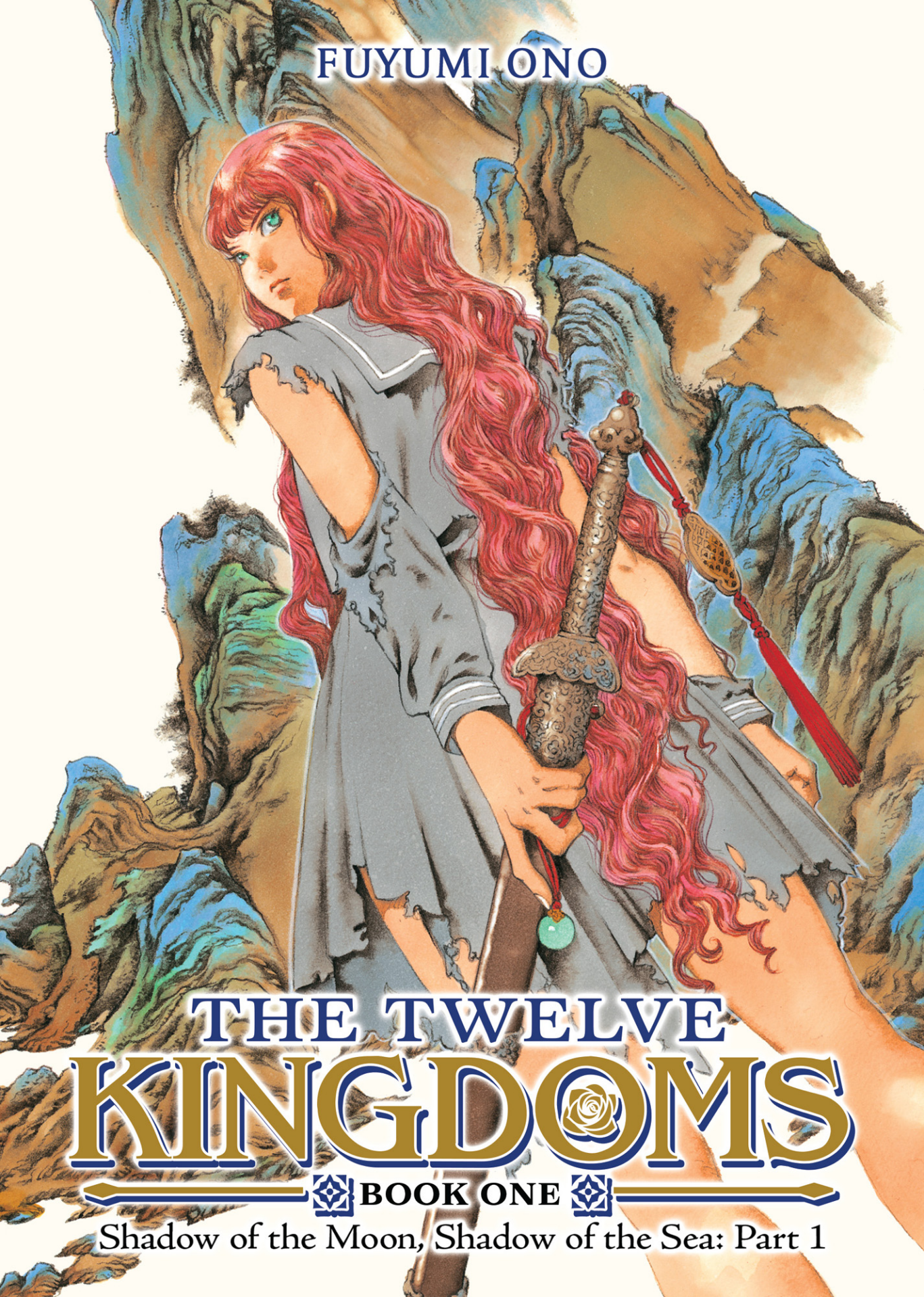

FUYUMI ONO
THE TWELVE
KINGDOMS
BOOK ONE
Shadow of the Moon, Shadow of the Sea: Part 1

