together. Their voices were the only ones to be heard in the milk hall, which remained absent of its usual customers and waitresses.

“Oh dear. How long has it been since I last laughed like this?” After their laughter subsided, the manager took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He then exhaled as if he’d been freed from all his lingering regrets. “Thank you. You were a great customer to have.”

And that was it. The ice in his glass rang out with a crack, and then he was gone.

“Thank you. I managed to enjoy some good whiskey because of you.” Jinya drank down the last of his whiskey.

Dreams were no more than dreams, but a warmth different from the one that was now gliding down his throat would remain with him.

2

THERE WAS A UNIQUE SMELL to abandoned buildings, one that's different from the smell of dust. Stillness permeated their empty halls, and the air always had a slight chill to it. Sakuraba Milk Hall was no different now. Or perhaps it had always been like this—devoid of life. Still, the warmth of the liquor Jinya had drunk remained with him.

He opened the door and heard its rusty hinges creak. Heavy clouds blotted the sky, looking ready to pour rain down at any moment.

"Heading back already?" Hotaru was right outside, waiting for him.

Their initial encounter had been a coincidence. He happened to see a man entranced by a dead woman and stepped in to help. That was all it was supposed to be. But he'd since slept with her, learned more about her inner thoughts, and formed a strange bond that was neither one of love nor of friendship. He didn't know how he would describe his feelings for her, but he undoubtedly liked her, and she seemed to like him too. They both maintained a distance from one another, letting what they had remain ambiguous.

"Is that…?" Her gaze was on his sword bag. On that night they shared on the balcony, he had told her about his sword and how he had received it from his village chief. She understood he was leaving soon. "I see. You're going, then?"

"Yeah. Thanks for all the care you've shown me. I came by to say my goodbyes."

She showed no sadness and gracefully smiled. "I should be the one thanking you for all you've done. My first love wound up ending on a good note thanks to you."

Her gratitude was sincere and direct. Her mask as a sex worker was nowhere to be seen. She spoke as an ordinary woman, her smile as pristine as a starry winter sky.

"Are you leaving right away?" she asked.

"No, I have one more thing to take care of first. I'm planning on leaving tomorrow morning."

She looked down and thought for a few moments. When she lifted her face, she looked straight into his eyes and pulled something out of her pocket. "Take this."

She handed him a small glass bottle—her star sand. The one thing she couldn't bring herself to leave behind, a fragment of an old love. Jinya knew just how much it meant to her.

She said, "I'm not giving you this to keep, of course. Make sure you return it to me tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. I can't leave this place, but I'd at least like to see you off."

She felt indebted to him, as well as to the Dove District that had granted her one more impossible encounter. She desired to see Jinya off as he left this place, then fade away together with the Dove District as her lingering regrets disappeared.

"You take your job seriously, huh?"

"What can I say? I'm a professional."

As a lady of the night, it was her job to grant dreams, then disappear when morning arrived.

"You're a true lady of the night."

"Indeed. In the end, I couldn't let myself just be an ordinary woman."

He thought her way of being was a beautiful thing, not because her existence was so transient but because she had the heart to bloom as long as she could, even knowing her petals would soon scatter.

He grinned wryly and held out his sword to her.

"Um…?"

"In exchange for the star sand."

The sword was Yarai, a sacred relic that would not rust away even if a thousand years went by. It was worshipped as a symbol of the Goddess of Fire itself in the iron-producing village of Kadono.

"I mentioned it before, but this sword was bequeathed to me by my village chief. It's been my partner through many difficult times, and I think of it as part of me. It's my only possession that can match your sincerity."

"I couldn't possibly take such a precious thing," she said.

"It's fine. It'll just be until tomorrow, right?"

To create a promise to meet one last time, she'd given him her star sand—a piece of her very heart. It was only fair if he did something equal in return.

Gingerly, she took the sword and brought it close to her heart like a mother would do with her baby. "All right. I'll hold onto it until tomorrow for you."

"Thanks. Don't lose it, all right?" he joked. She answered him with a serious nod.

The two of them didn't even know each other's names, but they were able to entrust their most precious possessions without a second thought. The strangeness of their bond put them in a good humor.

"Would you like to make a pinky promise for good measure?" she asked.

"How tasteful."

She giggled. "Don't worry. I have no intention of cutting off any pinkies."

While it was now a children's way of swearing, pinky promises began as a practice done by courtesans in the pleasure districts of old. A vow sealed with a kiss carried little weight when it came from a woman who slept with men for money. That was why courtesans would show the sincerity of their vows of everlasting love by cutting off a pinky and giving it to the man they loved.

Hotaru brought up pinky promises knowing their history full well. She wouldn't actually cut off her pinky, but she wanted to show she

was just as determined to keep this promise of theirs. Understanding that, Jinya nodded and wrapped his pinky around her own.

In a singsong voice, she said, "Piiinky promise, whoever lies must swallow a thousand needles, pinky promised."

It was a childish ritual, but he thought it suited them just fine. He felt a bit bashful as their pinkies separated. Hotaru's gaze met his, and she broke into a ticklish smile which made him smile in turn.

Their bond would be no more than a brief spring dream, but he would try not to feel sad when it ended and instead be happy it happened at all. For some time, the two looked up at the sky together.

After he parted with Hotaru, it began to rain. He took shelter under the eaves of a brothel for a while, but the rain didn't let up at all, so he chose to brave the elements and run back. He was quite drenched by the time he returned to the apartment.

Aoba saw how soaked he was and grew flustered. She was back to being an ordinary, innocent girl—different from the way she had been that same morning.

"Yikes, you're *sopping* wet! Come on in already; I'll get some towels." She pulled him into the apartment by hand.

He took off his shirt and sat down to rest. Aoba returned with towels, came up behind Jinya, and began drying his hair.

"I can do it myself," he complained.

"Nah, I got it." She didn't even pause, never having intended to listen to his complaints. She wasn't rough with the towel, though, carefully rubbing the moisture off his hair. After she finished drying his head, she used a new towel to dry his back. Being pampered like this was surprisingly comfortable. It was a bit of a new experience for him, since he was usually the one doing the caretaking.

He was mid-thought when she suddenly spoke up. "Hey, Jin-san? You don't have to turn around, but there's something I want to talk to you about."

He could feel her hands tremble as she dried his back. He didn't know whether it was out of nervousness or fear, and he wondered just what kind of face she was making—perhaps she was fighting back tears?

"Sure. Go ahead." He did not know her past, which meant he couldn't be certain in his deductions. But he did notice the feelings she directed toward him occasionally. He had chosen to stay with her anyway.

"Thanks…" She sighed with relief. She was close enough for him to feel her hot breath against his skin.

He felt indebted to her for all the care she'd shown him, so he chose to hear her out. He had a feeling she wouldn't be able to move forward otherwise. That was why he'd made a point to stay one more day. He'd decided to leave the following morning not for his sake, but for her—to give her one final deadline to mentally prepare herself.

"I've…been wavering this whole time over what to do," she said. "But I think I need to go back home just once."

She was finally baring her heart to him. Her drying came to a pause as her hands left his back. He felt the atmosphere grow tense, and he knew he wasn't just imagining it.

"You said you ran away from home because you didn't want to inherit your family trade, right?" Jinya asked.

"Yeah. I still don't know what I'll do about that, but I want to at least pay a proper visit. Just once."

Her family had engaged in a certain trade since olden times. Not wanting to continue that trade, she impulsively ran away from home. Her grandfather passed away while she was gone, and now she was too ashamed to return.

"I've been running away from a lot of things. My family trade, for starters, but I can't even commit to being a real sex worker. But more than anything, I've been running away from my grandfather."

She betrayed her grandfather's expectations by running away and denied him a peaceful death, a fact that weighed heavily on her.

"If I had just done things properly from the start, then my grandfather could have passed in peace. Not doing that has bothered me ever since I found out he died."

Jinya couldn't even begin to imagine her thoughts when she learned of her grandfather's death. Her lingering regret was that she couldn't do anything for her grandfather, but it was too late now. He was dead, and so she had remained trapped in the Dove District until its very end.

"I've thought about things during my time here. There's probably nothing I can do about the fact that I caused my grandfather to die in despair. Walking things back and inheriting the family trade at this point will only soothe my heart and nobody else's. But if I don't at least inherit my grandfather's will, where will the feelings he carried all these years go?"

The rainfall outside seemed to grow louder within the room. Tonight's weather was like a reflection of Aoba's heart: torrential and turbulent, yet chilling to the core. The rain only continued to grow in intensity.

"I'm a bit stupid, so it's taken me a long time to think things over. But the moment I heard you were leaving, I finally managed to make up my mind. I'm going home. I can't do anything for my grandfather anymore, but I want to at least grant his wish. That's why…" Her voice gradually grew heated, and a firm will became audible.

He heard the sound of a sword being drawn from behind, and he didn't have a second to wonder why that was. He reacted mostly out of reflex, leaping out of range and turning to face her. The sword aimed at him cut vainly through air.

"…I was too slow." No, he'd thought he avoided the strike, but it had scratched him just slightly. A small cut was left on his left arm, just enough to bleed. He'd failed to dodge completely because he hadn't seen her as a potential enemy in the slightest. The peaceful days they had shared gave her an opening, and the sight of her wielding a sword against him now was tough to bear.

"I thought I had you there." She looked at him without a trace of malice. Her hands trembled, showing her hesitation. She wore the same cheerful fake smile she always had. The unembellished sword in her hands didn't suit a petite woman like her.

He recognized the sword. "…Yatonomori Kaneomi."

"You know it well. This is the demon-sealing demonic blade of *Demon Wail*. My father gave it to me."

There were four Yatonomori Kaneomi blades, forged in the Warring States period by the swordsmith Kaneomi. They were demonic blades, each with its own unique ability. The one Aoba wielded had the ability *Demon Wail*, allowing it to seal demons away within its blade. Jinya's foster mother, Yokaze, once met such a fate.

"You're really something, Jin-san. I didn't think you'd be able to dodge that strike," she said. Her droopy eyes seemed close to tears, but he would not comfort her and instead kept his distance. The next time the distance between them closed would likely be the last.

"A dodge like that is nothing special," he replied.

"You don't need to be modest. Were you already suspicious of me or something?"

"Hard to say. The possibility was always in the back of my mind, but I had nothing concrete. You always smiled around me, and I don't think that was an act."

He would have dodged fully had he been more vigilant. He'd known she was scheming something, but he'd thought it was unlikely that she was aiming for his life. He distrusted her yet wanted to trust

her anyway. The wound on his left arm was the result of his half-heartedness. He was an impure man, through and through.

"Women are natural liars; you shouldn't go around trusting us so easily. You never know when you might be tricked," she said. Even after attacking him, she showed no guilt.

"I don't think I've been tricked," he replied. "I've known all along you were hiding things from me, such as the fact that you were the one who lured me to the Dove District."

Aoba looked surprised; she'd thought he hadn't known that.

Jinya came to the Dove District because Jingo, the eldest son of the Toudou couple, had tipped him off to a rumor. This rumor led Jinya to a daughter of Magatsume like he had hoped, but things didn't line up. The daughter of Magatsume whom he met lived under the name Nanao. He never found the rumored mysterious sex worker with the name of a flower—because she never existed in the first place.

"You knew?" asked Aoba.

"I did. It was merely a coincidence that a daughter of Magatsume was actually here. The rumor of a sex worker with the name of a flower was spread to lure in whoever would see it as significant. But what's the point of laying bait if no one's around when it's taken?"

That someone couldn't leave the Dove District until they settled whatever business they had with Jinya, and so whoever remained in this place until its last moments had to be the one who lured him in.

"If you knew, then why did you stay with me?"

"I felt like I should wait until you were ready to settle things yourself. That way we could both leave without an unpleasant aftertaste."

"Ah ha ha! You're kidding. You're so skilled in most things, but you're rather clumsy when it comes to communicating, huh?"

"It's my nature. I can't change it at this point." Things might have been easier if he had just confronted her himself, but instead he'd chosen to wait. He was stubborn to the point of being frustrating, but that was simply the way he was. This wasn't the only reason he stayed with her, however. "But I also enjoyed this strange cohabitation with you, and I'd like to believe you enjoyed it as well."

She hung her head as though to avoid looking at him, but she just as quickly lifted it and met his gaze directly with a broad smile. "I enjoyed living with you too, Jin-san. Really. I mean it."

"I see. Thank goodness. During our time together, I've noticed you would look at me with these lost eyes from time to time. I never understood why until now." From the way she forced herself to smile, he understood her heart didn't truly wish to direct her blade against him, but she did so anyway. There had to be a reason. "Aoba… You must have a reason for attacking me. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"…All right. Let's talk." As though to work up the will, she tightened her grip on her sword. "But don't misunderstand. I don't hate you, Jin-san. If anything, I like you. This would've been so much easier if you were just some jerk."

Her forced smile faded as her expression turned serious. A silence fell between them. The air felt stifling and uncomfortable, and

the echo of the rain outside only got more intense as the silence lengthened.

Finally, Aoba began to speak. “My family runs an antique store out in Asakusa. It’s not an ordinary antique store, though, but one specializing in spirits that possess objects and tools that have gained wills of their own. We’re a spirit-hunting family of little renown, at least compared to folks like the Kukami of the Magatama or the artifact spirit-wielding Akitsu. Our store is called Kogetsudou. It didn’t get much business in the old days, but that all changed when my grandfather took over.”

Kogetsudou. Jinya had never gone there himself, but he had heard about it a number of times from Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth. Back in the Taisho era, when he still worked as a gardener for a noble family, he had briefly met some of its people.

“A girl my grandfather loved was killed by a demon when he was young, and my grandmother says he became a completely different person after that. He wanted me to inherit Kogetsudou and continue the family trade so I could become like him and live with the intent of someday slaying that demon.” With that, all the pieces came together at once—it was clear why she was attacking him now and why she had tried to stay near him all this time.

The world seemed to spin under Jinya’s feet a little as a faint dizziness took hold. He wondered what could aptly describe this coincidence. “Destiny” was too pretty a word, but “misfortune” was too impersonal. “Odd happenstance,” perhaps? He then gritted his teeth, having found the right word.

"That's why I've decided to kill that demon, then report what I've done to my grandfather's grave. If I don't do that much for him, then his whole life will have been meaningless."

Punishment. His past actions had finally caught up to him.

"With my own hands, I will slay the wicked demon who killed and devoured Saegusa Sahiro—the girl my grandfather loved—then return home."

Jinya had hardly known Sahiro, but he'd never once forgotten her name or how she was unjustly killed by Furutsubaki, a daughter of Magatsume. He knew the wicked demon Aoba spoke of wasn't Furutsubaki, though. She meant the one who killed and devoured the one who took Sahiro's image—namely him.

"Come to think of it, I haven't given you my full name yet, have I?" Aoba shifted her blade to point the tip at him. "My name is Motoki Aoba, foul Demon Eater, and I will claim vengeance today for my grandfather Motoki Soushi."

3

PART FIVE: AOBA, GRANDDAUGHTER OF MOTOKI SOUSHI

THIS IS A RECOUNTING of an event from the Taisho era.

"What's the matter, Soushi-kun?" A peculiar customer visited Kogetsudou, an antique store located in Asakusa. They wore the latest Western fashion: a white shirt, boater hat, some slacks, and leather shoes. It was unclear whether they were a young woman sporting a

boyish look or a feminine-looking young man. They had been a new regular of Kogetsudou lately.

"Oh… Yonabari-san…" Motoki Soushi tended the store a lot, so he was familiar with Yonabari. They were on good terms, even if the latter never bought anything. Kogetsudou didn't receive many customers, so it was often just the two of them, as well as Saegusa Sahiro, chatting in the store.

Soushi was in low spirits that day, but who could blame him after his friend Sahiro had been devoured by a monster?

"I was hoping to sell you something, but maybe now's not a good time?"

"No…now's fine. What do you have?"

"A demonic sword! It was forged by some swordsmith a long time ago, and it can apparently seal demons away, believe it or not."

Kogetsudou was no ordinary antique store. The Motoki family were a line of spirit hunters who handled possessed objects and artifact spirits, which meant Yonabari's claim was not at all outlandish to Soushi. He could feel a strange aura coming from the sword.

"*You don't say?"* The mention of the sword's ability to seal demons made his gaze sharpen. If he had this, could he seal *that* demon away? The thought made him freeze in place, causing Yonabari to speak up somewhat worriedly.

"Huh. I don't see Sahiro-chan around, and you're real off today, Soushi-kun. Did something happen? Come on, you can tell your buddy

Yonabari." They smiled reassuringly, and their kindness set Soushi at ease.

"O-oh…" He couldn't contain his emotions, and tears streamed down his face. He told them everything: how Sahiro had suddenly disappeared, how he'd looked for her night after night, and how he'd seen a demon cut her down and consume her corpse. *"H-he, he killed her, and then…"*

Soushi had met the demon before. He was on good terms with the ticket boy at the theater called Koyomiza. He lived hidden among the populace and ate humans. He was that kind of monster.

"Ah, the Demon Eater, huh?" Yonabari suddenly said.

"…What?"

"I've heard of him. He's this really wicked demon who can consume others for their power. He's lived for a hundred years and absorbs life with his left arm."