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THE TWELVE KINGDOMS

BOOK ONE

Shadow of the Moon, Shadow of the Sea: Part 1

WRITTEN BY

Fuyumi Ono

ILLUSTRATED BY

Akihiro Yamada



Seven Seas Entertainment

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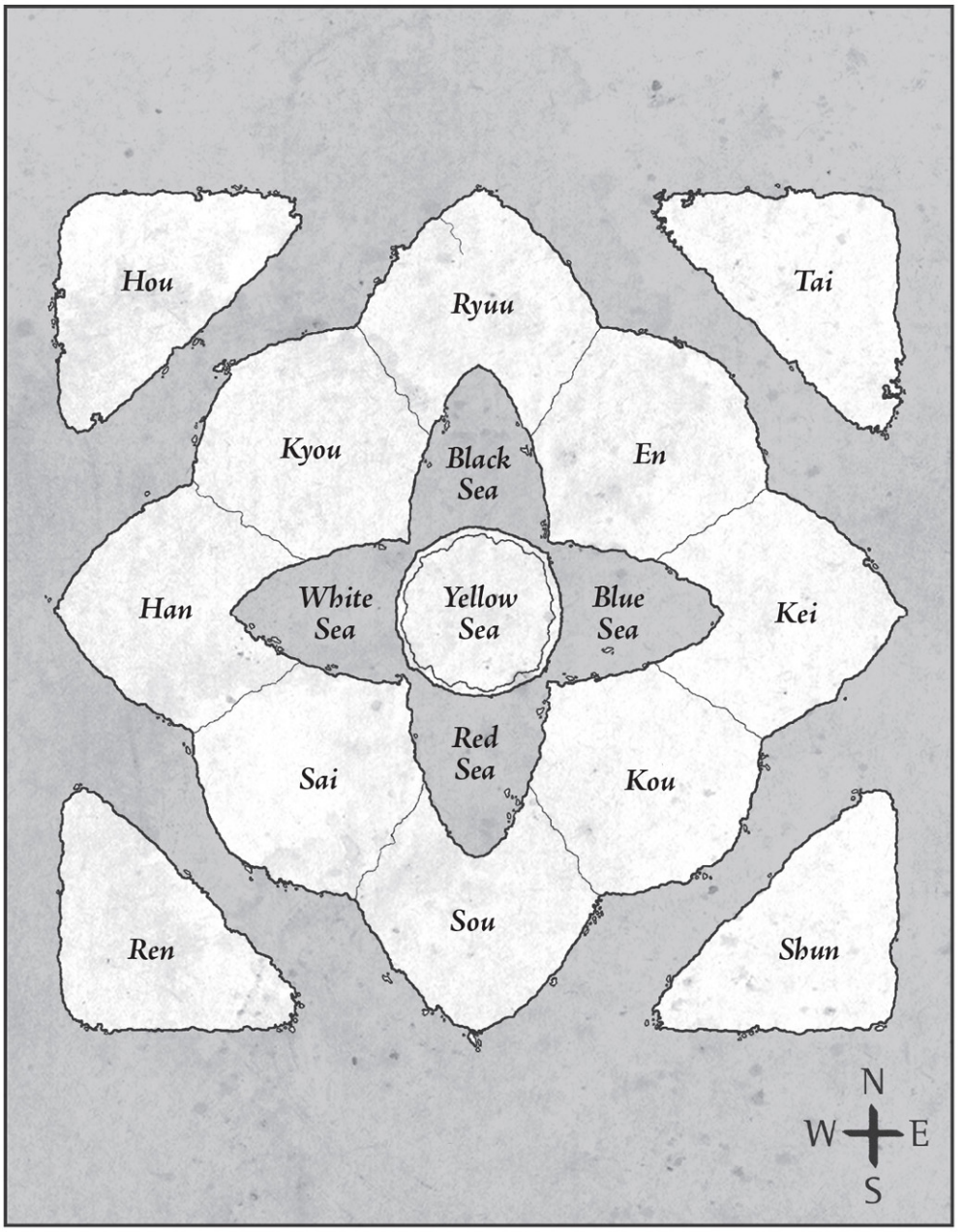
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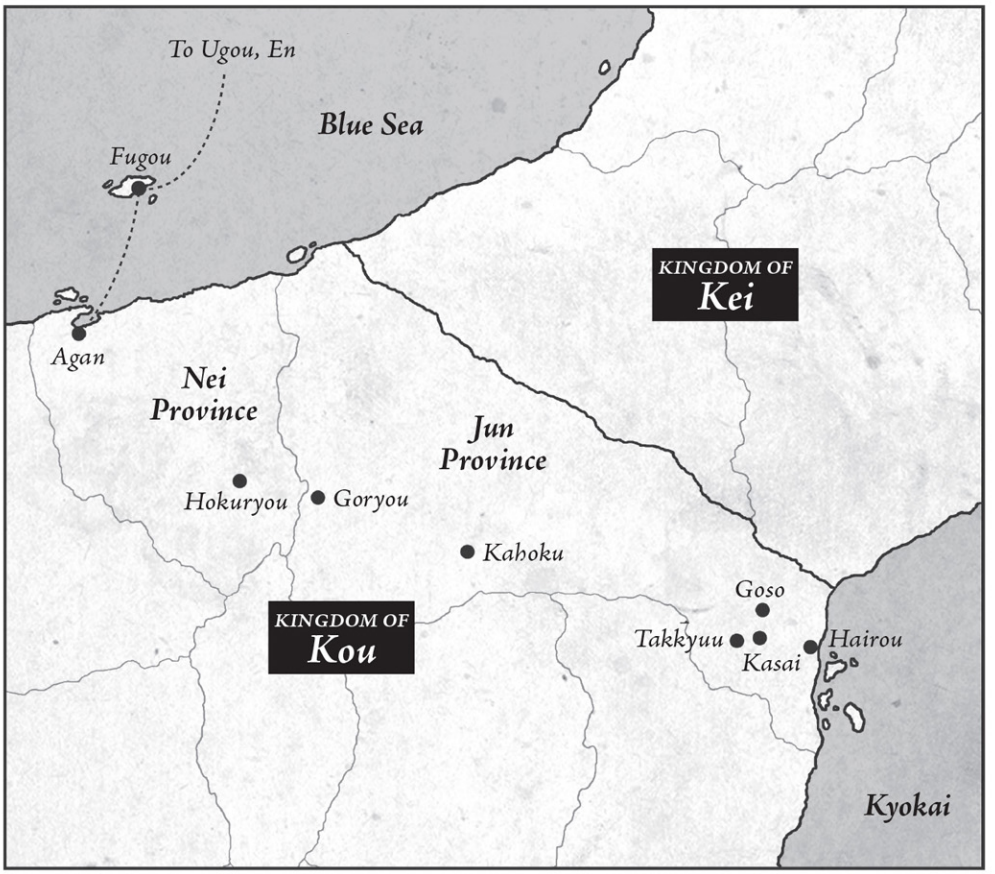
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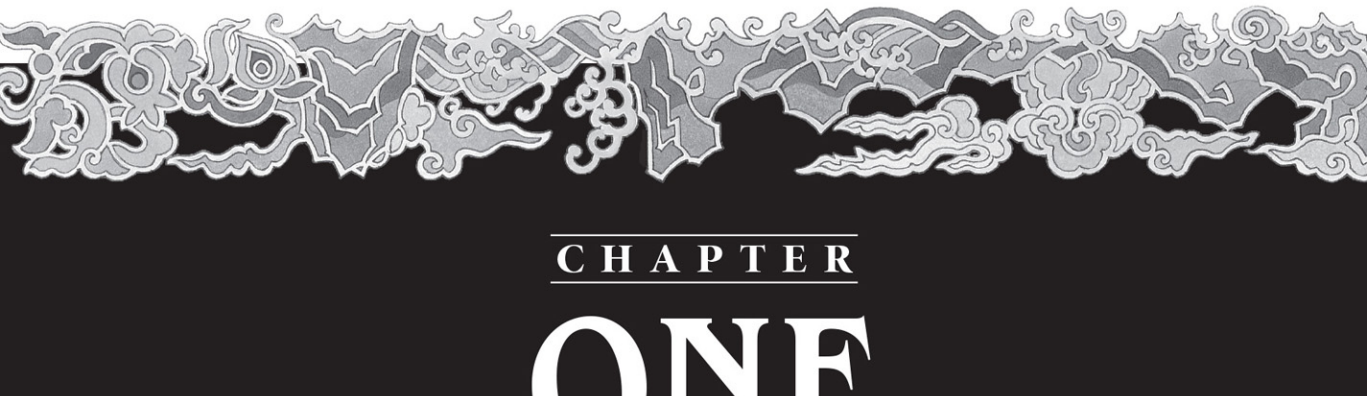
MAP OF THE TWELVE KINGDOMS



MAP OF NORTH KOU







CHAPTER ONE

Chapter One

1

SHE STOOD IN VELVETY BLACKNESS.

Droplets of water plopped from somewhere high above. The clear, harmonious sound reverberated in the darkness, as if she were standing in a cavern. Yet something told her that this was not the case.

The darkness was so vast and deep that it seemed to have no beginning or end. Somewhere beyond the expanse, there shone a faint crimson light, its form swaying and flickering like a roaring flame.

She could see vague silhouettes illuminated against the red light—a horde of strange beasts. They darted away from the light, throwing their bodies about in a way that could almost be mistaken for a dance. All manner of creatures numbered amongst the thrall: apes, rats, and birds. Yet they all looked subtly different from what one might see in an encyclopedia. Some were red, while others were black or blue, and they were many times larger than the average specimen.

Raising their forefeet, the beasts marched ahead. Others leaped and twirled in the air, as though the horde was in fact a festival parade, full of cheer and laughter. Yes, they certainly were in high spirits, and for them, this moment was undoubtedly a cause for celebration.

The strange creatures made a frenzied beeline for their hapless victim, roaring in bloodthirsty glee, all the while continuing their bestial dance. The hostility brewing in the air made their intentions all too clear.

Not even four hundred meters separated her from the frontrunners of the pack. Every beast had its mouth open wide; though she could not hear their cries, the demented delight was clear in their expressions. Neither their lungs nor feet made any sound; only the dripping water dared break the silence.

The girl merely stared wide-eyed at the approaching figures. She knew that they were bound to kill her, yet she could not move a muscle. Even as her brain screamed that she would be torn to pieces and

devoured, her body remained frozen on the spot. That being said, it wasn't like she had anywhere to run or any way to fight.

She felt her blood rush against the tide within her body. Dimly, she thought that she could hear the sound of it roaring in her ears. It reminded her, somehow, of a sea during a storm.

As she gazed onward, the beasts came closer—now only three hundred meters away.

Youko woke with a start. Her temples were damp with sweat, and her eyes stung painfully. She blinked raggedly over and over until she finally gulped a deep breath.

"A dream…"

She spoke the words aloud, if only because she craved the reassurance of hearing her own voice. Once she knew that her throat was working, unease descended upon her. She had to tell herself that it wasn't real, or else this feeling would never leave her.

"It was a dream."

Only a dream, even if it had been recurring this entire month.

Youko shook her head slowly. The thick curtains in her room shrouded her surroundings in darkness. Pulling out the alarm clock from under her pillow, she saw that it was a little earlier than she normally rose. Her body felt like lead; just moving her arms and legs was like struggling against a sticky spiderweb.

She first had this dream a month ago. In the beginning, she saw only the blackness. She stood there alone, listening to the distant sound of dripping water from somewhere on high. The unease always kept her rooted to the spot.

She only spotted the crimson light the third time. Her dream-self knew that something horrifying was approaching from the light. Just the sight of that sigil in the darkness made her scream and jolt awake.

Then, after five more iterations of the dream, she saw the silhouettes. At first, they were mere splotches within the red light. Only after repeating the same dream many more times did she realize that they were drawing near. It took her a few days after that to discover that it was a horde, and even more days still to discern the oddly shaped beasts.

Shivering at the recollection, Youko grabbed the plush toy on her bed and hugged it to her chest.

They've gotten so close.

Throughout the month, the beasts had been steadily approaching. They would likely reach her feet either tomorrow or the day after. What would happen to her then? She shook her head at the thought.

It was a dream.

It might have been going on for a month, progressing further each time, but dreams were not reality. Yet though she told herself all this, the gnawing anxiety refused to leave her chest. Her heart pounded, and she could hear the blood rushing through her ears like a furious current. Ragged breaths escaped from her mouth.

For a while, Youko squeezed the toy against herself, as if clinging for dear life. Then, she forced her weary and sleep-deprived body into motion, put on her uniform, and went downstairs. She found pretty much every action exhausting, so she settled for splashing some water on her face before heading down to the dining room.

"Morning," she called out to her mother, who was in the kitchen making breakfast.

"Up already? You're an early riser these days," her mother said, glancing back over her shoulder. As soon as her eyes fell on Youko, she frowned. "Red again, Youko?"

For a moment, she cocked her head, not understanding her mother's remark, but then she hurriedly scooped up her hair in her hands. On most days, she would only have shown up at the dining room after she properly did her hair, but all she did this morning was run a comb through it after leaving it loose the night before.

"Why don't you try dyeing it and see what happens?" her mother suggested.

Youko merely shook her head. Loose strands of her hair brushed gently against her cheek.

Her hair was red. The shade had always been rather faint, and it would quickly lose its color even on sunny days or whenever she went to the pool. It fell all the way down her back; growing it this long meant that

the ends had practically no red tint at all. All of this was to say that her hair looked bleached.