Their description of the demon matched perfectly. Soushi hadn't known such a terrible demon was on the loose. He felt frightened and utterly indignant.

"Y'know, somebody ought to do something about him before more people get hurt!" Yonabari said.

Still in tears, Soushi clenched his fists as the image of his sworn enemy became clear. He understood he was too weak to slay this demon, but just thinking about the monster who'd taken someone dear to him made anger well up inside him. If the demon was left

alone, he would devour again. More people would be hurt like Sahiro had been.

"You're right… Somebody needs to do something."

"Right. But, uh, just putting it out there, Soushi-kun, there's no way you could beat that monster. Don't go rushing to your death! You only have one life, so you got to treasure it!"

"But—"

"I get it, Sahiro-chan was killed by a demon. But revenge is stupid. I'd reeeally hate to see you bound by something like that and end up unhappy, Soushi-kun."

Soushi was touched by Yonabari's kindness. He too understood that revenge led nowhere.

"And I know this is a really mean thing to say," Yonabari continued, *"but sometimes the best thing you can do is forget and move on."*

Soushi agreed with what they said but shook his head anyway. His mind understood, but his heart couldn't follow suit. Even if revenge led nowhere, his hatred for the demon forced him to pursue it.

Suddenly he recalled the legendary spirit hunter Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth and the advice he had once given. He told Soushi he should let Sahiro know how he felt before it was too late. Of course, Somegorou hadn't known she was going to be killed. He'd just been jokingly suggesting he not waffle about and let another man

sweep her off her feet first, but his words were all the more meaningful now.

He loved Sahiro. He'd been too embarrassed to say it when she was around, but he had wanted to be with her, forever if possible. Those who lied to themselves couldn't choose what's dear to them when it mattered most and became pathetic men who gave up and pretended they never cared that much to begin with—that was another thing Somegorou had taught him.

Soushi envisioned the life that awaited him ahead. As time passed, the pain in his heart would surely fade and he would learn to love again. He would marry and have children, and his busy life would drive away thoughts of Sahiro and the hatred smoldering inside him. But he didn't want to live a happy life if it meant forgetting her. He didn't want to avert his gaze from the emotions he felt at this moment. He was not the kind of man who could pretend he didn't care about the cruelty of her murder.

"Oh dear. I see there's nothing I can say to sway you," Yonabari said.

Soushi's mind was set. Something weighty and solid replaced the grief in his heart. When he lifted his face, his expression was cold and his eyes held a dark glint. His tears had dried up at some point. *"I'm sorry, Yonabari-san."*

"It's fine. But I certainly wouldn't mind if you bought this sword at a premium in exchange! This is a demonic sword that can seal demons by cutting them, and its name is Yatonomori Kaneomi."

A tempting offer, Soushi thought. He gingerly accepted the sword.

Yonabari continued with a happy smile, *"I'd be happy to tell you everything I know about the Demon Eater if you'd like. I hear he used to be a human, which is something that makes him rather soft. He'd probably freeze up if, say, a good friend of his were to turn a blade against him."*

"How do you know so much about him?"

"Ha ha, good question! Why don't we just say I hear lots of rumors?"

Yonabari taught him many other things about the demon: his appearance, his abilities, and much more. Soushi listened attentively, committing every word to memory.

"He's merciless. If a clearly hostile person like you approached him—he'd kill them instantly. Of course, I can't tell you what to do. If you want to stake your life and fight him, then be my guest. But just remember that little ol' me here tried to tell you life's too precious to just throw away like that."

After telling him all they knew, Yonabari stared at Soushi's face, trying to gauge his reaction. They probably hoped he would give up on his revenge. He appreciated their kindness, but he could not do what they wished for him.

"If you're really going through with things, then I do have a scheme you could use to lure the Demon Eater out. It'll only work once, though…"

Graciously, Yonabari even went so far as to top things off by giving Soushi a scheme.

Unfortunately, Soushi never got to put that scheme into action. He had the anger, but his strength wasn't enough. He came to understand that as time passed, and he gave up on slaying the Demon Eater with his own hands—but he didn't give up on his revenge. If he couldn't see it through, then he would entrust this task to the next generation.

After several years, he took a wife, marrying a cousin he knew fairly well. She seemed to already like him, so there were no serious problems, and they were quickly wed.

He did feel some guilt over marrying someone whose love he couldn't return, but he did it anyway for Sahiro's sake. He remembered Yonabari's teachings and chose to entrust his wish to his children. He did his best to be a loving father and told his children from a young age about how the girl he loved was killed by a demon. He said that he wanted them to slay the Demon Eater and avenge her.

His beloved children listened to their father's wishes, even though they bore no personal grudge against the Demon Eater. That was what made them perfect. If the demon was as soft as Yonabari had told them, then he would likely hesitate to kill someone who wasn't truly hostile. Soushi married and had children all for the purpose of creating a perfect assassin without malice. This was his desperate bid for revenge.

Ideally, the assassin would be a girl. Soushi had heard the Demon Eater kept a girl around like a pet, so he figured he would be more hesitant if his would-be assailant was a girl. Unfortunately, he and his wife had three boys. He loved them all dearly, but none of them granted his revenge.

Unbeknownst to him, however, his wife had told their sons not to act recklessly and explained that their parent's grudge wasn't theirs to inherit. His mind was too clouded with thoughts of revenge to ever realize this.

He changed his methods once his granddaughter was born.

"You will inherit Kogetsudou and live to slay our mortal enemy."

He became stricter than ever before and took his granddaughter, Aoba, away from her parents to train her up. He wanted her life's purpose to be killing the Demon Eater. He loved her, but his desire for vengeance was far greater. His hatred had turned into an obsession over the years. Through no choice of her own, Aoba was molded into the Demon Eater's assassin.

It was only thanks to her grandmother's presence that she had a somewhat proper upbringing at all. Her grandmother would tell her that she didn't need to take on her grandfather's grudge and that he hadn't always been the way he was. Her grandmother worried for her, and that was enough for her to grow up to be a happy, spirited girl. But with her friendly nature came a strong will. In defiance of the way everything in her life was forced onto her, she impulsively ran away from home.

From there, she grew frighteningly quick in a short span of time. She drifted to the Dove District and encountered many new things under Nanao's tutelage. She learned things she couldn't have found out by just studying at a desk. She began to think about her grandfather's feelings and felt ready to hear him out once more.

But then news of his death suddenly came, along with the sword she had been supposed to inherit. All hope of the two ever understanding one another was lost.

From there, her lingering regrets grew stronger, and she wandered into the Dove District that shouldn't have existed.

***

His head felt dizzy, and not just because of the truth that had come to light. The Yatonomori Kaneomi blade in Aoba's hands held the ability *Demon Wail*, able to seal demons away. Jinya was only cut lightly by it, but his arms and legs felt heavy. His body was languid, his mind hazy. His state reminded him that no matter how much he tried to adjust to the world of man, he was an inhuman thing.

"Demon Eater… Please, don't resist." Aoba pointed the tip of the blade at the demon she had heard so much about since she was young. She held no malice toward him; she simply didn't want her grandfather's feelings to be for nothing. Her heart bore no hate for the Demon Eater, but it was set on slaying him regardless. She stood before Jinya as the unmalicious assassin Motoki Soushi had so desired. "…Have you nothing to say?"

"What is there to be said?" asked Jinya.

"I… I don't know. Don't you have any justifications to make?"

Jinya figured Soushi must have seen him devour Furutsubaki. That was why he had been under the false impression that he had killed Saegusa Sahiro.

He scoffed. What did it matter? He pitied Sahiro, but he'd killed and devoured Furutsubaki for his own personal aims. To claim otherwise would be wrong. He deserved to be hated. What's more, he couldn't deprive Aoba of her enemy here and now, or her lingering regrets would never fade.

"What's the point of making excuses? What you know is mostly correct. I've killed many people, humans and demons alike. I have no intention of trying to justify myself at this point," Jinya said. He could not understand Aoba's heart, but as someone who had lived a long life and felt many things, he could not deny her attempt to console the spirit of her grandfather by fulfilling the wish she inherited.

"I've wavered over what I should do. I didn't think the demon I lured in would be someone like you, Jin-san." Her hands trembled slightly. Her body was trained, but she was not used to the feeling of a blade in her hands. She wouldn't be a threat at all if it had been anything but that specific demonic sword. "I began to wonder if maybe Sahiro-san was a bad person. My grandfather may have loved her, but I never met her myself. You didn't seem like someone who would do horrible things for no reason."

Her words were more painful than any blade. She, too, didn't want to believe in the truth she was shown.

"I'm a demon," Jinya told her. "Doesn't that tell you enough about me?"

"Maybe it does… Just hearing things secondhand from my grandfather didn't convince me, but now I understand." She looked close to tears, a resigned smile on her face. "I saw what you did to Nanao-san."

His heart felt like it had been pierced. "You…were there?"

"Yes. I didn't hear what you talked about, but I saw you wrap your hand around her neck and what happened afterward."

"I…see."

Then this was no longer simply her grandfather's vengeance; it was her own as well.

"Why did you do it, Jin-san? Wasn't Nanao-san your niece?"

"I have no excuses to make. All I can say is that it was necessary," he replied emotionlessly. A heavy silence fell between them.

Choosing to play the villain might have been foolish of him. Aoba was a smart girl, and they could still end things peacefully if they talked it out. But no matter what he said, it wouldn't change the fact that he had robbed her of someone dear. Not a hundred excuses could overturn that.

"I'm a bit disappointed, but…relieved." The tremble in her hands stopped, and her hesitation disappeared. He could tell from the way the atmosphere shifted. "I've wavered all this time over whether I

could slay you to avenge my grandfather, but now I don't even have to think about that."

His vertigo grew fiercer, but he couldn't go down without a fight. He forced his heavy arm into action and drew blood from his right palm. Using the trickle of blood, he formed a blade with *Blood Blade*.

Aoba stared at him and his red blade without a hint of fear in her eyes.

"It's already clear how this will end. Do you still insist on fighting?" he asked.

"Of course. Even if I have no chance of winning, I must fight for the sake of the will I've inherited."

Ordinarily, there would have been no way to bridge the gap between them. Jinya eclipsed Aoba in skill, and she couldn't even begin to fathom his strength. She understood that fact well but would not back down now.

The room was small. The distance between them was already short enough for them to hear each other's breathing. The old relationship of roommates could no longer be found. In its place was a demon and a spirit hunter, about to battle like in olden times.

For a brief instant, an emotion filled her eyes—not grief or sadness, but a kindness that did not fit the scene. This too was drowned out by the sound of rain, and after a breath, the distance between them closed to zero.

Jinya didn't see this as a clash of martial arts, but a clash of wills. After making long journeys to get to this point, they would both

show the extent of their emotions here and bring about the end they sought. In other words, this had never been a battle of strength.

"What a farce…"

A blade dropped to the floor. He'd known it would end this way from the start. It was obvious, and yet he entertained her anyway. Hence, it could only be called a farce.

"Why…?" Her voice trembled. She looked at him in disbelief.

Jinya's red blade hit the floor with a thud, then turned back into blood, unable to maintain its shape.

Aoba was an amateur when it came to fighting. Her gait, her center of gravity, her blade-wielding, her footwork—Jinya was superior in every regard. Yet her blade had slipped past the wicked demon's own and pierced his body.

"I guess I lost…" There was a time when becoming stronger was everything to him. He had believed with all his heart that strength would let him wield his blade without wavering. But he had gained things dear to him since then, and before he knew it, he could no longer fight without hesitation like he had in the past. His impurity made his blade dull. He had become weak. He had swung down his blade at Aoba but stopped just short of cutting her.

She had freed herself from the indecision that he was full of to the end. Their battle was a foregone conclusion.

"Gah…" He dropped to a knee, then sat down. He could have typically borne a wound like this, but his body was sapped of strength; he couldn't use his abilities, or even lift a finger for that

matter. This was the power of the demonic sword of *Demon Wail*. He could no longer resist, only wait to be sealed within its blade.

"Jin-san…why?" She froze and looked down at him. She had not expected this outcome. She had challenged him to carry out her will, fully expecting to die. She exhaled shallowly and said without emotion, "No, the 'why' doesn't matter. We fought as spirit hunter and demon, and I just so happened to win. That's all there is to it, isn't there?"

"Yeah, you got me. That's all."

"Very well, then. I have claimed revenge for Motoki Soushi. Nothing more needs to be said."

No matter what their intentions that was what mattered at the end of it all. Though she seemed to have some misgivings, she swallowed them back.

Jinya looked down and checked his body. His life was in no danger, but the wicked Demon Eater would be sealed.

"Hey, Aoba. Can I ask you one thing?" he asked. He didn't have much time left. Before his consciousness faded, he wanted to ask a question he'd carried for a while now.

"Sure," she said after a pause. "If it's something I can answer."

"On that rainy night when I first arrived here, did you help me because you knew who I was?"

He wanted to know if she approached him knowing he was the Demon Eater, or if she did so out of the kindness of her heart. Had

she lived with him knowing he was her sworn enemy? How real was the kindness she had shown him?

It was a pointless, desperate question. Their strange cohabitation had been a lie from start to finish. But at the end of it all, he wanted to know if any part of what they had was genuine.

"Ah ha ha. You're really something, aren't you?" she said, smiling through tears. "What kind of girl calls out to a strange man in the rain? Of course that was part of my plan."

Ah. I see, he thought. His consciousness faded there.

The sound of rain continued to echo within the dark room. Alone, she looked down hollow-eyed at the sword that had fallen to the floor. The strange, stern-faced man who was oddly good at household chores was nowhere to be seen.

She had achieved her greatest wish by her own hands, yet she felt no joy, only a sense that she had been left behind.

"It was all a lie from the start. I knew who you were right away. That much should've been obvious." She spoke to no one, her voice soft and gentle. "But you saw right through me and still played along, sharing all kinds of stories with me. The fact that I liked you was not a lie."

The one truth she spoke, here at the end of it all, was heard by no one. But she didn't mind that. She picked up her sword and returned it to its scabbard. It felt heavier than before, but it could just as easily have been her imagination.

And so, with no lingering regrets left, she departed the Dove District.

A promise to meet was left unfulfilled, and the red-light district that shouldn’t have existed finally reached its proper end. Dreams could be no more than dreams, doomed to be forgotten by all once morning came.

Intermission:
Where Revenge Leads
1

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a wicked demon. This demon would grow stronger the more it consumed, and it ate both humans and its own kindred. With its great strength, it did as it liked and ate others, day in and day out.

The one who rose against this demon was a young girl. She tricked the demon to get close and attacked it unaware, defeating it. The demon was sealed away, peace was restored, and everybody lived happily ever after.

But what came after "happily ever after"? These were a number of events that took place some time after the wicked Demon Eater was sealed away.

THE YOUNG BOY AND THE PRETTY LADY

August, Showa 51 (1976 AD).

"I'm heading out!"

South of Asakusa Station, near where the Sumida River flowed, was the ordinary house Takamori Keito lived in.

It was the height of summer. Keito, a fourth-grade elementary school student, skipped doing his summer homework to play all day.

He was known as a bit of a free spirit, so much so that if anybody saw him actually studying, they would think it so unusual that they would suspect he'd caught a cold. He liked to move his body, hated hard work, and got middling grades at best. He didn't care, though. So long as he could make people laugh at his jokes, he was happy. He didn't study at all in the summer, played until the sun went down, and stayed up late every day.

However, he had been waking up earlier in the day lately. Not to do radio calisthenics like many his age did, but for a different purpose.

"Oh no! I overslept!"

He'd made the mistake of reading a book of ghost stories he borrowed from a friend. Every little bump in the night had kept him awake until the wee hours of the night, causing him to sleep in. He would be late if he didn't hurry, so he ran even harder than he did on the day of his class's fitness test.

"Hey, Keito! Keep it down, will ya?! Some people are trying to sleep here!" a middle-aged man yelled.

"Oh, shush it, old man! Nobody's a bigger nuisance around here than you after you start hitting the bottle. Agh, wait, I have no time for this!"

The folks in this downtown neighborhood all got along well. Keito ignored the angry shouts of the middle-aged man and ran. The people who saw him probably thought he was up to his usual antics again, but this was serious.

"Yes! I made it!" He reached a small shrine whose name he didn't know, located in Asakusa. It was part of his daily routine to visit

this shrine in the morning. Not that he was particularly devout or anything. His reason for coming had nothing to do with the shrine itself.

He caught his breath, wiped his sweat, and entered the shrine grounds with as nonchalant a face as he could manage. The noisy chirping of cicadas was everywhere, as was the overwhelming scent of greenery. He walked along, the place feeling keenly of summer, and broke into smiles when he saw that *she* was still around. He had made it in time.

"Oh? Hey, what's up, Keito-kun?" She greeted him with a warm smile. Her way of speaking was a bit odd, but she was beautiful and had a calm air to her. She looked to be around twenty-one or maybe twenty-two years old, and the way she gracefully smiled was the very image of a mature woman. She was Yunohara Aoba, a woman who ran an antique store in Asakusa.

"G-good morning, Aoba-san."

"And good morning to you. You're kind of early again, huh? Isn't it tough coming to the shrine every day?"

"N-no, this much is nothing! Nothing beats the clean, fresh air of the shrine in the morning, yup! Refreshing!" He combed his hair back with his fingers and tried to act cool. Aoba smiled warmly at him. He continued, "Wait, you come early every day yourself. We even meet every morning. Talk about a coincidence."

It likely needn't be said at this point, but the reason Keito came to the shrine so early every morning was to see Aoba. The young boy had a crush on the pretty older woman.

"Ah ha ha, well, in my case coming to the shrine is part of my daily routine." She laughed cheerfully, then looked toward the main shrine building. Her focus was on what was past its wooden lattice—the sword enshrined within. "Yatonomori Kaneomi…"

"Huh?"

"That's the name of the sword they keep here. It was used to seal away a demon a long time ago."

With eyes full of wonder, the young boy looked past the wooden lattice himself to try and see the sword. She watched him with a heartfelt smile.

She said, "It felt better to keep it here than at the store, so I entrusted it to the shrine. It's been a quick seventeen years since then…"

"You had it at the store? Like, for sale?" he asked.

"Not quite. It was passed down in the family—though not for many generations, I guess. We're an antique store, so most of the old things we have are for sale. Keeping the sword around our wares just didn't feel proper, like it was being lumped in with them."

She was using oddly ambiguous phrasing. Keito was too young to pick up on the subtleties of her heart, but he at least understood that the sword was important to her. "So you've been coming every day since you left it here?"

"Not quite. It was stolen once, you see. Er, maybe not stolen, but 'borrowed' by an acquaintance. It was missing for about ten years,

longer than it's actually been at the shrine. I didn't come by much during that time."

That ten-year void was a tale for another time. Aoba knew of the encounter between the timid, bookish boy and the sealed demon, but their story had nothing to do with her and even less to do with Keito. She saw no reason to bring it up.

"Is that so? Good thing it got returned then, huh?" he said.

"Ah ha ha, no kidding. But I'm sure it was fated to come back."

"Say, this sword's a family heirloom, right? Is it, like, crazy expensive?"

"Good question. It was made by a swordsmith in the late Warring States period, so I'm sure it's somewhat valuable."

"Ooh, that's so cool. Can I touch it?"

"Ah ha ha, you're such a boy, aren't you?"

The details of how the sword came to rest here were of no interest to the elementary school-age boy, but the fact that it was a family heirloom and from the Warring States period excited him. He wanted to touch it and draw its blade out if he could. He looked at Aoba expectantly, but her gaze was on the sword and her eyes were sad. The young woman he had a crush on stared at the sword as if it was someone she felt an unrequited love for.

"Wouldn't it be better if you kept the sword at home after all?" he suggested. Even as an outsider, he could tell the sword was terribly dear to her. She had said she didn't want to feel like it was being lumped in with the things she sold, but he still thought it would be

better if she kept it close. She cared about it enough to come to the shrine every day. Wouldn't she rather keep it herself instead of entrusting its care to someone else?

But she shook her head and smiled. "I think about it sometimes, but I always end up leaving it here. I think it's better for me to put some distance between this sword and myself."

"Why?"

"So I can keep thinking about thoughts that lead nowhere, I guess. That's what I've been doing for more than a decade now."

The smile she made then caused him to inadvertently blush. He was still too much of a child to understand her feelings.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Ah ha ha, I don't get it either, to tell the truth."

"So you've been coming here every day just to think about things?"

"That's about right. That, and for my revenge." Despite her peaceful expression, she said something rather unsettling.

Keito's eyes went wide. He hadn't expected such a pretty young woman to use such a disquieting word.

"My grandfather's revenge is over, so this time it's my turn for revenge. It's probably what I'm living for now." She ended the conversation there and stretched her back. Now that her body was more limber, she patted Keito, who was frozen stiff out of shock, on the back. "See you later, Keito-kun. I've got to head back. Nanao's waiting for me."

Hearing something even more alarming than "revenge," his mind began to whirl again. "Um, who is this Nanao-san? Is he your boyfriend…?"

"Huh? Ah ha ha ha! Oh, Keito-kun. You're so funny," she replied.

He let out a sigh of relief before being broadsided by cold reality.

"Nanao is my adorable little daughter, who takes after my husband a lot. She goes to the same school as you, so I kinda assumed you knew each other."

He was in disbelief. A woman as youthful-looking as Aoba had a daughter and a husband? "Um, Aoba-san? How old are you?"

"Oh, dear. You shouldn't ask a lady her age. Not that I particularly care! I'm thirty-two."

He had completely been under the impression she was in her early twenties. He froze stiff for a second time, while she started walking home with some extra pep in her step. Left alone, he could only stand there, dumbfounded.

There existed a saying in Japan: *First love bears no fruit*. On this summer day, at the ripe age of ten years old, Keito learned how oh-so-painfully true that was.

THE ONE NO LONGER A YOUNG WOMAN

To this day, I continued to think about thoughts that lead nowhere.

"I guess I lost…"

His words from that moment still remained with me. I fought the Demon Eater and sealed him away, but I still didn't understand. How did I win?

My defeat should have been a certainty. I lacked his strength and experience. I fought him simply to carry out my will, and I was ready to die. But somehow I survived, and he was sealed away.

Did he not want to hurt me out of respect for my determination?

…No, that couldn't be it. He could have easily stopped me without causing me any harm.

Then did he lose on purpose to let me carry out my grandfather's revenge?

…No, that had to be wrong too. My grandfather taught me about his abilities. He could have used his illusions and invisibility to make me think I'd sealed him away if he really wanted to. So long as he never reappeared before me, I'd think I had claimed vengeance for my grandfather, and he would get away unharmed.

He likely didn't need to jump through all those hoops either, really. He probably could have talked me out of my meaningless revenge if he wanted to.

But in the end, I sealed him away. How that happened evades me.

Since that day, I've spent all my time thinking about these thoughts that lead nowhere. I didn't know if I'd ever have an answer, but my revenge continued anyway.

THE ONE NO LONGER A LITTLE BOY AND THE DAUGHTER OF HIS FIRST LOVE

August, Showa 57 (1982 AD).

Twenty-three years had passed since the demonic blade came to rest in the shrine.

"Kei-chin, is it true that your first love was my mom?"

"Huh? Where did you hear that from?"

The boy had grown since his heartbreak six years earlier and was now a high school student. Takamori Keito, now sixteen, visited the small shrine only occasionally these days. Aoba still continued to visit daily to stare at the sword, but since his visits had become less frequent, they met less often. On the other hand, he had grown closer to her daughter, Yunohara Nanao.

Nanao turned fourteen this year. She entered her second year of junior high school, and her looks became more mature. She was shaping up to be just as beautiful a woman as her mother.

"Uhh, my dad. He said there was a boy who went to the shrine every day just to see my mom."

"Yikes… So the cat's out of the bag." Embarrassed by his youthful actions, he buried his face in his hands. He began to make excuses about how it was completely normal for elementary school boys to fall for older women.

"I guess my mom does look kinda young," Nanao said.

"That she does. Does she still talk in that weird way?"

"Totally. Dad keeps reminding her about it, but she can't seem to change."

Aoba always spoke a bit too casually, like a young punk, no matter who she was talking to. That had been part of her charm for the younger Keito, of course, but it was a fairly unusual thing for a woman in her late thirties.

Putting that all aside, even though his first love hadn't worked out, Keito was honestly glad it had led to him becoming friends with Nanao. He looked for her in his elementary school after he learned Aoba had a daughter and found her surprisingly easily. They hit it off right away once he mentioned he knew her mother, and the two had been constant companions for the six years since then. His classmates sometimes teased him for being a high schooler who hung out with a junior high girl, but he didn't care. Why should he when he didn't have the slightest of ulterior motives?

"This place never changes either, huh?" he said. It was summer vacation. As a high schooler, he had to start thinking about his future, but instead he played all day with Nanao.

The sun hung directly above them. Exhausted from playing, they bought some ramune soda from the candy shop and took a break at the shrine.

He wet his throat with the cold carbonated beverage and blocked the sunlight with a hand as he scanned the shrine grounds. The cicadas were noisy, and the air shimmered with heat. The small

shrine, only hosting a single time-worn building, was the same as it had been in his youth.

He hadn't known this as a child, but apparently small shrines like this didn't have a chief priest, or any priests of their own at all. Instead, there would be a priest assigned to many small shrines like this one. Naturally, that meant they wouldn't always be around, so a parishioner living nearby would often maintain the place. The sword that was left here wasn't exactly an offering to the shrine, but something Aoba had asked a parishioner she knew to keep here for her. Why she wanted to put such distance between herself and the sword was something Keito still didn't understand, even after he became a high schooler.

"We owe that to Kamei-san, I guess," Nanao said.

"Ah, the parishioner who takes care of this place?"

"Yeah, that guy. My mom and dad get along with him pretty well."

Hearing her mom got along with another guy bothered Keito a bit. Though his first love had long since been extinguished, hearing that the woman he had liked was close to someone else put him in a bit of a mood. But perhaps that was just puberty.

Nanao continued, "I'm good friends with one of his nieces too. She's coming here in two days, and she's super cute."

"Super cute, you say?"

"You stay away from her, Kei-chin. A high school boy who can't get a girlfriend and just plays with a junior high girl all day will be a

bad influence on her."

"Rude. Not that it isn't true."

"Ah ha ha, I'm kidding. I wouldn't hate you no matter how much weirder you got."

She was indirectly calling him weird, but the broadness of her smile made it hard for him to get mad. At any rate, she seemed to be making friends just fine.

Seeing her drink her ramune soda, he did the same, downing the rest in one go. The glass marble in its neck rang as it shifted. Uncharacteristically of him, he thought about how it would likely be these kinds of summer days where nothing particularly happened that he would look back nostalgically upon one day.

THE SHRINE GIRL AND THE ANTIQUE STORE GIRL

Himekawa Yayoi was a shrine girl. Her family's lineage could be traced far back, and they ran a fairly big shrine.

Her household had blood ties to Kamei, who acted as parishioner of a small shrine in Asakusa. Kamei was the older brother of Yayoi's father, making him her uncle. The whole family was pretty close, so she went to Asakusa with her parents every summer vacation. Having no children of his own, Kamei doted on her, and she of course didn't mind all the tourism and eating out at restaurants they did.

When she went to Asakusa about two years earlier, she became friends with a girl living nearby, and they'd stayed in touch by writing letters to one another. Yayoi looked forward to meeting her again.

The day they arrived in Asakusa, they dropped their things off at her uncle's house and took a rest. With her parents' permission, she left the house and immediately made for the shrine where she'd promised to meet her friend in their letters.

"Yayoi-chan, it's been so long!"

"It has, Nanao-chan."

She arrived at the small shrine to find an energetic, short-haired, suntanned girl waiting for her—Yunohara Nanao.

Yayoi turned eleven this year, and Nanao was fourteen years old, in her second year of junior high. They were three years apart in age, but Nanao's outgoing bubbliness and Yayoi's deep curiosity about everything let them get along well. They had become good friends in no time at all.

"Nanao-chan, you've grown taller."

"Haven't I? And you've… Hm."

Yayoi had grown, but she was still on the small side for her age. Her long hair, pale skin, and short height made her look like she was still in the lower grades of elementary school.

"It may not seem like it, but I've grown," Yayoi said. "It's just that everybody else has grown more."

"Don't worry, you still have plenty of time! I didn't start getting taller until junior high myself!"

“Yeah… Yeah, you’re right.” Yayoi balled her fists to encourage herself. Seeing her spirits lift, Nanao nodded in approval.

“Have you been well?” she asked.

“I have. From what I can see, I take it you’ve been well too?”

“Of course! But, wow, you’re really mature, huh? When I was your age, I couldn’t have replied that sharply.”

Yayoi’s family ran a shrine, so she was trained in the basics of etiquette. She still got scolded a lot, though, so she was happy to be praised for once.

“It’s hot outside. You should come over to my place! Mom said she would make us some shaved ice!”

“Okay.”

The two happily ran, hand in hand and without a care in the world. Things would only get hotter from here on out, but it was a comfortable summer afternoon for the time being.

THE SHRINE GIRL AND THE DEMONIC SWORD

Time flew when one was having fun.

Those summer days were long. It stayed bright well into the evening, but if they stayed out any longer their parents and Uncle Kamei would get worried.

“Bye-bye, Yayoi-chan!”

“See you tomorrow.”

They returned to the shrine they'd met at and parted. Nanao waved her hand vigorously before running off, somehow still full of energy after a full day of playing.

Yayoi was about to go home as well since it would be dark soon, but she stopped, feeling something off about the shrine. "Huh…?"

This shrine, whose name she didn't know, had a pair of komainu guardian lion-dog statues by a torii gate, a stone path leading up to an offertory box, and a tiny shrine building. For a shrine where no dedicated chief priest was stationed, the place was of decent scale. But to Yayoi, whose family ran a shrine, it was a small one.

She looked around, trying to identify what felt so off about the place to her, and soon found it. The shrine's wooden lattice grid sliding door was slightly ajar. She was sure that it had been closed during the day and that her uncle Kamei managed the keys. She wondered if perhaps he had forgotten to close it completely. But then she recalled something Nanao had told her: *"Our family heirloom is kept here!"*

An heirloom passed down through the family of Kogetsudou, an antique store, was sure to fetch a price. To herself, Yayoi murmured, "Could someone have broken in?"

Looking from afar, it didn't seem like anyone was inside. Nobody was in the area either. The only sound was the usual incessant cries of cicadas.

Though she was mature for her age, she was still only an elementary schooler. She couldn't think far enough to consider that a potential thief might still be hiding somewhere and carelessly approached the shrine building. She saw a strangely shaped rock

inside, likely the go-shintai—an object of worship believed to house a deity. In front of it was a sword holder made from plain wood, which held a single long tachi blade. Immediately, Yayoi realized that this was the family heirloom Nanao had mentioned.

"Oh, thank goodness. So nothing was stolen…" She felt relief, even though it was something that belonged to someone else. Now relaxed, she began to take interest in the sword, the first real one she had ever laid eyes on. Unlike the swords she had seen in period movies, it rested in a plain, unadorned scabbard. Though young, she was still a shrine maiden and was thus drawn in by the sword's air of divinity.

"One look wouldn't hurt, right?" Forgetting what she even came for, she double-checked her surroundings to make sure no one was around, then reached for the blade.

The summer heat had seeped into the metal, making it warm to the touch. She held it out of curiosity, but she had no naughty intentions. It would be a real problem if she somehow broke the blade, so she planned to only take a quick look and then return it to where it had been.

She put her hand on the sword's handle and tried to unsheathe it—but a voice suddenly called out.

"Don't."

"Eek!" she yelped out of surprise. She checked her surroundings again but saw nobody. Whose voice was that, then? An eerie thought crept into her mind, only exacerbated by the fact that she was at a

shrine. The sun was lowering in the sky, and ghosts liked to come out at this hour.

A chill ran down her spine. The voice didn't sound particularly frightening, though, and she was almost certain it had come from close by.

She dropped her gaze down to the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade she held firmly in her hands. Weakly, it trembled all on its own.

"Don't. A girl like you has no business drawing a demonic blade."

The voice was unmistakably coming from the blade. This time, she let out a scream of terror.

2

THE YOUNG BOY AND THE PRETTY LADY — PART TWO

YUNOHARA AOBA WAS apparently thirty-eight. She looked considerably younger than that, but some wrinkles had appeared on her face in recent years. She still remained as pretty as ever to Takamori Keito, though.

"Wow, I feel like it's been forever since I've talked with you like this, Keito-kun."

"Ha ha. It's been a while, hasn't it, Aoba-san?"

One morning during summer vacation, Keito woke up earlier than usual for some light exercise. He walked to the small shrine, where he was greeted by Aoba's usual smile. He used to run to the shrine every day to meet her back when he was in elementary school.

The memories of his first crush were embarrassing to him now, but the fact that her smile still made his heart race proved he probably hadn't grown much since then.

"Aw, since when did you learn to be so formal?"

"I couldn't stay a brat forever, ma'am."

"Little Keito-kun's all grown up. I guess that means I'm an old lady now." She looked to the side. Even her face in profile captivated him. His first love had come to an end a long time ago, and not a trace of lingering regret remained in him, but a part of him did wish he had been born into the world just a bit earlier.

"You still come here every morning, huh?" he said.

"Every day," she replied, looking toward the shrine. She'd once told him a demon-sealing sword called Yatonomori Kaneomi was enshrined there. This had fascinated him as a child, but now that he was older he was mature enough to understand it was just an empty legend. Perhaps that had something to do with the fact that her face in profile seemed to look sadder now. The expression she made probably hadn't changed. The one who had changed was him. He had grown able to see the things he couldn't when he was younger.

For instance, he realized how small the father he used to be scared of really was, how kind his middle-aged neighbor was to make time to banter with a bratty child, how many of the people he'd thought were upstanding adults hid secrets behind their smiles, and so on. Growing up was giving him much more to think about.

"You said something a while back," he began. "What was it… Something about how you think about thoughts that lead nowhere?"

"Wow. You've got a good memory."

"Only when it comes to you. Er, so, do you still find yourself thinking like that?"

She thought for a moment. "Yeah…I guess I do."

He'd been too young to understand back then, but he felt he could lend her an ear as he was now. That was why he brought up what was likely a sore subject for her.