"If you can't dye it, you could at least cut it short or something," her mother added.

Youko hung her head silently. She kept her eyes on the floor as she hurriedly tied up her hair. The color was slightly more pronounced once she had braided it into a neat plait.

"I have no idea who you take after." Her mother sighed, the frown still lingering on her face. "Your teacher asked me about it not too long ago. She wanted to know if it really was your natural color. See why I keep telling you to dye it?"

"It's against the rules to dye your hair."

"Then how about cutting it short, like I said? You won't stand out as much that way."

Youko refused to meet her mother's gaze. The woman poured a cup of coffee as she went on, her tone cold.

"Modesty is a girl's best trait. You ought to keep quiet and not draw attention to yourself. Otherwise, people will wonder if you've done this to yourself on purpose. You'll make an embarrassment of yourself. I'm sure there'll be some who start to wonder if that attitude is more than skin deep."

Youko gazed at the tablecloth wordlessly.

"I'm saying you could get mistaken for a delinquent with that hair. People will assume you're getting up to no good. Get a trim before you get back home from school—I'll give you some money for it."

Youko let out a furtive sigh.

"Are you listening, Youko?"

"Mm-hmm," Youko mumbled as she turned her gaze to the window, peering at the melancholy winter sky.

It was halfway through February, and many cold days still lay ahead.

YOUKO WENT TO A TYPICAL PRIVATE ALL-GIRLS' school. There was nothing remarkable about it, save for the gender stipulation. Her father was insistent that she go there.

Her grades in middle school were always on the higher end of the scale, so she could have gone for a more academically inclined school. In fact, her teachers strongly recommended as much, though her father was unswayed. Apparently, he liked how this school was close to their home and that it had no reputation for bad influences or what he thought of as excessive showiness. At first, her mother was dismayed after seeing the mock exam results, but she quickly fell in line with her husband's opinion.

With both her parents in agreement, Youko had no room for argument. There was a different school with a uniform she liked the look of, but she had to concede that this was a poor hill to die on. And so, she quietly obeyed her parents. It was probably why she felt no special attachment to her school, even after a whole year of attendance.

"Morning!" a bright voice greeted Youko when she entered the classroom.

A few girls waved. One of them ran up to her. "Have you done the math homework, Nakajima-san?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Soooo sorry to ask you this, but could you show it to us?"

Youko nodded. After taking her seat by the window, she retrieved the math handout. The other girls gathered around her desk and got straight to copying her work.

"You sure do take your studies seriously, Nakajima-san. No wonder you're the class rep," one of them remarked.

Youko gave a vague smile in response.

"Seriously," said another girl. "I *hate* homework. I'm always forgetting it."

"I know what you mean. I can't get my head around it, even when I psych myself up to do it. It takes so long that I nod off at my desk. It's nice to have a smart person around."

“I bet this only took, like, a second for you.”

Youko hurriedly shook her head. “I-I wouldn’t say that.”

“Oh, so you just like studying, then.”

“No way.” Youko pasted a smile on her face. “My mom’s just strict.”

This wasn’t actually the case, but saying this avoided ruffling any feathers.

“She always checks to see if I’ve done it before I go to bed,” Youko went on. “It’s annoying.”

In truth, her mother vehemently disapproved of all the studying she did. It wasn’t as if she didn’t care about grades altogether, but she reasoned that if Youko had the time to go to cram school, she might as well use it to learn housework. Even then, she didn’t take her studies seriously because she enjoyed it—it was simply that she didn’t want to be told off by the teachers.

“Yikes, you’ve got a tiger mom.”

“Yeah,” said Youko. “She always goes on and on about studying hard.”

“I get you. Mine’s the same. She’s always whining about grades whenever she sees me. She can do my homework for me if she loves it so much.”

“I know, right?” Youko nodded, feeling somehow relieved.

Just then, one of the girls let out a hushed whisper. “Oh, it’s Sugimoto.”

A lone girl entered the classroom. Everyone cast furtive glances at her before quickly looking away. A silent, strained atmosphere came over the room.

Ignoring the girl had been the class’s idea of sport for about half a year now. Faced with this cold attitude, she looked around forlornly for a while, then ducked her head down. Meekly, she walked over to Youko and sat down at the seat to her left.

“Good morning, Nakajima-san,” she said hesitantly.

Youko almost made an instinctive reply but quickly swallowed it. One time, she carelessly greeted her, which earned her some sarcastic

remarks from her classmates later. So instead, she stayed silent, pretending not to have heard. Stifled laughter rang out around her.

Although the girl looked upset about being laughed at, her eyes did not leave Youko. Feeling her expectant gaze, Youko participated passively in her classmates' conversation. She did feel bad for ignoring the girl, but she knew that her head would be next in line if she were to dare oppose the crowd.

"Um…Nakajima-san," her neighbor tried again meekly, but Youko ignored her once again.

It left a bad taste in her mouth to deliberately shun another person, but she had no other option.

"Nakajima-san?"

The girl was persistent. Every time she spoke, the voices around her went quiet until, finally, all the other girls shot her a cold glare. Unable to ignore her any longer, Youko turned to face the girl's upturned eyes. Despite making eye contact, she still mustered no response.

"Um…have you done the math homework?" the girl asked diffidently.

Youko's classmates snickered.

"Yeah," Youko said quietly.

"Sorry, but could I have a look?"

The math teacher often called a student to the front to demonstrate —which reminded Youko that it was this girl's turn today.

Youko glanced at her friends. Nobody said a word, merely gazing back at her with the same cold eyes. She knew that they were waiting for her to shoot the girl down. She swallowed the bullet.

"I still need to check over it."

The peanut gallery did not seem to appreciate the roundabout refusal.

"Wow, you're so nice, Nakajima-san," a girl rushed to comment.

You're spineless, was the subtext there. Youko shrank back involuntarily.

Another student chimed in, “You should just give it to her straight, Nakajima-san.”

“Yeah, she’s putting you out of your way.”

“Some idiots won’t get it unless you literally spell it out for them.”

Youko was at a loss to respond. She lacked the courage to go against the tide, and yet at the same time, she was too afraid to spew even more venom at her hapless neighbor.

Eventually, she settled for an uneasy laugh. “Mm-hmm.”

“You’re soooo nice, Nakajima-san. Bet that’s why *some* people think they can rely on you.”

“Well, I am the class rep, I guess…”

“She’s getting what she deserves. She knew she’d be called up today, and she still didn’t do her homework. You don’t have to take care of slackers, you know.”

“I guess so.”

“Yeah, and besides…” one girl said with a nasty grin, “your workbook would totally get stained if you lent it to Sugimoto.”

“Oh. That’s not…good.”

“Right?”

There was another round of snickers. As she giggled along with them, Youko watched her deskmate out of the corner of her eye. Her head was pointed firmly at the floor, and her eyes were beginning to well with tears.

Sugimoto-san is just as responsible for this, Youko told herself. Nobody got picked on for no reason at all.

There had to be something wrong with her for her to become a victim.

WITHIN THE BOTTOMLESS ABYSS, THE SOUND of dripping water echoed from somewhere high above.

Youko stood there, enveloped by the darkness. Her head faced the dim crimson light. Countless silhouettes squirmed in the backdrop. The horde of strange beasts was prancing its way over to her.

A mere two hundred meters separated them now. Not only were the creatures enormous in size, but they appeared frighteningly close as well. Giant apes dropped their jaws in raucous laughter, their red fur reflecting the light. With every leap, their fervor escalated, and their muscles flexed. The fact that she could see this in precise detail was a testament to just how little time she had before the creatures reached her.

She could neither move nor scream. Her eyes were so wide that the corners threatened to split open. She could only watch helplessly as the horde drew ever closer.

They ran. Leaped. Pranced. The sheer bloodlust emanating from their bodies swept through the air like a hurricane, making it almost impossible to breathe.

I have to wake up.

She needed to leave the dream before they could get to her.

Yet no amount of conviction could make her stir on command. She would have woken up long ago if that were all it took.

As she gazed on powerlessly, the distance between them halved yet again.

I have to wake up.

Panic shot through her, enough to make her grind her teeth in vexation. Her skin crawled. Between her ragged breaths, her frantic heartbeat, and the pounding footfalls of the beasts, it all sounded like the sea's raging dirge.

I have to do something. Get out of here.

As the thoughts raced through her mind, she suddenly sensed the overwhelming hostility of something directly overhead, stifling in its pressure. For the first time, Youko moved her body within the dream. She turned her head up and caught a glimpse of brown wings. They were

paired with equally brown and burly legs, as well as frightfully sharp, thick claws.

There was nary a moment for her to think about running. In an instant, a furious tide surged within her body, and all she could do was scream.

“Nakajima-san!”

All of a sudden, the danger was gone. After willing her body so desperately to run, she sprang up without even thinking. Only afterward did her surroundings finally register to her.

There was an appalled look on her teacher’s face, mirrored by her classmates. A beat later, fits of giggles rang throughout the room.

Youko breathed a sigh of relief, and then her face swiftly turned red.

She’d been sleeping. Her sleep was constantly disrupted lately due to her dreams, leaving her generally unrested. It meant that she often found herself nodding off during class, but this was the first time she’d dreamed there.

She bit her lip. For some reason, this teacher seemed to have it out for her and was stomping over to her. She normally got along well enough with the others, but this woman was the one exception. No amount of obedience seemed to be enough.

“Well, well, well…” she said as she thumped an English textbook on Youko’s desk. “I’ve seen students doze off before, but having one treat the classroom as their personal bed is a first.”

Youko returned to her seat, her head hung low.

“What do you come to school for? You ought to sleep at home if you’re this tired. Don’t force yourself to come to class if you hate it so much.”

“Sorry,” Youko mumbled.

The teacher rapped the desk with the corner of the textbook. “Or perhaps you’ve got a thrilling night life we’re not privy to.”

The students burst out laughing. Youko’s friends joined in unabashedly. She could even hear it clearly from the girl to her left.

The teacher tugged lightly on Youko's long plait. "Is this your natural color?"

"Yes," Youko said falteringly.

"Oh, really? I had a friend in high school with hair like this. It reminds me of her," the teacher said with a smile. "But then again, she bleached hers. It wasn't natural like yours. She got arrested and dropped out in her third year. I wonder what she's up to these days. Sure brings back memories."

Stifled laughter sounded through the classroom.

"So," said the teacher after a long pause, "do you feel like learning or not?"

"I do," Youko mumbled.

"Oh, you do? Then I'll have to ask you to stand during class. That will stop you from falling asleep, yes?" the teacher said with a meaningful chuckle before returning to her podium.

Youko climbed to her feet. The snickers didn't stop for the rest of the class.

The homeroom teacher called for Youko after school that day. He must have heard what happened during English class.

Youko went into the staff room, where she received a lengthy interrogation about her lifestyle choices.

"Some teachers have been wondering if you've been fooling around at night," the middle-aged homeroom teacher said with a scowl. "Anything to say for yourself?"

"I…don't," Youko said quietly. She could never tell anyone about that strange dream.

"Have you been staying up late watching TV?"

"No, um…" Youko hurriedly searched for a reason. "My midterm grades were lower than usual…"

That answer seemed to appease the teacher. "Yes, you did slip up a bit. Makes sense." Then he coughed. "But listen, Nakajima."

"Yes?"

“It’s all well and good to study at home, but staying up late defeats the purpose. You need to pay attention in class.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. It’s easy for people to get the wrong idea about you, Nakajima. Your hair makes quite a strong impression. Can’t you do something about it?”