She smiled warmly at him, understanding what he was trying to do. She thanked him, then stared at the shrine and offhandedly asked, "Keito-kun, would you be angry if I hit you out of nowhere?"

The strange question bewildered him, but he saw the sincerity in her eyes and focused up. This was no joke, and she wasn't trying to change the topic, but continue it. This had something to do with the thoughts of hers that led nowhere.

"Well, no, I figure I wouldn't be. Angry, that is," he said.

"Why? Even if I had no good reason to hit you?"

"I mean, if it was really out of nowhere, then I guess I'd wonder *why* you hit me first."

"All right, then what if Nanao got hurt because of you, so I got angry and hit you?"

"I'd let you hit me, then grovel on the ground and beg for forgiveness. I'd have no right to get angry back at you there."

"What if it wasn't me, but some stranger you've never seen before who picked a fight and hit you?"

"Oh, well, I'd probably get angry then."

He couldn't understand what she was trying to say. Meanwhile, she seemed to deeply think over each and every one of his answers, letting them digest in her mind.

"Okay, then imagine someone *didn't* put up any resistance at all after a stranger picked a fight with them. What kind of things do you think they might've been thinking?" she weakly asked. Her voice was full of resignation.

"Is that…something that really happened?" he asked.

"A long time ago, yeah. I one-sidedly lashed out at somebody."

Without needing to ask, he understood this other person was probably a man. A man other than her husband. Perhaps this was an old flame, or maybe somebody else she was close to. The exact details were unclear, but it was painfully obvious that they were at least somebody dear to her.

"What I did was awful," she continued. "But they didn't resist in the slightest or even offer a single excuse for what I unfairly claimed they did."

"That's, well… Maybe they felt guilty for whatever happened?"

"Maybe, but they should have been able to talk me down at least. I just don't understand why they chose the most foolish possible option. It doesn't make sense, no matter how much I think about it. More than a decade has flown by since." She suddenly looked at Keito with warm eyes and smiled, as though to say that was the end of this topic. "I guess knowing wouldn't do me any good at this point. I'm

living a happy life with my family even with this unanswered question."

He could tell she meant it. She had a kind husband and a darling daughter, and she had inherited Kogetsudou from her grandfather. The life she led with her family was a happy one.

"Still, I can't help but wonder…"

But one could lead a happy life and still feel uneasy from time to time. Now that he was of high school age himself, Keito knew that to be true.

THE HIGH SCHOOL BOY, THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL GIRL, AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GIRL

It was already the fourth day after Yayoi had come to visit Asakusa. She planned to meet Nanao at the shrine in the morning, like they did every day, so they could go play.

However, she arrived to find somebody else already there. A high school boy she didn't recognize was blankly staring at the shrine. Nanao arrived soon after and grimaced when she saw him. He quickly noticed the two of them as well and gave a wave.

"Oh, hey, Nanao."

"Heya, Kei-chin… Shoot. We hang around the same places, so I guess it makes sense that we'd eventually bump into one another."

"Why do you look so bummed to see me?"

Nanao greeted him back. They were close enough that she had a nickname for him.

"A friend of yours?" Yayoi asked.

"A friend? Not quite the word I'd use…" Nanao seemed tongue-tied for once. After some thinking, she nodded firmly and introduced the high school boy. "Uhh, so, this guy's in high school, but we've hung out with one another since way back. We're childhood friends, I guess? Hm? Wait, what's your actual name again, Kei-chin?"

"Takamori Keito! How do you not remember my name after all these years we've known each other?!"

"I don't know. I guess I don't really use it?"

Their argument seemed more like friendly banter. After some more complaining, the boy, Takamori Keito, looked at Yayoi and smiled reassuringly. "Ah, sorry about that. I'm Takamori Keito. A longtime… Well, I guess a longtime friend of Nanao."

Nanao chimed in, "He's been single his whole life and spends his time hanging out with a junior high school girl. You better be careful or he'll get you too, Yayoi-chan."

"Do you desperately need to make me look bad at every turn or something?" he said with a groan.

They acted like there was no difference in age or gender between them. Perhaps thanks to that, Yayoi didn't feel guarded around him, a stranger she'd just met. "Nice to meet you. I'm Himekawa Yayoi. My uncle lives around here, so I've come to visit."

“Oh, so you’re that niece of Kamei-san who Nanao talked about?” asked Keito.

“That would be me.”

“Got it. She told me you were super cute, so it looks like she wasn’t lying.”

Even though it was just flattery, she was happy to hear it. She didn’t feel scared of him even though he was so much older. He certainly didn’t seem as bad as Nanao made him out to be.

“Say, Kei-chin, what’re you doing here alone first thing in the morning, anyway?” asked Nanao.

“Um, well… I guess I felt like taking a walk.” He answered hesitantly, his gaze wandering.

Nanao, having known him for so long, saw right through him. “You were trying to see my mom, weren’t you?”

She filled Yayoi in, explaining that Keito would sometimes chat with her mother Aoba here in the morning. That alone didn’t mean much until she added that Aoba was his first love.

“What? N-no, of course not. But I mean, if we happen to meet by chance…” Keito said.

“Yeesh. You realize my mom’s thirty-eight now, right? Shouldn’t you give your first love a rest already?” said Nanao, hounding him.

“It’s really not that, okay? I might’ve liked her a little bit a long time ago, but not anymore. We only talk about that sword when we meet, anyway. You know, that family heirloom that you guys left here,” he said, flustered by Nanao’s badgering. He must have been a

really bad liar, since his awkward speech and inability to meet her eyes made it obvious he was trying to change the subject. "We've talked a lot about it, really. And you know how we boys are; we love to talk about demonic swords and family heirlooms and stuff. Oh, right, Yayoi-chan! Did you know there's a sword enshrined here called Yatonomori Kaneomi?"

"Um, yes," Yayoi answered. "Isn't it an important sword from Nanao-chan's family?"

"Right, right. Apparently it was used to seal a wicked demon away."

"R-really? I didn't know…" Now it was Yayoi's turn to get flustered. She had, in fact, talked to whatever was sealed in the blade just last night.

"The world is sure full of mysteries, huh?" he remarked stiffly.

"I-It really is," she replied stiffly as well.

Their awkward laughter was drowned out by the sound of cicadas on the shrine grounds. Yayoi's first meeting with Keito was uncomfortable, to say the least.

THE SHRINE GIRL AND THE SEALED DEMON

The three of them ended up playing the whole day. Keito bought them plenty of things at the candy shop and told Yayoi what Nanao was usually like, while Nanao got back at him by dredging up embarrassing secrets from his past.

Their busy day of fun flew by. When evening arrived, Yayoi returned to the small shrine once more.

"Sounds like you had quite a lot of fun."

"I'm sorry, I must be boring you."

"Not at all. Old folks like me love hearing about the antics of you children."

Yayoi had encountered this strange demonic sword on her first day in Asakusa. It was now her fourth day of meeting with it.

The one who'd stopped her from drawing its blade out of curiosity was none other than the blade itself. Understandably, her shock had been great. But she didn't throw the sword down and run off, since it was her friend's family heirloom.

"Um, umm… Hello?

…Now this is a surprise."

The demonic sword had fully expected her to run away in fear. She was only an elementary school girl, after all. But instead she stayed and warily talked to the sword. After talking with it more, she understood that it meant no harm and her fear of it faded away.

After the initial strangeness, she found the sword quite easy to talk to. Every word it said overflowed with consideration for her young self. It was always kind to her when she visited, so she met with it in secret every day.

"I'm sure he doesn't mind you."

"I think so too. Keito-san's kind, like an older brother."

She told the sword how she'd played with Nanao and Keito that day. It reacted a bit strangely when the topic of Nanao came up, but it listened to what she had to say even more attentively than a father would. She enjoyed her conversations with the strange sword.

"Oh, by the way…"

"Yes?"

She'd come to understand some things about the sword over the past few days. She could only hear its voice when she touched it, which meant she wasn't hearing its voice with her ears but through her skin. Another thing was that the sword itself wasn't exactly the one talking, but the person contained inside it. After learning a demon had supposedly been sealed away by the sword, she could guess what kind of being she was speaking with.

"Keito-san said the sword in this shrine was a demonic one that had sealed away a wicked demon. Is that demon…you, Sword-san?"

The sword's name was Yatonomori Kaneomi. According to legend, it had sealed away a terrible, terrible demon.

"It is. I am the demon sealed within Yatonomori Kaneomi."

"So…you're a wicked demon?"

"I've committed my fair share of heinous acts."

"Hey…nuss?"

"It means I've done many bad things."

He said it like it was nothing, but Yayoi couldn't believe it. After talking with him for four days, she knew he wasn't a bad sword. She

didn’t think he was somebody who deserved to be sealed away. “You don’t *seem* evil.”

“The more wicked the person, the better at deception they are. One shouldn’t trust what someone says just because they act kind—especially not a cute girl like you.”

“C-cute…? Wait! You’re trying to distract me.”

“You got me. But I’ve proven my point, haven’t I? Kind words can be deceiving.”

She glared at the sword in her hands, but since it had no expression to read, she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. His voice did sound like he was enjoying himself, though.

“Fine. Let’s just say I fell for your kind words, then.”

“You don’t need to sulk. I meant it when I said you were cute. Just let what I said about kind words often containing lies remain with you in some corner of your mind.”

“A-all right. Jeez.”

In the end, she couldn’t tell how much of what he said was true or not. That saddened her a bit, and being called cute made her feel bashful, so she pouted a little. Soft laughter came from the sword.

She enjoyed talking to him, but she didn’t like being treated like a child so much. It didn’t help that she understood he was telling her this out of genuine concern.

After chatting with him some more, she suddenly remembered to ask, “Sword-san, don’t you want to come out from there?”

“Pardon?”

"You were put in this sword against your will, right? Don't you want to come out?"

"It'd be a lie to say no. There are some people waiting for me. My memory was a little fuzzy after I was sealed, but I've recently become able to recall them. I feel bad making everyone worry."

He had been in the hands of a young man for a time. He couldn't recall the past at all then, but after he was returned to the shrine, his memory slowly started to come back.

His words didn't make much sense to Yayoi, but he said not to worry about it, so she didn't. Instead, she thought about how he must have felt.

"Then—" She began to say something, but he interrupted her in a firm tone.

"Yayoi. You mustn't think of releasing monsters that have been sealed away."

"But…"

"Thank you. Your feelings alone are enough."

The fact he would say such a thing made her even surer he wasn't some wicked demon. She didn't think he was trying to deceive her somehow. Even though she was a child, she felt bad for him and how he'd been sealed away in a sword and left all on his lonesome in this shrine.

"Don't worry about it. There were some things I wanted time to think about, anyway. Being sealed away like this presented a good opportunity for just that."

"R-really?"

"Yeah," he replied in a lower tone. *"It's not that I don't want to return, but I still have these thoughts that lead nowhere stuck on my mind."*

THOUGHTS THAT LEAD NOWHERE, THE HEARTBROKEN YOUNG MAN, AND THE SHRINE GIRL

Yayoi used to think adults knew everything, but even the strange sword that was far older than her had things it didn't know. She realized how unsure of himself he was from the self-derision in his voice.

"But I still have these thoughts that lead nowhere stuck on my mind."

She wanted to help the sword, but she didn't know what she could say in that moment. This was the first time she felt the pain of not being able to help someone who needed aid.

Takamori Keito wanted to help his first love somehow.

"I still have these thoughts that lead nowhere stuck on my mind."

But he didn't know what to say to her in the moment. Being a child was rough. If he were just a little more mature, maybe he could've done something for her.

He used to think adults knew everything. He'd grown since then, learned many things himself, and experienced many things too—but the things he didn't know had only increased in number.

Was that because he was still a child? If he became an adult, would he finally have answers to all these remaining unknowns?

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"Oh, Keito-san. Good morning."

"Oh hey, Yayoi-chan. Alone today?"

"Yes, Nanao-chan had something come up. I'm just taking a walk."

"I see. I was doing the same thing."

One morning, Keito happened to run into Yayoi near the shrine. They'd played together a number of times by then and got along well even when Nanao wasn't around.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"You seem a little down."

"Do I…?" Yayoi looked startled to have her situation pointed out. Though she was mature for her age, she was still a kid, and she couldn't hide her gloom. "I guess there is something I'm worried about. Not that it's something that affects me personally…"

"All right. Why don't we play if you have some time?"

"Huh?"

"There's no point in worrying yourself sick. Let's go play a whole lot so you can clear your head."

She hadn't expected his offer. They got along well but still only saw one another as a friend of a friend, and there was a gap in their ages as well. By no means were they on good enough terms for him to casually suggest something like this.

"You don't mind?" she asked.

"Of course not. I've been thinking it'd be nice to get to know you better anyway."

She was bewildered but accepted his offer. Her smile was clearly forced, but he understood she was just trying her best to show how grateful she was.

"Let's see, what should we do…" he said, musing to himself. Though he was the one who'd suggested it, there were only so many ways a high schooler and an elementary schooler could play together, not to mention a boy and a girl at that. In the end, Keito decided to go get some of the old toys he had at home.

He brought back a silver ball gun, a spinning top, and some menko cards. The silver ball gun fascinated her, since it was a toy a girl didn't often see. He taught her how to wrap the rope around the top and, after some difficulty, she finally managed to make it spin. They then played with the menko cards for a bit, slamming them against each other to try and make the other's card flip, but the robots drawn on them weren't very interesting to her. When he was young, the other kids were in awe of the fact he had menko cards with Iron

Fortress and Super Electrofusion Robo on them, but kids of the current generation had apparently moved on to other things already.

After they'd played for some time, he bought cold drinks at the neighborhood candy shop. Yayoi was reluctant to impose, so he had to half force a ramune soda into her hands. They returned to the shrine and rested in the shade of the trees. He and Nanao often relaxed at this shrine together.

"Sorry for making you treat me," Yayoi said, referring to the ramune soda. She bowed cutely.

"Don't worry about it. This stuff is cheap," he replied.

They ran into some of his high school classmates while they were playing earlier. They gawked at him, wondering what he was doing with an elementary school girl, but she stepped in and claimed he was a relative for his sake. The strange experience brought them just a bit closer.

"Say, you're pretty good friends with Nanao, right?" he asked.

"Yes. We first met when I came here a while ago. We kept in touch by writing letters to one another."

"You don't say. She of all people kept up with that, huh?" It was unexpected of the generally sloppy Nanao to stick to something like letter-writing, but then he recalled that the girls in his elementary school class did exchange diaries. Maybe writing letters back and forth was more fun than it sounded.

"You're good friends with Nanao-chan too, right?" she asked.

"Me? Well…"

He never got to finish his words because she interrupted him, casually saying, “Is it because her mother was your first love?”

He felt like he had been punched in the gut. The fact that he used to come here every morning when he was ten years old ranked among his top three embarrassing secrets. “Y-Yayoi-chan… You know about that?”

“Yes, Nanao-chan told me, remember?”

Having his embarrassing past dredged up like this was bad for his health. He made a mental note to tell Nanao off later. With a smile to hide his chagrin, he deflected, saying, “Well, I guess it’s true I admired her when I was a kid.”

“It’s okay; Nanao-chan’s mom is really pretty. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Loving someone is a wonderful thing.”

It was impressive she could say all that with a straight face. She was his polar opposite, since he was always trying to hide how he felt. They said girls matured faster, but Yayoi seemed particularly mature when it came to matters of love.

“You’re a good kid, Yayoi-chan.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You just are.” He could not be as honest about his feelings as she was. To his pubescent self, her way of being was worthy of envy. “Aoba-san really was my first love, but that’s not why I became friends with Nanao. She caught my interest in her own way, and we became friends. Oh, but don’t go telling any of this to her.”

Yayoi giggled. “I’m sure she’d be happy to hear it, though?”

"Don't you dare."

They went back and forth like that for a while, with her threatening to tell Nanao and him telling her not to. It was a bizarre exchange, but they were both smiling. Though they hadn't known each other long, they were already friends now.

"Oh, yeah. How long are you going to be staying around here, Yayoi-chan?" he asked.

"Um, about another week, I think."

"I see. Then let's play again if we get a chance. With Nanao this time, of course."

"I'd love to."

They started playing again for some time until the sky began to darken, after which they parted at the shrine. He offered to walk her home, but she declined with a stiff smile, saying it was fine because she was staying close by. He had a feeling she was hiding something but decided not to follow up on it. Even kids had their secrets, after all.

"Thank you very much for today," she said.

"Not at all; I had fun myself. I'm glad you seem to be doing better now."

Her expression clouded. "Um, Keito-san…"

He couldn't do anything for Aoba and her worries, but Yayoi seemed to see something dependable about him. Hesitantly, she revealed what was bothering her deep down.

"Yeah? What's up?"

"It's about an older friend of mine. He has some worries on his mind that he won't share with me. Is there anything I can do for him?"

"…Worries?"

"Yes. He says he has thoughts that lead nowhere stuck on his mind, and I'm not sure what I can say to help him." She was vague about what her friend's exact issue was, but the pain she felt from her inability to help was clear. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I see. It hurts when you can't do anything to help, doesn't it?" Keito himself was struggling to figure out how he could help someone who thought about things with no clear answer. That was why his reply wasn't one of cheap sympathy but of understanding. He knew what it felt like.

"It does…" she replied.

"I'm sorry, Yayoi-chan. I don't have an answer for you there. I may look like an adult to you, but I'm not. High schoolers are really just children too. I was made painfully aware of that recently."

He didn't know what to say to ease the worries of the woman who was his first love. He wished he had the life experience to know what to do.

"Maybe if I were a little older I could be of some help," he said.

"…Maybe." Sharing his sense of helplessness, she hung her head.

He gently patted her head, which made her look up curiously. "Y'know, there's probably not much you and I can do for others, and

that sucks. But even if you can't fix their problems, when you care about somebody you want to be by their side and make them smile."

It wasn't to the extent of being a lingering regret in him, but he wanted to help Aoba somehow, even if it was just a tiny bit. And if he couldn't do even that, then he at least wanted to make her smile.

Perhaps that was a silly thing for him to want for a woman close to his own mother's age. He thought about it somewhat wryly and felt foolish all of a sudden.

But then Yayoi smiled. "Like you did for me?"

"Y-yeah, I guess. Maybe you could play with this friend of yours and help them forget their worries for a bit too. I'm sure they'd be happy with that if they're as sweet of a kid as you."

The sudden compliment made her bashful. His heart was warmed by her reaction, and he found himself smiling.

He meant it half as a joke, but perhaps that was really it. He didn't know what he should do for Aoba, and thinking about it would probably lead nowhere anyway. He couldn't be sure he'd ever have an answer to that question, even as an adult. Maybe, then, it'd be better to find something he could do while he was still a child. Those were his honest thoughts as he looked at the shrine basking in the light of the setting sun.

3

THE YOUNG BOY AND THE DEMON

THIS YEAR'S SUMMER was special to Keito.

“Oh, hey, Keito-kun. We’ve been running into each other quite a bit lately, haven’t we?”

“Hello. I’ve come to keep our conversation going from last time.”

Aoba giggled. “You’re not one to give up, are you?”

“When something grabs my attention, I stick to it.”

“Like natto beans?”

In the mornings, he met the woman he admired at the shrine and chatted with her. He wasn’t so conceited as to think he could understand her worries, but if he could at least make her smile with a dumb joke or two, then it would be enough.

“Yayoi-chan, let’s go. Oh, and you too, Kei-chin.”

“Coming.”

“Wait, am I an afterthought?”

He played more with Yayoi and Nanao too. They were fairly far apart in age but still good friends. They ran under the blazing sun and played late into the evening.

This year’s summer vacation was more fun than usual. Not just for Keito but for Yayoi as well.

“Thank you for today. I had a lot of fun,” she said as usual.

Time flew when one was having fun. Before they knew it, summer vacation was almost over, and Yayoi would be heading home the following day.

This was to be Yayoi’s last night.

After the sun went down, Nanao paid a surprise visit to the Takamori home. The moment Keito came to the door, she grabbed him and said, "Kei-chin! Has Yayoi-chan come by?!"

"Uh, no? Whoa, be careful! What's going on?"

She almost fell over in her panic, but Keito caught and steadied her. She seemed on edge, talking without even stopping to catch her breath. "It's Yayoi-chan! She's gone!"

"Gone? What do you mean gone?"

"She didn't make it home after we split up! What do we do?!"

"W-well, let's calm down, for starters."

The three of them had played during the day, but Yayoi hadn't arrived home afterward. Her parents and Kamei-san were searching everywhere for her as well.

The clock showed it was already ten, late into the night. A little girl still not being home at this hour was worrying indeed.

"Nanao, you'd better go home."

"But—"

"Don't. You're a girl too; you shouldn't be out this late. I'll help look for Yayoi-chan, so just sit tight."

"O…kay." She seemed reluctant but backed down.

He was just as worried about Yayoi as she was. He hurriedly got ready to leave and rushed out of the house. "Yayoi-chan…"

He first planned to check the places they had gone to play. He prayed she was safe as he ran through the night, trying to calm his

anxious heart.

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"Shouldn't you be going home?"

"I don't want to…" Himekawa Yayoi hid herself in a corner of the shrine. She sat with her back to the wall, hugging Yatonomori Kaneomi.

Her parents had already come by looking for her, but they couldn't find her because she was hiding in a dark corner. They ran off after some searching, frantically calling her name.

"Your parents must be worried about you."

"Probably…"

They were likely still looking for her now. Still, she did not want to go home.

"Do you think I should go home, Sword-san?"

"That's a rather difficult question," he replied, to her surprise.

She had assumed he would say "of course" because he was so stern. He didn't get angry when she did something naughty, but he did gently scold her. She had been fully prepared for him to tell her to go home.

"You're young, but you have good common sense for a child. I doubt you'd do this for no reason, so it'd be wrong of me to tell you to go home without at least hearing your reasons why."

She knew she was just being a willful child, but the sword was still willing to hear her out. That made her happy, and at the same time, a bit sorry. "I had fun here. A lot of fun."

She'd enjoyed her summer vacation. She got to play almost daily with Nanao and Keito, and she met a mysterious talking sword. But if she returned to Uncle Kamei's house tonight, then tomorrow she would have to leave Asakusa and return to her old daily life. She would only be able to communicate with Nanao through letters, and there was no knowing if she could even meet Keito and the sword next year. That was why she thought, just maybe, she wouldn't have to go home tomorrow if she stayed here for the night.

Logically she understood that was wrong. But she'd loved the summer she spent here so much that she couldn't help but cling to her childish wish.

"I see. But you can still write letters to that friend of yours, can't you?"

"But I can't see her face or hear her voice through letters. And I won't be able to meet Keito-san or you."

"I'm flattered you include me among those you'll miss."

Her father, being a chief priest, was rather strict with her upbringing, and the sword's gentleness felt all the more pronounced as a result. When she said that to the sword before, he reacted like he'd been put on the spot a little. He had said that if her father felt strict it was only because she meant that much to him. She didn't agree then and had sulked. She still didn't agree now. When she'd told her father she wanted to stay in Asakusa a little longer, he'd flatly refused.

"He said I was asking for too much…" she explained.

"Your father probably has his own work circumstances to consider."

"Then is his work more important than me?" With her spirits so low, only negative thoughts came to mind. The sword chuckled softly.

"Well, how about this? Which of your two friends do you like more?"

"Huh?"

"Let's include myself for good measure too, and your parents and classmates, your school life, your hobbies, and your free time. Who or what do you like the most and the least?"

"W-well, I've never thought about it…"

"That's normal. But once you become an adult, you'll have no choice but to do that. Regardless of what you like and dislike, you'll have to choose between everything."

Yayoi was flustered, not comprehending what he was saying well.

"Even if you don't want to work, you'll do it to make money for your family. Even if it means you'll be hated, you'll scold your child so they can learn. Very few people can live doing only the things they like. You may see your father as strict, but it's not because he hates you; it's because he has to maintain his priorities."

"His…priorities?"

"Yes. Even if you are first in his heart, that doesn't mean he can put your wishes first—for your own sake. Sometimes work has to come before you, and sometimes he does things for your own

nurturing. If he lets you have your way all the time, it could have consequences down the road."

"That's why he's strict with me?"

"That's right. Just as you're putting the fun you had with your friends first, your father, like many other fathers, is putting your future first. It may be hard to see, but you mean a lot to him. Love and kindness aren't only expressed through words."

The sword sometimes expressed things in very roundabout ways. Half of what he said was beyond Yayoi's understanding. She could not recall ever feeling this fatherly love that he spoke of.

"But even if it doesn't mean anything to my father, this summer vacation was precious to me." The feelings she had now were dearer than anything, and she did not want to deny them. "I…I still don't want to go back. I know I'm being selfish and causing everyone trouble, but…I can't."

She had refused to go home in defiance of her father. If she gave up now, that would prove the fun she had here meant just that little to her. The feelings she felt would become no more than a lie. That was why, instead, she wanted to achieve her will even if it was selfish of her.

"You're surprisingly stubborn."

"Is that bad…?"

"No. If this is your choice, then I'll support it. Feel free to stay here for a while."

All that lecturing, only to end up giving her his approval. She felt the tension lift from her body. The oppressive air faded, and a smile naturally formed on her face.

"You know, even if your father is acting with your best interests in mind, it's his own fault if that isn't clear. Causing him a little worry might just be what he deserves."

"Thank you, Sword-san."

The sword had rather ordinary sensibilities for a talking object; he probably thought it was best for her to return home. Even so, he placed the rebellious wishes of a young girl first, and that made her happy. She let out a relieved sigh and started to feel tired. Thinking it would be a waste to fall asleep here, she forced herself to speak.

"This was the funnest summer vacation I've ever had. I'm glad I got to spend time with everyone."

"Is that so? Does anything stand out as particularly memorable?"

"Good question… Maybe doing fireworks or drinking ramune soda at the shrine. Oh, of course, the biggest surprise was meeting a talking sword. That was a first for me."

"Fair enough. I suppose that would be rather memorable."

"Right?"

"What's that boy's name again? Keito-kun? The one you said was like an older brother."

"Keito-san, yes. He's a very kind and dependable boy."

"Why not start writing letters to him too? It'll make the wait until you can meet next year all the more fun."

"Oh, that's a good idea. Exchanging letters with a boy sounds a bit embarrassing, though. Exchanging letters with you…would be a bit hard, huh?"

"Unfortunately, I have no hands at the moment."

"That sounds inconvenient."

"Well, I have nothing in particular that needs to be done, so it's fine. I do miss eating isobe mochi, though."

She giggled. "Then I'll ask my mom to make you lots and lots of mochi once you're free."

"I look forward to it. While we're at it… Yayoi? Did you fall asleep?"

She held out for a good while, but eventually she drifted off to sleep completely, soothed by the sword's voice.

***

Keito ran around searching everywhere for Yayoi, and it was only after he peered into the shrine that he could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

He saw her inside from behind. He thought about calling out to her right away, but then he heard her talking even though he saw nobody around. Warily, he waited until her talking eventually ceased.

As quietly as he could, he slid open the wooden lattice grid door.

"…Yayoi-chan."

She had fallen asleep. It didn't seem like she had been harmed, and it appeared safe to say she hadn't been kidnapped or anything of the sort. Relieved, he felt the strength sap out from his body and sat down.

She was hugging a long tachi blade kept in a metal scabbard. He hesitated to take it from her, but sleeping with a sword could be dangerous. Taking care not to wake her up, he removed the sword from her arms.

It looked fairly ordinary, but he had heard it was a demonic sword. He didn't quite believe that, but he was curious enough to talk to it. "Um, hello?"

"Good evening."

"Wh-whoa. It really talked." He stopped himself just short of a loud exclamation, having covered his mouth. He hadn't thought the sword would actually respond.

"Didn't you already know I could speak? You were listening to us earlier."

"You noticed? Scary thing you are, demonic sword… No, wait, you're not the sword, per se, but the demon sealed inside it, right?"

"Correct."

Keito had listened carefully to what Yayoi said before she fell asleep. He'd thought she was talking to herself at first, but the truth all came together when he remembered the strange sword enshrined here. She had probably been coming here to talk to the sword all summer vacation.

"So you're the wicked Demon Eater who was sealed away by the sword?"

"That's right. I take it you're Keito-kun?"

"Y-yeah. How'd you know?"

"Yayoi proudly described you to me. She said you're like an older brother to her, kind and dependable."

"Well, ha ha. I'm honored." Keito scratched his cheek, blushing slightly. His surprise was fully gone, and there had never been any fear in him from the start. This was undoubtedly a strange situation, but the sword had looked after Yayoi while she hid here, and he saw no reason to be wary of it. "I've heard a bit about you myself. Something about you thinking thoughts that lead nowhere?"

"From Yayoi?"

"Yeah. She was worried and said she wanted to help you somehow."

"How shameful of me to make a child worry. And what a kind girl she is."

"Yeah, she's a good kid." Keito reached over and patted her head. "I'm glad she's safe. She came here herself, right?"

"Right. She didn't want to go back because it meant she couldn't meet with her friends anymore."

"She felt that way, huh? She's got such good manners and acts so mature. I didn't think she could be willful and do something like this."

"She was stubborn enough to put up with the pain, enough to make others think she was all right. But just because you can put up with the pain doesn't mean it isn't there. It piles up until eventually everything comes crashing down."

"I see. I'm ashamed. I didn't know the first thing about Yayoi-chan." Keito hung his head, his soft murmur carrying well through the silent shrine. The sword heard his worries and nonchalantly drove them away.

"What's wrong with that? You're a child; you still have all the time in the world. Just play with her next year and get to know her better than you did this year. I'm sure she would like that."

"…Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Children were allowed to make mistakes. He regretted that he hadn't understood Yayoi's heart better, but that was something that could be amended. He lifted his face and thanked the surprisingly kind demon. "Thank you, um…"

"Yayoi calls me 'Sword-san.'"

"Then I'll do that too. Thank you, Sword-san. For looking after Yayoi-chan…and for helping me."

"The pleasure was all mine…and I got something out of it too. Thank you, Keito-kun."

Keito didn't understand why he was suddenly being thanked back, and he had a feeling the demon in the sword enjoyed his reaction. He couldn't see his face, but he sensed it was smiling.

"How foolish I've been to be so hardheaded at my age. I let myself believe thinking about difficult things was the answer."

When he was young, he'd thought adults knew everything. But the truth was that once one grew older, the knowledge they gained clouded their vision. The reason his thoughts never went anywhere was because he'd forgotten how to simply see things as they were.

"With age I gained wisdom and became able to think about difficult things, but that's caused me to overthink and freeze in my tracks. Seeing you two has reminded me that sometimes it's okay to just act on your feelings."

There were times when it was better to charge headfirst into something rather than worry about the little things. Seeing Yayoi acting on her desire to stay and Keito worrying about her reminded the demon of this.

"You're welcome, I guess? I don't quite get what I'm being thanked for."

"You don't? Well, let's just say I realized something from watching you two. More importantly, you'll be taking Yayoi home, correct?"

"Of course."

"Then could I trouble you to return me to that sword holder there? And remove my blade a little from the scabbard while you're at it, if you could."

"Oh, uh, sure." Keito did what the demon asked. The latter half of his request was rather suspicious in hindsight, but he didn't think the demon was as bad as he had heard. Without a second thought, he unsheathed the blade slightly and laid it carefully on the sword rest.

"Thank you. Farewell, then. Take care of Yayoi."

"Of course. Goodbye, Sword-san. I'm truly grateful for your help, and I'd like to do something to repay the favor if I can."

"Is that so? Then offer to exchange letters with Yayoi for me."

"Is something like that really good enough for you?"

"It is."

And that was the end. After Keito took his hand off the sword, he no longer heard the demon's voice.

The dark shrine suddenly felt eerie. A bit frightened and eager to leave, Keito picked Yayoi up—careful not to wake her.

She was light. Light enough for his untrained body to lift her with ease.

She had desired to stay with everyone in Asakusa so badly that she didn't want to return home. Knowing that made her seem all the cuter.

"…I prefer older women, though," he said to himself. The fact that he had to say anything at all, however, might as well have been damning.

Her parents would probably scold her once she returned to Kamei's place. He would cover for her as best as he could when that happened. He didn't look forward to the experience, but his heart felt light. The reason was no secret to him, but he would feign ignorance of his feelings a little longer for both of their sakes.

He looked up, saw the countless twinkling stars spread thickly across the sky, and realized for the first time just how beautiful the

night sky could be.

FAREWELL

Yayoi thought she would be scolded by her parents, but once she got back to Uncle Kamei's house, they simply hugged her without saying a word. Their relief was palpable, but that only made it clearer how much they had worried. She cried and apologized, and that was the end of it.

"Sword-san was right after all," she said. Keito didn't know what she meant, but he didn't bother to ask since she seemed satisfied.

Because it would be difficult to leave first thing in the morning after everyone had stayed up so late, the new plan was to leave in the evening. That meant everyone could take their time to say their goodbyes.

"Goodbye, Nanao-chan."

"Bye-bye. I'll write you letters."

"Me too."

Of course, there was no better place for them to bid each other farewell than the usual small shrine.

Reluctant to part, the two girls hugged. Once Nanao was ready, it became Keito's turn to say his goodbyes. He handed her a memo he'd prepared the previous night.

"Be well, Yayoi-chan."

“Thank you for everything, Keito-san. Um, what is this?”

“My address. I was thinking I could be your pen pal too and maybe get to know you better until next year. What do you think?”

“I would love to,” she replied, smiling widely. This year’s summer was over, but now she had next year’s to look forward to, and it was all thanks to a suggestion from one meddlesome demon.

“Oh, you’re heading home already?” Just as they were about to part, a stranger called out to them—a young man, perhaps around high school age and somewhere close to six feet in height. His musculature was rather imposing. He acted like an acquaintance of Yayoi’s from the way he called out to her, but she treated him like an unfamiliar face.

“Um, I’m sorry. Who might you be?” asked Keito, speaking for the group.

The young man answered with a surprised look. “You’re kidding. We met last night. Have you already forgotten about me?”

“Last night…?” Keito didn’t recall meeting this man last night. He’d been too busy looking for Yayoi; even if he had encountered him, he wouldn’t be able to recall it. His voice did sound slightly familiar, though.

“Um, excuse me.” Yayoi hesitantly spoke up, seeming to realize something. “That voice… Might you be Sword-san?”