“I was thinking of getting it cut today…”

“Oh, I see,” the homeroom teacher said with a nod. “You’re a girl, so you might not like it short, but trust that it’s for the best. There are some teachers who would say only flippant students dye their hair.”

“Mm.”

The teacher waved a hand at Youko. “You can go now.”

“Okay.” Youko bowed her head.

It was then that it happened—a voice called out to her from behind.

4

“FOUND YOU.” THE VOICE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY the faint scent of the sea.

Youko’s homeroom teacher gazed suspiciously over her shoulder.

When she turned to look, she saw a young man standing behind her—a totally unfamiliar face.

“You’re the one,” the man said with a steady gaze. He looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties and had a strikingly peculiar appearance. His outfit looked sort of like a long-sleeved kimono, and his face was akin to a Noh mask. His hair was so long that it fell all the way down to his knees, which was unusual in and of itself. The uncanniness was exacerbated further by his faintly golden locks, which possessed an almost artificial look.

“Who are you?” the homeroom teacher demanded.

The man paid him no heed. Instead, he did something even more astonishing. He knelt at Youko’s feet and bowed his head deeply.

“I have been searching for you,” he said after a reverent pause.

“Do you know this fellow, Nakajima?” the homeroom teacher quizzed Youko, snapping her out of her reverie.

She shook her head frantically. “No.”

Naturally, both Youko and the teacher were at a loss at how to respond to this strange situation. As they stared uneasily at the man, he stood up.

“I must ask that you come with me,” he said.

“Huh?” said Youko.

“Nakajima, who *is* this man?” the teacher asked.

That was what Youko wanted to know. “I have no idea.” She shot a beseeching look at her homeroom teacher. The other teachers in the staff room were starting to gather around them, looking incredibly skeptical.

“Care to explain who you are? Only students and faculty are allowed on school grounds,” the homeroom teacher said firmly, finally regaining his wits.

The man gazed back at him expressionlessly, not even a hint of shame on his face.

“You have naught to do with this,” he said frigidly before sweeping his gaze across the other teachers in the room. “Nor do you. Begone.”

The adults were stunned at his excessively haughty attitude. Meanwhile, the man focused his stare at the similarly flabbergasted Youko.

“I can explain the circumstances at length, but first, you must come with me.”

“Excuse me, but—” *Who are you*? Youko was about to ask when a voice abruptly called out from nearby.

“Taiho.” It sounded like the owner of the voice was addressing the peculiar man. The man looked up—perhaps it was his name.

“What’s the matter?” the man asked, scowling.

But the newcomer was nowhere to be seen. The voice rang out again, its place of origin unknown. “We’re being tailed, it seems.”

The man's Noh-like face instantly turned grave. He simply nodded before grabbing Youko by the wrist.

"My apologies. This place is dangerous. Come with me."

"Dangerous?"

"I've no time to explain," he said flatly. Youko involuntarily shrank back. "The enemy will be here soon."

"The…enemy?" Youko asked back, feeling an inexplicable unease.

At that moment, however, the voice called out again.

"Taiho, they're here."

Youko looked around but still could not see the owner of the voice. The teachers looked as if they wanted to cut in, yet before they could muster any words…

The glass on the window facing the back garden shattered to pieces.

It was the closest window to Youko. As she instinctively scrunched her eyes shut, the sounds of splitting glass and agonized screams assailed her ears.

"What's happening?!"

Youko's eyes opened at the homeroom teacher's voice. Shards of glass covered the floor. Meanwhile, the other teachers dashed toward the window that faced the nearby river so that they could peer outside. A cold wind howled through, carrying with it a bloody scent.

Despite standing relatively close to the window, she was completely unscathed—the strange man had shielded her with his body.

"What just…?" asked Youko in total confusion.

"I told you it was dangerous," the man responded, his tone somewhat curt. He grabbed her arm once more. "This way."

Unease racked her entire being. She tried to shake free from the man's grip, yet he showed no sign of letting go. In fact, he only tugged harder. When she tripped and staggered, he placed a hand on her shoulder.

The homeroom teacher decided that enough was enough. “What are you trying to do?!”

The man shot a sharp glare at the teacher. “Get back. Do not involve yourself in this matter,” he said, no hint of mercy in his surly voice.

“How rude! Who do you think you are? What business do you have with my student? Do you have friends outside waiting for you?!” the teacher barked at the man before throwing a glare at Youko. “What is the meaning of this, Nakajima?!”

“I…don’t know.” She was just as lost as he was.

The man tugged on her again as she was shaking her head. “Anyway, come with me,” he said.

“No.” Youko was mortified at the thought of being mistaken for this man’s friend.

As she tried to wriggle out of the man’s grasp, the disembodied voice rang again from above.

“Taiho.”

The voice sounded tense. As the teachers scanned the room for the speaker, the man scowled plainly. “Obstinate fiend,” he spat and then abruptly dropped to his knees.

He grabbed her legs before she even had time to respond.

“*I pledge undying loyalty to my liege*,” he intoned rapidly.

No sooner had these words left his lips than he cast a fixed stare at Youko.

“‘I allow it.’”

“Wh-what?!” she stammered.

“Do you not value your life? Say ‘I allow it,’” he insisted roughly.

Youko instinctively nodded, cowed. “I allow it…”

What the man did next was more than enough to stun her to the spot.

A heartbeat later, scandalized voices rang out around her.



“You two!”

“What are you thinking?!”

Youko was utterly dumbfounded. This complete stranger of a man had lowered his head and pressed his forehead against the back of her hand.

“What are you—?” *Doing*, she was about to say when the sentence abruptly died in her throat.

Her head swam with dizziness. Something coursed through her, instantly casting a veil of darkness across her vision.

“Nakajima! What’s going on?!” her homeroom teacher shouted, red in the face.

That same moment, a low rumbling sound thundered, and what was left of the glass in the back garden glowed white.

5

IT ALMOST LOOKED LIKE A GUSHING FOUNTAIN OF water. A sharp glow emanated from the shards of broken glass and spilled across the ground like a veritable deluge.