“You got it.”

“Sword-san” was what Yayoi had called the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade. However, the one talking had been the demon sealed inside the

sword, never the sword itself.

Finally realizing the man's identity, Keito took a step back. "Wait, you're that sealed demon?!"

"Took you long enough," the demon said with a grin. He didn't seem remotely as wicked as the legends claimed.

Yayoi looked as surprised as Keito to see the sword's true self out and about. Nanao, who had no idea what was going on, just looked between everyone in confusion.

"I owe my escape to you, Keito-kun," the demon said.

"What do you mean—ah, so that's why you had me draw you from your scabbard!"

"Exactly. The seal was already weakening, though. I could've escaped on my own in two or three years."

The scabbard had apparently played a critical role in sealing away the demon. A cold sweat ran down Keito's brow. Had he just released a wicked demon into the world? "Oh man. You're not going to go on a massacre or something, are you?"

"That's not my thing," the demon replied. "Now that I'm free, I think I'll go back home."

"Oh? That's it?"

"That's it. I'm not one for senseless slaughter."

Keito couldn't tell whether the demon was being truthful or not. He could only hope he was.

Yayoi smiled at the demon. She'd believed him to be a good person all along. "Sword-san."

“Hey, Yayoi. Did they scold you when you got back last night?”

“No, you were right. My father cried and said he was just glad I was safe.”

“What’d I tell you? There isn’t a father in the world who doesn’t love his daughter,” the demon said a bit emotionally as he patted Yayoi’s head. He looked young, but he acted more like a doting grandfather. Perhaps it might be okay to trust him after all.

“Thank you, Yayoi and Keito-kun. I was able to leave some doubts behind thanks to you two,” he said. “You reminded me that there are some things more important than just thinking. Now, let me get out of the way of your farewell.”

With a heartfelt grin, the man began to leave. Yayoi and Keito tried to stop him, but he simply said they’d probably meet again somewhere down the road and continued to walk away.

He departed just as abruptly as he arrived, leaving Yayoi, Keito, and Nanao in a daze.

“Uhh, so who was that ‘Sodo-san’ guy or whatever?” asked Nanao, who hadn’t properly heard the man’s name.

“Good question,” Keito replied thoughtfully. The way the man came and went like the wind was kind of funny, and Yayoi seemed to think the same thing. The two shared a look and smiled.

“You think we’ll meet Sword-san again?” she asked.

“Who knows? But, well, he did say we’d probably meet somewhere down the road.”

"I hope we do." A touch of sadness filled her eyes, but there was hope in them too.

Suddenly remembering they had been in the middle of their farewells, Keito brought up his promise to write to her again. "Oh, right. Continuing where we left off, write me some letters too if you can."

"Oh, yes. I'd love to. I think Nanao-chan can give you my address? Although you could probably find it easily on your own too."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"My family's shrine is pretty famous around Hyogo."

"Is that so? I should be able to find it no problem, then. Hm? Wait, you mentioned you helped out with your family business before, right? Are you a shrine maiden or something, then?" He envisioned her in shrine maiden attire, but she shook her head. He felt a bit disappointed, having got his hopes up. She smiled teasingly at the way he wore his emotions on his sleeve.

"Um, I do wear shrine maiden clothes, but our shrine doesn't exactly have shrine maidens."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. Instead of a shrine maiden, it's our custom to have what we call an Itsukihime." Yayoi, her name bearing "ya" meaning night and "yoi" meaning evening, spoke proudly.

REUNION

In Asakusa, Tokyo, a bit removed from the street of the famous Kaminarimon Gate, there was a dimly lit alley with an antique store called Kogetsudou. It had been around since the middle of the Meiji era, but not many customers ever came by. The building was old, giving the store a rather shabby look. The sun was setting for the day, bathing everything in the color of sunset, and the store's antiques looked bewitching bathed in the orange glow.

The store's owner, Yunohara Aoba, blankly looked around the empty shop and let out a slight yawn.

Business was poor, but she didn't particularly mind. Her husband had a company job, so the family earned enough. She ran Kogetsudou not to make a living but more as a hobby, making the lack of business a nonissue.

"Pardon me."

A customer entered just then—a rather rare sight. His voice was somehow familiar, belonging to a young man around seventeen or maybe eighteen years of age.

She had known this day would eventually come. Some emotion she couldn't identify welled up inside her. Its warmth raced through her whole body and made her smile. "Oh, hey. It's been a good while, Jin-san."

It really had been a good while. He was a nostalgic face, and she was truly happy to see him.

"It really has. Twenty years, has it been?"

"Twenty-three. Wow, you haven't aged a day. Meanwhile, I've turned into an old lady over here." She slapped her own cheek softly.

Jinya smiled wryly, thinking to himself that she hadn't changed at all. "Aren't you surprised?"

A demon she'd sealed away had appeared before her. He'd half expected a different reaction than this. But she didn't even get up from her chair and instead treated him like he was an ordinary customer.

"Oh, I am, but I had a feeling you would come. I just knew the first thing you would do once you were free would be to come here. So although I'm surprised, I'm not *that* surprised."

She hadn't been safekeeping the sword particularly securely, so its seal coming undone was no surprise. She was certain he wouldn't come seeking revenge either. When he appeared before her, it would only be to say hello.

The tension left his body once he heard her words. The two of them had lived together while hiding many secrets from one another, but she still trusted him enough to talk to him like this. He sighed, probably out of relief. Their time together hadn't been meaningless after all.

"I see… What have you been up to since then?"

"What else but living life with thoughts of revenge on you in my heart? And thinking. Lots of that. I've been thinking about thoughts that led nowhere this whole time." She spoke jokingly, but her words

were the truth. She had spent the past twenty-three years on revenge and thoughts with no answers.

But the man who had the answers was finally here.

"Hey, Jin-san? Something's been on my mind these past twenty-three years. Why did you let me seal you without fighting back? I'm sure you could have found some way to stop me."

To this day, she still didn't know why he allowed her strike to land. He could have chosen to end things differently, but instead he let himself be sealed away and wasted twenty-three years of his life estranged from those he knew. She didn't know what had been on his mind then or what he thought of her, the girl who had tricked him. She had spent all this time aching to know.

"I couldn't move," he answered.

"Don't lie to me, please. A man as skilled as you should have seen through my movements easily." She didn't believe him, but he insisted it was the truth.

"No, I mean I really couldn't move. The demonic blade of *Demon Wail* only needs a small cut to activate its effects. I was doomed the moment I failed to dodge your first strike. What's more, I had taken from you twice already by then without managing a single thing in return…"

Since he had taken Saegusa Sahiro and Nanao's lives, he was seeking a way to end things that would leave Aoba unharmed, and that hesitation dulled his movements.

"I didn't know what to do. That's why I was too slow to dodge or block. You had abandoned all indecision, but I couldn't do the same… There is no grand secret hidden within our bout. It was simply an honest victory for you."

The truth she had waited all these years to hear turned out to be something so anticlimactic. The cause of his defeat was none other than his impurity, which dulled his blade and made him weak. A blade clouded with indecision could reach no one. He might have been able to slay a stranger, but not Aoba, to whom he had grown attached after living with her for a time.

Jinya had hesitated because he did not want to cut down a young woman desperately trying to carry out her will. That proved her time in the Dove District with him had not been meaningless.

"…I can't believe you. You're so skilled most of the time but clumsy in strange ways. You're a real fool. What if I killed you after sealing you away?"

"I knew you wouldn't. If you were that kind of woman, I could've killed you without hesitation from the start. I told you it was clear how this would all end, didn't I? No matter what path might lead up to it, I was certain we would meet again like this."

So that was what he had meant, she realized. He had taken the lives of her grandfather's loved one and Nanao, but she never hated him herself. If it hadn't been for her grandfather's wishes, she'd never have turned her blade against him. That was why he knew she would only seal him away at best, not kill him, which in turn made him hesitate to fight her.

The end had been clear from the start. He had known they would meet again like this and manage to smile together again.

"An impure sword makes for a dull blade, but my dull blade was what let me get by without killing you. This is the first time I've felt appreciation for my weakness."

"Hmph. So what? I've been dancing in the palm of your hand this whole time?"

They did not share a particularly special bond. To Jinya, Aoba was no more than a deceptive young woman who made a cowardly sneak attack, but his indecision stopped their bond from being severed.

"It's not like I had control over your life. Everything leading up to this moment is the result of your own choices," he said.

"Well, yeah… All right, fine. I get it. That fight ended with me winning, and I've succeeded in my revenge on you over these past twenty-three years. Looks like you've done nothing but lose this whole way."

"I'm home!" Just then, a young suntanned girl ran in—Aoba's daughter, Nanao. "Oh, there's a customer? Eh heh heh, sorry for the noise. Wait, aren't you that Sodo-san guy from before?"

He looked at her in surprise. Nanao took after her mother greatly. It had never occurred to him that the sex worker apprentice he had known would start a family of her own.

"A daughter, huh? Time's really a mysterious thing. To think the young woman I knew has become a mother."

"Ah ha ha, I'm surprised myself, to be honest. Come here, Nanao." Aoba beckoned Nanao to approach, and the girl made a face. "This is an old acquaintance of mine. Greet him properly, 'kay?"

"'Kay. I'm Yunohara Nanao. Nice to meet you."

The girl was named after the benefactor who gave Aoba a place to belong after she arrived in the Dove District. It was the name of someone dear to her, someone Jinya had killed.

"How's that, Jinya? You couldn't take much from me after all, could you?" Just as Jinya's expression began to cloud, Aoba hugged her daughter with a broad smile. "You may have killed Sahiro-san and Nanao-san, but I have a loving husband and a darling daughter now. I guess the oh-so-scary Demon Eater wasn't all he was cracked up to be, huh?"

"Aoba, you…"

"I told you, didn't I? I've dedicated all this time toward my revenge, and what a good revenge it's turned out to be. No matter how much you took from me, it didn't mean a thing. I turned out happy anyway."

She showed him that no matter what he might have done, it had had little effect on her life. That was her revenge.

"That's some revenge… You got me."

"Heh heh. You messed with the wrong girl. I guess the humble spirit hunters of Kogetsudou have something to brag about now."

"Brag all you like. The only human who's managed to defeat the Demon Eater so soundly is you, Aoba."

It had taken many years, but a clear winner and loser had emerged. However, there was no grudge held by either party, only smiles all around. In this instance, revenge had led to a rather refreshing result.

"Oh, sorry. I shouldn't overstay my welcome," he said.

"No, no, you don't need to worry. Why not come upstairs for a bit? I'll bring out some tea and snacks."

"I wouldn't want to impose. I'll take my leave here for today."

He was glad to have met her again. After a brief farewell, he turned away and left without a hint of hesitation. Aoba made no attempt to stop him. The two of them might have been reluctant to part, but it would've been tactless to draw things out here.

"Mom, who was that man?" The instant Jinya was out of sight, Nanao questioned her mother like she couldn't wait a second more.

"He's someone I lived with for a while, long ago. Oh, but keep that a secret from your father, all right?" Aoba answered with the truth but in a roundabout way that would lead her daughter to misunderstand.

Nanao's eyes went wide. "H-huh? You mean…he's an old boyfriend?"

"Nooo way, we didn't have anything romantic like that going on. We just happened to live together for a time." Aoba looked in the direction Jinya had gone, as though she was searching for a trace of him. He'd always returned when he left before, but this time he would

be gone for good. Perhaps it was improper of her as a wife to miss a man when she had a family of her own.

"Hey, Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Did you ever love that guy?"

Thinking about that question would probably lead nowhere. Just what were her feelings for him, who knew he was being deceived but was kind to her anyway? She could no longer recall.

She gently brushed her fingers through her daughter's hair and answered, "Who can say? In the end, it was all nothing more than a dream."

Nanao frowned at the ambiguous answer, but Aoba thought it was apt.

There might have been feelings left unsaid at some point, but some things were beautiful precisely because they ended as a dream. She could say with pride that she had enjoyed their time together, as rooted in deception as it might have been, and she would remember him in her heart like one recalled a precious dream.

And so, time flew on by.

The antiquated Kogetsudou still stood in Asakusa well into the Heisei era. Its owner, now an old lady, thought back on the past every now and then.

In April of year thirty-three of the Showa era, the red-light districts all vanished. Only a mere decade after the war, their golden

days became simply a memory. With the passage of the Prostitution Prevention Law, most brothels became apartments and lodging houses, the buildings living out their remaining lives as ordinary residences. They've weathered like you would expect over the half century leading up to the present Heisei era and scarcely bear a resemblance of their former glory.

The sights, old feelings, and even promises once sworn—all were swept away by time.

…But every now and then, I still thought back to the Dove District that couldn't possibly exist and the strange events that occurred within it.

INTERLUDE: THEREAFTER

April 2009.

"This sword here is called Yatonomori Kaneomi."

The chief priest of the shrine showed the sword in his hands to a girl sitting by him. It was a long tachi blade contained in an iron scabbard, one of four artificial demonic swords created in the Warring States period by the swordsmith Kaneomi. The man, Keito, then explained it had been entrusted to them by Aoba, the owner of Kogetsudou.

"It's a real demonic sword, by the way. I've heard it talk myself, in fact," he said.

"R-really?!"

"Oh yeah. You can ask my wife for more information. I'm sure she'd love to tell you all about it."

Then a cold voice called out, "Dad? What do you think you're doing?"

It was Keito's only daughter. She was in high school now and had reached that age when children turned a little rebellious toward their parents. He still thought she was just as cute as her mother, though.

"Oh, welcome home. Your friend came on by, so I just thought I'd show them something interesting."

"There was no need for that," she said sternly. "And what kind of girl would care about a sword, anyway?"

It was Sunday. Her friend had come over to play but had gotten the time wrong and arrived while his daughter was out for some business. Keito didn't want her to be bored while she waited, so he decided to show her the Yatonomori Kaneomi blade Aoba had entrusted to him.

"I think it's pretty interesting!" the friend said. "He said the sword talks! Can you believe that?"

"Don't be so gullible. And Dad, don't tease my friends."

The friend was a first-year in high school like his daughter, but she looked rather young for her age. It was a little childish of her to believe the sword could talk just like that, but it was, in fact, the truth. The sword did talk.

Or rather, it used to.

Keito's mind wandered to the distant past. Aoba had entrusted this sword to them, saying she didn't need it anymore. It had been a nostalgic summer vacation day, and his memory of it was still fresh.

"Oh, but he isn't teasing her." Keito's wife entered then, carrying a tray with some cakes and black tea for the girls.

His wife was a beautiful woman whose long black hair suited her. She was just past her mid-thirties but looked shockingly youthful for her age. They'd first met when he was in high school and she was in elementary school. To say he had fallen for her back then would certainly be criminal, but he did feel as though it had been fate that they ended up together.

"Isn't that right, Keito-san?" she asked.

"That's right. But I'm sure you can tell them more about Sword-san than I could, Yayoi."

"I'd love to. This sword really did used to talk, girls."

Their fun summer vacation was behind them now, but their time after it ended was dear to them as well.

After that summer vacation, Takamori Keito and Himekawa Yayoi began exchanging letters, spent time together during long breaks, and deepened their bond. Once she became a high schooler, she worked up the courage to confess her feelings to him, and the two started dating.

Keito was a twenty-one-year-old college student at the time and had liked Yayoi himself, but he had hesitated to ask out a girl of high

school age and instead got beaten to the punch, which gave Nanao a good laugh.

At any rate, the two dated and were an amicable couple. Talk of marriage eventually came up, but then an issue arose. Yayoi was the only daughter of a shrine that could trace its roots all the way back to the Edo period. Her father was adamantly against her marrying out of the family, but that was fine by Keito. Soon after they started dating, he had left his college and instead immediately applied to another one that would give him Shinto priest qualifications. In other words, he had already started preparing for marriage with her while she was still in high school.

Though most would've thought that was jumping the gun, Yayoi's father was moved by Keito's devotion and welcomed him into the family as Himekawa Keito. He married Yayoi, the Itsukihime, and became chief priest of the Jinta Shrine.

"Even your mom says it's true, Miyaka-chan!"

"Really? Then maybe it is…"

Keito and Yayoi had named their daughter Himekawa Miyaka, and her close friend here was Azusaya Kaoru.

"How unexpected. I didn't think you'd come around, Miyaka," Keito said.

"Well, they do say the world is full of mystery," Miyaka said, making a bit of a face for some reason. Meanwhile, Kaoru was in high spirits.

"Right, right! A talking sword is totally possible!"

Keito had assumed the two wouldn't believe his tall tale, but they had little issue doing just that. He wrongly chalked it up to the fact that young girls liked to dream.

The truth, however, was that the two had already been involved in several incidents that made a talking sword seem ordinary in comparison, but Keito and his wife wouldn't learn about that until some time later.

"Hey, don't you think Kadono-kun would like to hear about this?" Kaoru said.

"Would he really? He'd probably say this kind of stuff is just work to him," replied Miyaka.

As a father, Keito couldn't overlook what had just been said—there was mention of a boy connected to Miyaka. He leaned in, about to follow up on what she said, when suddenly Yayoi stopped him. "No, dear."

"But Yayoi! There's a boy eyeing my girl!"

"Nobody said that. And even if there were, it's her choice whether or not to stay with him."

"Yeah… That's true. Even we had things going on that our parents wouldn't understand." He sighed and fixed his posture. Though he really knew without being told that he shouldn't butt in, he still couldn't help but worry. Being a father was tough.

Come to think of it, there was a time he believed adults knew everything. But the mysteries in life had only grown in number for him, even after he became a parent. He couldn't tell what his

daughter's feelings for others were, nor how he should deal with her at this age. The unknowns still far outweighed the knowns, just as they had when he was a kid.

"Right? I'm sure it's the same way for her."

"But still…"

"It'll be fine. She's our daughter. Let's trust her to make her own choice about what's dear to her."

He saw his wife's lovely smile and was reminded of the time they first met, one summer vacation long ago. He wondered to himself just how much they had grown since then and came up with an answer immediately: probably very little.

"Yeah, all right. Hey, Yayoi?"

"Yes?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking that I'm glad you're my wife."

"And I'm glad you're my husband."

But it was all right even if they hadn't grown. The more unknowns there were in life, the more precious the knowns became.

What he had now was something called happiness. That much he knew.

Final Chapter:
Visiting the Remains of a Red-Light District

PART SIX: HOTARU

AUGUST, SHOWA 57 (1982 AD).

It was the height of summer. There were fewer trees in Tokyo now, but the cries of the cicadas were as incessant as ever. The summer sky felt oppressive overhead and made the words being spoken feel all the more pointed.

"Hey, Jii-chan. Didn't you tell me you were only heading out for 'a bit'?"

Koyomiza looked unchanged from the past. The building had been completely destroyed by an air raid during the war, but Toudou Yoshihiko and his wife Kimiko worked hard to restore the theater to the way it had been in Taisho times.

Of course, it was still just as Jinya had remembered it once he returned. Nothing had changed.

"Hm? Oh, did I say something like that?"

"You *definitely* did."

But for humans, things weren't that simple. Now that Yatonomori Kaneomi's seal had faded, Jinya was finally free to return to the Toudou family. But an absence of twenty-three years was a bit much.

"You're so mean, Jii-chan! How could you just vanish for twenty-three years?!"

The Toudou couple's eldest son, Jingo, was ecstatic to see Jinya return—but he was also livid it had taken him twenty-three years.

Jinya had been forced to sit formally in the living room. His scolding had gone on for a full hour already.

"C'mon, Jingo. Go easy on 'im. He was only gone for a mere twenty-three years." Izuchi, an employee of Koyomiza, tried to lend Jinya a hand. Izuchi looked like a large, well-built man in his thirties, but he was actually a demon. Jinya had known him since the Taisho era, and he made for a good drinking buddy. He let out a hearty laugh to try and lighten the mood, but it seemed to have the opposite effect and earned him a glare from Jingo.

"It might've been short for you, Izuchi-san, since you're a demon and all. But for us humans, who only live to around sixty or seventy, twenty years is more than a quarter of our lives! While he was gone, I had my third son and even became a grandpa myself."

Most of Jingo's hair had turned white, and his eldest son had children of his own. A long time had passed. The fact that Jinya left like he was only stepping out for a short while and never came back must have weighed greatly on his mind.

"Forgive me. I have no excuse for my actions." Jinya deeply bowed his head, feeling Jingo's anger was justified. There was no argument he could make for himself. It had been through his own carelessness that he had been sealed away.

Faced with such a genuine apology, Jingo gave a heavy sigh. "I'm angry. You really made me worry. I get you had circumstances, like that one girl told us, but I still wish you could have at least contacted us every now and then."

"It is as you say. But who is this girl you mentioned?"

"A young woman named Motoki Aoba. Didn't you ask her to come here in your stead? She told us you were busy with a troublesome job and couldn't come back for a while. I just didn't think that 'while' would be more than twenty years."

After Jinya asked some more questions, he learned Aoba had come to Koyomiza about half a year after he had set off for the Dove District. She told them that after he had finished his business in the Dove District, he got involved with a troublesome opponent—one that would take an unknown number of years to defeat—and that he would return only after he did so.

As Motoki Soushi's grandchild, she must have already known Jinya was living with the people of Koyomiza. She must have told them that so they wouldn't worry about him too much.

Good grief, he thought. He had been defeated in every sense. Strength must have been a word reserved to describe people like her. He longed to have more of the non-violent strength she possessed.

"You knew her, right?" asked Jingo.

"I did. She comes from a line of spirit hunters and is the one who soundly defeated me."

"Oh, she did, did she? …Wait—*what*?!" Jingo knew Jinya was a demon who had fought and overcome his fair share of deadly battles. The revelation that a girl like Aoba had defeated him was shocking, even if she was from a line of spirit hunters.

"I know no human as strong as her," said Jinya.

After he was unsealed, he paid a visit to Kogetsudou and talked to Aoba, who showed him he was incapable of even properly making someone unhappy. That had been her revenge against him. She portrayed his actions as meaningless, yet Jinya's heart felt full. She was telling him not to feel guilty about what happened anymore, and that lifted a burden from him.

When he lost to Okada Kiichi and when Magatsume took Nomari from him, he had managed to stand up once more. But his battle against Aoba could only be considered a complete and utter defeat. In the twenty-three years he was sealed away, she had completely forgiven him and seized happiness on her own. He had been soundly defeated by her smile, her strength as a person, and her warm kindness.

"I guess people aren't always what they seem," Jingo said thoughtfully. "But anyway, that's all from me. I can only keep you so long. Of course, I could chew your ear off longer if I wanted to, but, honestly, I'm just glad you're back. Think a little more before doing something like this again, though."

Jingo smiled somewhat bashfully. He was still a bit angry, but he didn't want to trouble Jinya too much. He had said most of what he wanted to say, so he decided to call it there. Grateful for his graciousness, Jinya lifted his head. But then Jingo's smile faded for some reason, replaced by an awkward expression. Before Jinya could ask what was wrong, he felt someone pound his shoulders.

"Me next."

He looked to see Ryuuna standing behind him. She, too, was ageless. She looked the same way she had in the Taisho era: a slender face, sleek black hair, and the small body of an adorable fourteen-year-old girl. The only difference was that her cheeks were puffed up to show her anger now.

"After Ryuuna-neechan, my mom will want to have a word with you. Then it'll be my son's turn," Jingo said. Jinya finally understood why he was making that face.

He got his ear chewed off for many, many hours after that.

Ryuuna was mad he'd taken so long to return and complained she missed him. Kimiko cried and said she thought he might never come back. Jingo's eldest son greeted him with a smile, then complained that he hadn't been around to play with him when he was growing up. Jinya got lectured for almost three hours in total and was left exhausted.

He knew he deserved to be dressed down, having made them worry so much. He also knew all their anger sprang from worry. Though he felt discouraged, he was equally happy.

After all the scolding was done, he received a visitor while he was resting in his room. It was Toudou Yoshihiko, who was enjoying retirement after entrusting the position of theater manager to his son.

"Hey, Yoshihiko."

"Ah, they really put you through the wringer, huh? Here, I brought you some tea."

Yoshihiko had been just a ticket boy when they first met, but now he was seventy-five. There wasn't a hair left on his head, and he was skin and bones. There was no trace of his younger self in his face, but he smiled just as warmly as he used to.

He had aged well. That was Jinya's honest belief every time he saw him. The man had married Kimiko, been blessed with children, and rebuilt Koyomiza after the war. He'd lived through the tumultuous times spanning the Taisho and Showa eras and had become able to look back on the past with a nostalgic smile.

He did not lament past misfortune, nor did he flaunt what he had achieved. He overcame difficulties with a composed smile and properly treasured the happiness he obtained afterward. Jinya considered Yoshihiko to be among the few people who had true strength.

"Sorry to make you go through the trouble of making us tea," Jinya said.

"Not at all. I wanted to chat with you, anyway. It's been too long."

"Ah. Here to chew me out as well, eh?"

The folds on Yoshihiko's face multiplied as he smiled. "Ah ha ha, no, no."

"You're not? I caused you a great deal of worry, so I'll happily accept whatever you have to say."

"Oh, I never worried. I may not have known when, but I always knew you would come back. Your home is here, after all." Yoshihiko's

words were so carefree, and that made them all the more striking. He'd had complete faith in Jinya this whole time. The fact that he could say so without a hint of shame was admirable. Jinya felt he had caught a glimpse of why Izuchi respected this man enough to call him "Yoshihiko-senpai."

"Damn…"

"Ha ha. Was I wrong?"

"No, it's as you say. You're so right that I have no choice but to show my respect to you, my master, as a member of 'Yoshihiko's Demon Quartet.'"

Yoshihiko recalled that old joke of Izuchi's and smiled as his face became all wrinkles. "Now *that* brings back memories."

Jinya would never age as a demon, but if he had the choice, he wanted to become a man who could smile like Yoshihiko did.

Jinya said, "While I have you, there's something I'd like to ask for."

"Oh, sure. Name it."

"Just like that? You haven't even heard what I want yet."

"Oh, please. I know you wouldn't ask for anything impossible."

Jinya couldn't help but feel a bit bashful when he heard that, but his request was nothing lavish. He only asked for a few maps.

He took out the small bottle in his pocket and fiddled with it in his hand. It was filled with star sand. The ephemeral dream was long

gone, but there was still something left undone. Before he woke up completely, he needed to settle one last matter.

Several days later, Jinya started working at Koyomiza again. Most of his tasks only involved cleaning and odd jobs, so he wasn't kept particularly busy. In fact, he was busier in the moments between work when others like Jingo and Kimiko came to take up his time.

"Jiiya, Jiiya."

The one who came to see him the most was Ryuuna. After he returned, she could often be seen following behind him wherever he went. Even though he was only stepping outside to sweep the theater's entrance now, she followed behind him like a duckling. Seeing her like this reminded him of the way she used to be back when he was still a gardener for the Akase family. She must have missed him terribly in the twenty-three years he'd been absent.

He felt a mixture of joy and guilt as he patted her head. She gave a heartfelt smile, a sight that made returning worth it on its own.

"Sorry it took me so long to come back," he said.

"It's okay. I protected everyone while you were gone."

"I see."

"So pat my head more."

During the war, Jinya and Izuchi had temporarily left Koyomiza to avoid the drafts, not because they were afraid to fight but because they did not believe demons had a place meddling in the conflicts of humans. It was a fact of life that fortune came and went. Jinya knew

their inaction could cause Japan to lose the war and fall to ruin, and that there might have been honor in taking up the sword to fight. But even so, he believed it was not their place, and Izuchi agreed. Whether the result was victory or defeat, it had to be brought about by human hands.

It would have been a problem if young, able-bodied men stayed around the Toudou home while avoiding the draft, though. That was why Jinya and Izuchi lived as vagabonds for much of the early Showa years.

As he left, Ryuuna had said, *"I'll protect everyone while you're gone. So don't worry, Jiiya."* Koyomiza had become a place dear to her too. After that, every time he left for an extended period, she would protect the place in his stead.

She'd done the same this time as well, making sure no harm befell Koyomiza in his absence. Of course, now that he was back, she wanted him to dote on her as a reward for all her efforts.

"Ah, Jii-chan."

Just as Jinya finished most of the sweeping, he heard Jingo call out to him. He was the theater manager now, in charge of assigning others their duties, among other things. In his hands were two maps which Yoshihiko must have quickly sent for.

"Jingo. Are those the maps I requested?"

"Yeah, my old man asked me to give them to you. This here is an up-to-date map of Tokyo, and this here's a map of East Mukojima. You also said you wanted a route map of the city trams, but they got rid of them a while ago."

The city trams were gradually shut down from Showa 38 to Showa 47, a duration for which Jinya had been sealed away.

Jinya couldn't hide his surprise at the news. Many things changed from Meiji to Taisho, and it was the same way from Taisho to Showa. The advance of modern science was frighteningly fast—but so was the rate at which things were rendered obsolete. He just couldn't get used to that fact no matter how hard he tried, and he felt sorrowful for what time had left behind.

"I see… No wonder I didn't see any trams around."

"Twenty years will change any city," Jingo said. "Not that Koyomiza has changed one bit this whole time."

Koyomiza's lack of change was not just something they strived for, but a point of pride as well. Having properly inherited that way of thinking, Jingo beamed. Though his words were meant jokingly, he was proud of his home.

"So, what are the maps for, anyway?" he asked.

"I was thinking of going to the Dove District again." Jinya felt Jingo grab his shoulders almost the exact instant the words left his mouth. Ryuuna clung to his waist from behind as well. The two didn't want him to go, considering what had happened last time.

"Jiiya, no," Ryuuna said. Her eyes were moist, tears ready to fall at any moment.

"Neechan's right. You mustn't go." Jingo's expression was a mixture of worry and anger.

They were both afraid he might not return again.

"It'll be all right. I'll be back before you know it," Jinya said.

"You said that last time." Ryuuna glared up at him. Her cuteness meant she was far from threatening, but he couldn't bring himself to shake her off, so it ended up being a fairly effective move.

Nomari and Heikichi, Kimiko and Yoshihiko. Jinya was always soft when it came to children, but he was particularly weak when Ryuuna was involved, perhaps because they'd spent so much time together. But in this particular case, he could not do what she wanted.

"I promise I'll be back before the day is over," he said.

"But…"

"Please, Ryuuna. I have to go." He meant it. His feelings were sincere.

Knowing how stubborn he was, Ryuuna reluctantly released her hold on him. Seeing her do that, Jingo begrudgingly did the same.

"You promised. So come back," Ryuuna said.

"I will. Want to pinky promise?"

"Mm."

Piiinky promise, whoever lies must swallow a thousand needles, pinky promised.

A promise that is sworn must be kept. That much was common sense to anyone, and it was also why he had to return to the Dove District one more time.

"I'm sorry for making you worry too, Jingo," Jinya apologized.

"I won't stop you if Ryuuna-neechan won't. But I at least want to hear why you're going," Jingo said with a frown.

Jinya grinned slightly and said, "Because I broke a promise, I guess?"

***

The Dove District was located in East Mukojima of Sumida Ward, Tokyo. To get there, people used to ride the tram from Kanda-Sudacho, cross through Asakusa, and disembark at Mukojima-Susakimachi, from which it was only a short five-minute walk to the flourishing "special restaurant district," a common euphemism for red-light districts. Many of those who visited the Dove District probably looked out and admired the prospering city of Tokyo as they swayed with the tram's movements.

But once the Prostitution Prevention Law was fully implemented, the red-light districts were closed for good. Leading up to Showa 47, all the trams except for the Arakawa Line were phased out as well. Never again could the sight of what had been there be savored the same way.

That wasn't to say the Dove District became ruins or anything of that sort. The normal businesses on the main streets were still around, and the brothels on the side streets had been repurposed into residences and shops. The Dove District Shopping District Association —formerly the Terajima Business Association, founded in Showa 3— had decided to keep the feel of the old Dove District but change it into a neighborhood shopping district.

"This place has changed," Jinya said thoughtfully. "…Much less than I expected."

If the Dove District he had seen was a dream, then this place could be no more than the hollowed-out ruins of that dream, or so Jinya had thought. But he arrived to find it a rather lively spot. There was the regular hustle and bustle one would expect from downtown, and the tiled buildings reminiscent of red-light districts were still around. Wild cats dashed through, ignoring the chatter of ladies stopping to gab on their way home from shopping. There were no gaudy pink neon signs, but the place had a unique vitality to it, one different from the old Dove District.

He couldn't help but feel sad about the differences, but the faint traces of what once had been here set him at ease. The Red-light District of the Après to which men used to make pilgrimages might have been gone, but the Dove District unmistakably remained—just in a different form. And what a great thing that was.

"Now then…" Jinya took out the map of East Mukojima that Yoshihiko had prepared for him. Though he'd lived here for a time, much had changed since then. He was right to bring a map so he wouldn't get lost.

He began to walk with the map in one hand, but soon he smelled something delicious. He found the source after quickly scanning of the area—a butcher shop with a sign that said "Makita's Meats." The smell was of some fried food, and a woman in her forties was in the middle of displaying her freshly fried croquettes.

"Croquettes, huh…" The Dove District and croquettes. Seeing the two things together brought a wry smile to his face.

It would be noon soon, so he figured he might as well eat something while he was here. Perhaps the familiar face that rose to mind was what spurred him to do so, or maybe the croquettes simply seemed that delicious. Before he knew it, he found himself walking over to the butcher shop.

"I'll have a croquette."

"Sure thing! That'll be fifty yen!" An energetic, cheerful voice responded to his order. She was a broad-shouldered woman in her forties. Age must have made her put on weight, but judging from her facial features, she'd probably been quite the beauty back in her heyday.

Jinya took the croquette she handed him and paid her fifty yen. He liked his croquettes slathered in sauce; they paired extra well with rice that way. That was something Jingo had taught him. Jinya had no rice at the moment, though, and so he took a bite of the croquette as it was. The coating was thin, and the potato was fluffy. A lighter amount of minced meat was used, and he could taste the sweetness of well-fried onion. The texture was excellent. It was a simple but delicious croquette.

"What do you think? Our croquettes are pretty damn good, right?"

"They are. It has a well-honed, nostalgic flavor."

"Ah ha ha ha! Even a young kid like you thinks so, huh?" The

woman opened her mouth wide and laughed.