Youko squeezed her eyes shut and held her arms up to shield herself from the incoming projectiles. Yet she felt only a slight stab of pain. An earsplitting sound rang out, but her ears failed to register it.

Eventually, the sensation of being hit by small pebbles disappeared. When she opened her eyes, the glass shards scattered across the room appeared to still be gleaming with light. The teachers cowered where they stood. Youko’s homeroom teacher was collapsed at her feet.

“Are you okay?*”* she was about to ask, but the answer was evident. His body had been pierced by a countless number of shards. It finally dawned on her that the teachers were screaming at the top of their lungs.

Youko quickly glanced over her own body. Even though the homeroom teacher had been right beside her, she was completely unscathed.

As she stood there in shock, the homeroom teacher grabbed her feet. “What…did you do?”

“N-nothing.”

The strange man swatted the homeroom teacher’s blood-smeared hand away. “Let us go.” He was also unharmed.

Youko shook her head. People really *would* think they were friends if she followed him. But her legs weren’t in agreement. When he tugged on her hand, she went with him—she was more afraid of staying than leaving.

The words “The enemy will be here soon” weren’t what scared her most. In fact, they barely felt real. It was simply that she was afraid of being in this room, where the stench of blood hung thick in the air.

On her way out, she bumped into some teachers who were running toward the staff room.

“What happened?!” shouted an elderly teacher. When he spotted the man at Youko’s side, his eyebrows creased into a frown.

Before she could say anything, the man raised his hand and pointed at the staff room. “Go. Treat the injured,” was all he said before pulling on her hand. The teacher yelled something at their backs, though she could not tell what it was.

“Where are we going?” Youko finally spoke up when the man attempted to go up the stairs instead of down. She wanted to leave this place behind her and go home. She tried to let the man know this by pointing down the stairs, yet he pulled her arm upward. “The roof’s that way…”

“It’s fine. Just come with me,” he said. “People are coming from that direction.”

“But—”

“We would only cause trouble for others if we go that way.”

“Trouble?”

“Do you *want* to get bystanders involved?”

The man opened the door to the roof and yanked Youko’s hand hard.

His mention of bystanders implied that she herself was not one. Who was this “enemy” he’d mentioned? As curious as she was, she did not have the nerve to ask.

Dragged along by the hand, she half staggered onto the roof. It was at that moment a strange voice rang out—one with the raspy quality of rusted metal. Sensing a keen gaze on her back, Youko turned and found a silhouette atop the door she just exited from.

Brown wings. A curved beak that somehow felt sinister and malicious. It opened wide, and a peculiar voice emerged from it—she could only compare it to an excitable cat. The bird was enormous. When it stretched out its wings, it spanned roughly five meters.

No way.

She was bound to the spot.

That’s from my dream.

A thick and heavy cloud of hostility descended upon Youko as the bird cried out. Nightfall was only just arriving, and yet the sky was now bathed in darkness. A strain of red sunlight peeked through the large, oppressive clouds.

She watched on as the horned bird shook its head and beat its enormous wings, blowing a foul-smelling wind in her direction. It was like she was back in her dream.

The bird soared high into the air with extraordinary ease, then beat its wings once more. Then, it abruptly changed course. Youko dimly understood that it was about to swoop with its thick legs pointed straight at her. Sharp talons peeked through the brown feathers on its limbs.

Without giving her a chance to regain her footing, the bird plunged for her. There wasn’t even time to scream.

Her eyes were wide open, and yet she saw nothing. She felt a dull impact on her shoulder and assumed, as a matter of course, that it was those scissoring talons.

“Hyouki!” a voice shouted from somewhere as dark red gushed in her vision.

Blood…

Strangely, she felt hardly any pain.

Youko finally closed her eyes. Death was easier than she'd imagined. She always assumed she'd meet it with terror before now.

"Look out!" a voice cried. The speaker shook her by the shoulders, bringing her back to reality.

The man was peering directly into her eyes. Her back was against the concrete, and her left shoulder was dug into the hard fence.

"Pray keep your wits about you!" he shouted.

Youko sprang up, startled. She had rolled quite some distance away from where she had been standing moments before. The bird's strange cry rang out once more, and over by the door, she could see it beating its wings.

Every flap produced a strong gale. The bird's talons tore holes through the concrete on the roof. With its claws sinking so deep, it seemed unable to find a proper footing.

As it shook its head wildly in fury, Youko finally realized that there was a red beast with its mouth around the bird's neck. It resembled a leopard, albeit with dark red fur.

"What?" Youko croaked before shouting, "What *is* that?!"

The man pulled her upright. "I told you it was dangerous."

For just a moment, Youko looked between the man and the bird. The bird and beast were still entwined in their scuffle.

"Kaiko," the man intoned.

A girl with a feathered torso appeared right on cue, rising out of the concrete floor as if it were water. She held a beautifully ornate sword in one of her winglike arms. Flecks of gold adorned the hilt and scabbard, and it was studded with a jewellike stone. It looked more like an ornament than a weapon meant for battle.

The man took the sword from the girl, then presented it to Youko.

She was sluggish to respond. "What?"

"This is yours. I ask that you make use of it."

Youko glanced between the man and the sword. "Me?" she eventually replied. "What about you?"

The man pressed the sword into her hand, looking rather ill at ease. "I've no fondness for swordplay."

“Isn’t this the part where you come to my rescue?!”

“Alas, I know nothing of the sword.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Youko exclaimed. The sword was heavier than it looked—she doubted she could swing it around. “I don’t know how to use it either.”

“Do you plan to just sit and wait quietly for death?”

“Well…no.”

“Then use it.”

Youko’s head swam in confusion. Her only driving thought was that she did not want to die. But that did not mean she had the guts to brandish a sword. She totally lacked the strength or skill for it. One voice told her to use the sword, while the other urged her not to. Caught between the two extremes, Youko was compelled to take a third option.