Jinya mused to himself that "nostalgic" was, indeed, a strange word for a young man of his apparent age as he took another bite. The woman stared as he ate. Wondering what was wrong, he looked back and saw her cock her head.

"Say, have you bought from us here before?"

"No, this is my first time."

"Right, that's what I thought. Huh. Weird, I just feel like I've seen you before. Something about croquettes… Oh well. It's probably nothing." The woman muttered to herself for a bit before abandoning the thought and putting on a cheerful smile.

His spirits lifted, and he suddenly got the urge to ask something. "Do you mind if I ask a question too?"

"Go for it," she said.

His question was one he had wanted to ask for a long time. "What's your favorite food?"

"Well, that'd be the croquettes my husband makes, no doubt!" she replied without missing a beat.

Grinning, Jinya bought another croquette in lieu of thanks. After a quick goodbye, he left the butcher shop behind and speedily dug into the croquette as he walked.

"Delicious."

The second croquette tasted even better than the first. Its flavor must have reached all the way to his heart.

Relying on the map, Jinya snaked his way through the shopping district and many of its alleys. Eventually he was greeted with a nostalgic sight.

It had seen better days, but it was mostly the same—a two-story café-style building with tiled walls and a balcony. Even the two rather striking diagonal brass door handles were just as he remembered them. The only big difference was that the signboard now said "Sakuraba-sou." The place had been Sakuraba Milk Hall back when it was a brothel, but it seemed to have been refurbished into an apartment. A shame, but that was time for you.

Jinya liked the liquor he used to drink here. He could still remember the place it had been when he looked at it now. The manager had spoken with an effeminate drawl and would welcome him in like a friend. "Nice to see you," he would say, already reaching for a glass to pour out some whiskey.

He had thought that far before realizing the voice he had just heard was not a hallucination but real. An elderly man in his sixties holding a broom was standing right in front of him. He was broad-shouldered for his age, and his right leg was in a brace.

"You're the one moving in today, right? I've been waiting for you. I'm the manager of Sakuraba-sou… My, my, that's strange. You look different than I thought you would." He was a peculiar man who spoke with a feminine drawl despite his age. How nostalgic. It made Jinya indescribably happy to know he was still the manager of this place. "Might I have mistaken you for somebody else?"

"I believe you have," Jinya answered.

"Oh dear. No wonder. Sorry to bother you."

"No, it's fine," Jinya said with a smile. It seemed the manager had only addressed him by mistake.

The manager sighed and said, "But of course, a young man like you wouldn't pick a place like this to live."

"I wouldn't say that. This building is charming."

"Oh, aren't you sweet? It may look a little dirty, but this place is dear to me. I've spent half my life here. It used to be called Sakuraba Milk Hall in the old days, but now I use it to rent out rooms."

Jinya knew that already. It was a place dear to him as well, although he couldn't say so. An eighteen-year-old youth would have no way of knowing about Sakuraba Milk Hall, so he kept his mouth shut and simply stared at the manager's face in profile.

The red-light districts were abolished, but the manager had proudly seen Sakuraba Milk Hall through to its last moments. From his demeanor, Jinya could tell that not a hint of regret over the past remained in him. The manager, who had once lamented how lost he was, had found a place his heart could call home.

"I'm the one who named this place Sakuraba-sou. A good name, don't you think?" the manager said.

"Indeed."

"I almost didn't, though. Part of me wanted to name it Hotaru-sou instead."

Jinya froze. In his pocket was the small bottle of star sand from Hotaru, the very reason he had come here. "…Hotaru, you say?"

"Yes. This place used to be a brothel back in the day, and there was a girl called Hotaru-chan who worked here then."

Even though she was sick, she endeavored to remain a sex worker. She was allowed to keep working because her disease wasn't infectious, but perhaps it would've been better if someone had stopped her. She pushed herself too far and didn't live long enough to see the red-light district through to its end. She never got to hear *Glow of the Firefly* played in the Dove District's last moments.

"She was a good girl," the manager said. "An old-fashioned, nostalgic lady of the night. She was popular too. A lot of men cried when she died."

"Is that so…"

"Interested? Her grave's in East Mukojima cemetery, if you want to pay a visit."

"Well… I doubt she'd want some stranger visiting her."

"Nonsense. I can tell from the look on your face that you want to see her. Her old clients still pay her visits, so I doubt she'd mind one more man dropping by. She was never the type of girl to split hairs over things like that anyway." The manager went back inside, then came out with a hand-drawn map showing the path to the cemetery. He half forced it onto Jinya, and after briefly explaining the directions, smiled wistfully. "It was her wish for her grave to be near here. She wanted to be a sex worker of the Dove District until the very end. That's why I'm sure she would be happy to see you pay a visit. She'd probably brag that she was still just as popular of a sex worker, even in death," he paused with a brief smile. "You should go."

The manager pleaded for Jinya to go. Suddenly being asked to visit a stranger's grave would put most people off, but this had been Jinya's objective from the start, so he accepted the request. With a deep bow, he said, "Thank you very much."

The manager answered with a smile. "Not at all. I hope you at least get some amusement out of it."

He returned to sweeping, and the conversation ended there.

Jinya bowed once more, then checked the map he'd received and began walking. He didn't dare look back at Sakuraba Milk Hall or the manager. He had said his farewells to them already, and they were both doing well. Just that knowledge alone was enough for him.

The manager continued to clean after the young man left, and eventually a high-school-aged boy came out of Sakuraba-sou.

"Good afternoon, sir!"

"Yes, good afternoon. Always full of energy, aren't you, dear?"

"Well, my energy is the only thing I've got going for me! By the way, who was that guy from earlier? Someone looking to move in?"

"No, no. We haven't had anyone apply to look at the place since you."

"Dang. I thought I was finally gonna get someone my age around here."

"Oh, no, I'm pretty sure that man's a good deal older than you."

"Huh? Really?"

This was just an ordinary conversation, heard by no one else—certainly not the young man from earlier. But that was all right. He was the manager of Sakuraba-sou now, and dreams were meant to be kept separate from reality. That was why he continued to sweep, giving everything he had to his current work.

"…Take care, my old customer." Something not quite, but almost, a lingering regret left the manager's mouth. It too was swept away by his broom, and their ordinary encounter came to a close.

***

After buying a bouquet of flowers from a shop in the Dove District, Jinya followed the map he'd received. There was a large temple in Sumida Ward, and behind it was the cemetery Hotaru was laid to rest in. Because it wasn't clear what faith her family had followed, the manager had asked a monk he knew to handle her service.

The cemetery was in a location that received good sunlight and had lots of greenery. A soft summer breeze blew through, shaking the leaves and caressing his skin. The incessant cries of the cicadas seemed quieter here. The cemetery felt still. Jinya found Hotaru's grave in one of its corners.

"What should I say? Long time no see?" he asked the gravestone. Of course, it made no reply.

He'd never asked what flowers she liked, so he picked out a prearranged bouquet meant to be offered to graves. Would she have been offended by his safe pick, or maybe amused?

He had no real way to find out. The woman Jinya had known was no more than the mask she donned as a sex worker of the Dove District. The *true* Hotaru was unknown to him.

Her gravestone was clean, absent of moss and grime. Somebody must have been coming by often to wash it. On its side would be her real name and the year of her passing, but he didn't look. The two never learned one another's name. They met and dreamed together as strangers. To learn her name in such a manner would be tactless, and it wasn't what he was here for anyway. He was here to apologize.

"I broke our promise," he said.

She'd already been deceased by the time they met, and so he didn't feel sad to be faced with her grave. The emotion welling up inside him now was regret. He recalled the pinky promise they made. They'd sworn to meet once more before he left the Dove District and had given each other something they treasured dearly.

But he broke their promise. He failed to meet Hotaru, and twenty-three years had flown by since. He'd returned to the Dove District to apologize before her grave.

"I'm sorry. I betrayed your trust in the last of your moments."

She had trusted him not as Hotaru the sex worker, but as an ordinary woman. At least, that was what Jinya believed. But he had betrayed that trust. He knew it was just the lingering regrets in him, but he wanted to apologize to her. An inanimate gravestone had no words to speak back to him, though.

But of course it wouldn't. Apologizing here was meaningless; nothing he said would reach her. The only one who could be consoled

by this action wasn't the dead but his own self.

Maybe it was a lie to say he wasn't sad to be faced with her grave. His heart felt like it was being squeezed tight.

"Oh? Hello."

Jinya stood there for an unknown amount of time. When he came to, there was a man in a suit approaching with a flower bouquet. He looked to be nearing old age. The man's gaze was on Jinya, presumably because he stood in front of the grave he was visiting.

Jinya made a short bow and moved to the side. The man returned a quick bow of his own, then placed his flowers before the grave and offered a silent prayer.

Perhaps unable to bear the awkwardness, the man spoke up first. "Um, are you…?"

"I was an acquaintance of hers," Jinya answered. "We were little more than strangers, though."

"Ah, I see. I apologize; I just thought you seemed a little young to be visiting her."

She was the only thing they had in common to talk about, and so their conversation was subdued.

The man must have thought it strange that a young man who looked to be around eighteen was visiting a woman who'd died more than twenty years ago. He snuck wondering glances at Jinya.

"Are you the one who cleans her grave?" Jinya asked.

"Ah, yes. I opened a small clinic around here and come by often. Oh, I'm sorry; I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Kajii Takumi, an…old acquaintance of hers."

Kajii Takumi. Jinya recognized that name. He was Hotaru's former boyfriend, the one who wandered into the Dove District unable to forget her, and who also gifted her the star sand.

"…Kajii Takumi," Jinya repeated.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it's just that I've heard about you from her."

"Oh dear, ha ha. Nothing embarrassing, I hope." The man laughed, but he seemed tired. If what he said earlier was true, then he was the one who maintained this grave. He continued to visit his dead love after all these years. Jinya could not see into the man's heart, but he could easily imagine what was there.

"Quite embarrassing, I'm afraid. She would go on and on about her time with you," Jinya said.

That gave the man pause. "She did, did she?"

"Indeed. She talked about how close you two were and how you gave her a place to belong. She said you were the one thing she could consider true."

Takumi went speechless. He averted his gaze and looked at the gravestone with an expression full of disbelief. "…Truly?"

"Truly."

"I see…" He frowned slightly, still unable to believe.

He really loved her and had wanted nothing more than for her to be happy, but the red-light districts were already a thing of the past by the time he reached the Dove District. The woman of the night called Hotaru passed away a full year before even that, and so their love never reached a proper conclusion. He was probably still tormented by regret even now.

"To be honest, I find that hard to believe," he said.

"Why is that?"

"I loved her. I had no idea what she was thinking when she left, and she never understood how I felt up until the end. Maybe the two of us weren't looking at one another at all."

He shared the same thoughts he'd told Jinya once before. Hearts could not communicate if both sides only forced their feelings onto the other. Takumi still believed that perhaps they had only been selfish, claiming they'd acted out of love without ever stopping to consider what the other wanted.

"She wished for your happiness even if she couldn't be by your side. I'd say you were both looking at one another just fine. You just misunderstood each other a bit, that's all." Seeing the pain on Takumi's face, Jinya said the same words he told him long ago. "So don't be so down. The two of you definitely loved one another."

Bewildered, Takumi said, "Wait, you're…"

Jinya paid him no mind, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small bottle made of dull glass. "Here, let me return this to you. She entrusted me with this bottle of star sand. She claimed it was

something precious she received from you… I originally planned to return it to her grave, but I think it'd be better for you to take it."

Takumi's jaw hung open. His gaze flitted between the bottle of star sand and Jinya's face. After a few moments, he nodded, finally accepting what was going on. "So you're the one she meant."

This time Jinya was the one who showed confusion. He only met Hotaru in the Dove District that shouldn't have existed, so there was no way Takumi could remember him. And yet, some dots seemed to connect in the man's mind as all traces of doubt cleared from his eyes.

"I'm sorry, but could you come with me to my clinic for a bit?"

"Why?"

"Please. It won't take a minute. There's something I need to give you as well." Takumi bowed his head deeply.

Jinya was confused, but the man seemed insistent, so he obliged. He followed Takumi back to a small clinic on the bank of the Sumida River. The building had white, clean-looking walls, and the smell of sanitizer stung his nose when he went inside. He was led to the back of the waiting room, where he sat on a sofa and waited.

He looked around. The walls were white, and the room was neat. Apparently places like hospitals only used simple colors for their walls to set patients at ease. Jinya had to admit that the clean white color did have a calming effect on him.

"Thank you for waiting." Takumi returned with a long, narrow paulownia wood box in his hands. He sat across from Jinya and placed

the box on the table between them, then slid it toward him. “Go ahead and open it.”

Jinya slowly lifted the lid of the box. Inside was a sword bag. He took out the bag’s contents and looked at it in surprise.

It was a single sword. A long, peculiar blade set in an unadorned scabbard.

“Yarai…?”

It was Yarai, the sword that had been his companion for more than a hundred years.

“Why is this here?” he asked.

“She entrusted it to me,” Takumi answered, speaking calmly now. “By the time I reached the Dove District, she had already passed away. But the manager of the place where she worked handed me this sword along with a letter.”

The letter had read: *Someday, a man carrying star sand will visit my grave. Please return this sword to him.*

Such a thing couldn’t be possible. Jinya had only met Hotaru after she died. She didn’t have Yarai then and couldn’t possibly have written a letter.

But Yarai was unmistakably here.

With a powerful emotion welling up inside him, he shut his eyes and saw an impossible scene.

“It’s been a while.”

She leaned back in her seat, the soft spring breeze caressing her skin. Sunlight filled the white walls of the room as she looked out the

window. Amid a shallow dream, she drifted, waiting for his arrival.

"I'm sorry. I broke our promise."

After a long wait, he'd finally arrived. She welcomed him with a smile.

"Nonsense. You kept it fine; it just took a little while."

She lifted her pinky finger. He thought he had broken their pinky promise, but no. He'd just arrived a little late, that's all.

"Thank goodness. I was able to return this for her…"

Takumi's voice brought Jinya back to his senses. He opened his eyes and found himself back in the waiting room. The beautiful scene he saw had slipped through his fingers and returned to the distant sky.

The only thing left from it was Yarai. It felt heavy, not because it was steel, but because of the journey it had taken to get here. Similarly, its cold steel had a warmth to it.

"Thank you very much. Please, let me return this as well," Jinya said. Takumi accepted the star sand he wouldn't take earlier.

Memories were supposed to fade with time, but Jinya's memories of Hotaru had remained because he had the star sand to connect them. Perhaps, then, he would come to forget her now?

No, Jinya answered his own thoughts. They were still connected even now, so surely he would remember her.

"Can I ask why you traded a sword for a bottle of star sand?" With no hidden motives, Takumi looked down at the bottle in his hands and asked that question, which came from genuine curiosity.

"The two of us swore to meet once more, and we exchanged the things we held dearest so we wouldn't forget our promise."

"…And that was this star sand for her?"

"Yes. This sword is a part of me. It was my only possession that could match what she entrusted to me. That's how dear your star sand was to her."

To be more specific, it wasn't the star sand itself that she treasured but what it represented: the time she had spent with Takumi.

Takumi looked speechless to hear how she felt.

As for Jinya, he had said the things that needed to be said and reobtained Yarai. He returned the sword to its bag and quietly stood up. "I'll take my leave here."

"W-wait!" Takumi called out as Jinya left. Jinya stopped and looked back over his shoulder at Takumi. "Just…who are you?"

Jinya pondered over how to answer, then grinned slightly and replied with a nonanswer. "Just one of the many men, as numerous as the stars, who were in love with the woman known as Hotaru."

His name would have been meaningless to Takumi anyway, but he made a point not to give it out of respect to the fact that he had fallen for Hotaru.

Reality was demanding and cold; that was why ladies of the night deceived men with cheap lies and shallow imitations of love. Jinya had definitely felt love for the woman who tried her best to remain a lady of the night until her last. That was why he wouldn't

give his name here. He was just a man—one who knew nothing of her and whom she knew nothing of—who had loved Hotaru the sex worker, and that was enough.

He bowed to Takumi while the latter was still in a daze, then left the clinic.

He'd promised to return that same day, so he made no stops and headed straight for Koyomiza.

His dream was over, so it would've been wrong to stop and linger on it at that point. There was no hesitation in his steps, and he didn't pause.

From time to time, he thought back on that one night and how he couldn't take that last step no matter how hard he tried. Their night of passion faded like snow. But some things were beautiful precisely because they ended as no more than a dream.

"Goodbye, Hotaru… For real this time." He said the words he'd failed to say long ago, bidding farewell to a past love. This parting lacked gravity, but he felt it was right.

The scorching sun's heat made him feel a little dizzy. He squinted and thought he saw her smiling beyond the summer haze. She vanished almost immediately; she'd been just a trick of the eye. He felt some sadness in his heart, but it was drowned out by a joy that brought a smile to his face.

After long nights, the morning sun could be blinding to the point of disorientation. But above him now was a clear, blue summer sky, and that was enough for him to keep on walking forward.

In spirits almost high enough to make him whistle, he thought of what lay at the end of his long journey.

To be continued in Sword of the Demon Hunter: Kijin Gentōshō – Heisei Arc



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