She threw the sword.

“What are you—?! You fool!” the man cried out in a mix of bewilderment and scorn.

Though Youko had aimed the sword straight at the bird, it did not even reach the target. It merely grazed the bird’s outstretched wings before falling at its feet.

“Good grief.” The man clicked his tongue. “Hyouki!”

The dark red beast extricated its claws from the bird’s wings. It picked up the fallen sword with its mouth and shot straight back to Youko.

As he took the sword, the man asked the beast, “Can you endure?”

“I think so,” came the surprising reply. The dark red creature named Hyouki had actually spoken.

The man tersely told the beast to continue the fight, then called out to the birdlike girl on standby. “Kaiko.”

Just as the girl nodded, a slim rock came flying—the enormous bird had extricated its talons from the concrete, sending chunks of it through the air. The red beast pounced at the bird just as it was trying to take flight. The girl—who managed to lift her entire body into the air at some point—joined the fray. Her legs were just like those of a human, save for the feathers and long fur.

“Hankyo. Jyuusaku.”

On the man’s command, two more large beasts appeared in exactly the same manner as the birdlike girl. One was a large dog, while the other looked like a baboon.

“Guard this spot, Hankyo. Jyuusaku, you take that position.”

The two beasts bowed their heads. “As you command.”

The man nodded in response before turning his back to them. Without a shred of hesitation, he strode toward the fence and swiftly disappeared from view.

“What the—?! Wait!” Youko cried.

Just then, the baboon-like creature reached out for Youko and forced her into its arms. An involuntary scream escaped her mouth, but the baboon ignored it and tucked her under its armpit. It kicked off from the ground and jumped the fence.

6

DASHING LIKE THE WIND, THE BABOON BOUNDED between rooftops and telephone poles with bewildering speed. Only their arrival at a stretch of coastline away from town allowed Youko respite from the rough journey. The baboon stopped at a pier and plopped her on the ground facing the port. As she fought to regain her breath, the baboon disappeared without a word.

Youko looked around, wondering where it ran off to, when the man appeared from out of the concrete tetrapods clustered on the shore, one hand gripped around the ornamental sword.

“Are you unharmed?” he asked.

Youko nodded despite her dizziness. She suspected that it was either caused by the baboon’s jumping or the uninterrupted string of bizarre events.

Her knees buckled, and she crumpled to the ground. For no reason she could discern, her eyes welled with tears.

“This is no occasion for crying,” said the man. At some point, he had made his way to Youko’s side and knelt beside her.

She looked at him inquisitively. Just what was going on here? The man seemed uninclined to explain, and his attitude was so unfriendly that she could not find it in her to ask him a simple question. Instead, she lowered her eyes and hugged her knees with trembling hands.

“That…was scary,” she muttered.

“You speak so leisurely?” he spat. “They will be after us soon. We’ve no time to sit around.”

She looked up at the man in surprise. “We’re…being pursued?”

He nodded. “We would not be if you had cut our foe down. Hyouki and the others are keeping it occupied, though I doubt they can hold it for long.”

“Are you talking about the bird? What *was* that?”

“A Kochou.”

“What’s a Kochou?”

The man gave her a scornful look. “Our foe.”

Youko shrank back. She could not muster the courage to retort his roundabout explanations.

“Who are you?” she asked instead. “Why did you help me?”

“I am Keiki.”

He left it at that. Youko let out a shallow sigh. She wanted to ask why he was referred to as Taiho, but something told her that this was far from the time or place for that question. What she really wanted to do was flee from this bizarre man and get back home, but her school bag and coat were still stuck in the classroom. She couldn’t imagine having the nerve to stroll right back through those hallways to retrieve them after everything that just happened, though returning home would come with similar challenges.

“Are you able to proceed now?” the man asked.

Her mind was still trapped in a whirlwind of jumbled thoughts.

“Huh?”

“I am asking if you are ready to go.”

“Go…where?”

“Over there.”

Youko had no clue where “there” was. As she stood in a daze, the man snatched her hand. She wondered how many times he had yanked on her arm. Why was he trying to force her along into something without even a hint of a satisfying explanation?

“Please wait,” she finally managed to respond.

“We’ve no time,” the man said, clearly irritated. “We’ve waited long enough already. We cannot afford to linger.”

“Where are we going? How long will it take?”

“A day if we carve a straight course.”

“That’s too long.”

“How so?”

Youko hung her head at the man’s barbed tone. She thought it strange he’d even consider it. What was she supposed to tell her parents if she was going to be out of the house for that long? Given how rigid they were, she highly doubted they would allow it.

“It just is,” Youko mumbled, wanting to cry. She did not understand a single thing. The man explained nothing, and yet he insisted on scowling at her and making unreasonable demands.

She desperately held back the flow of tears, knowing that he would only reproach her again if she were to unleash them.

As she sat there clutching her knees, the disembodied voice suddenly rang out again. “Taiho.”

The man looked up at the sky. “The Kochou’s here?”

“Indeed.”

A chill ran down Youko’s spine. The bird was chasing after them. “Help me… Please,” she said, clutching the man’s arm.

He looked over his shoulder at her and then presented the sword in his hand. “Use this if you value your life.”

“But I can’t.”

“You’re the only one who can.”

“I *can’t*!”

“I’ll lend you a Hinman, then.” The man called out, “Jyouyuu.”

Half a man’s head slid up from beneath the ground. He had a disagreeable-looking face that looked as if it were made of stone, his sunken eyes as red as blood. Nothing below his neck was visible, and his form was translucent like a jellyfish.

“What the—?!”

As Youko let out a small shriek, the head slipped entirely out of the ground and flew straight at her.

“No!” she screamed again.

Keiki grabbed Youko’s arm when she attempted to run.

Something heavy latched on to the back of her neck as she struggled. She could tell that the disembodied head had attached itself to her. Sensing something cold and soggy slip into the sleeves of her uniform, Youko screamed. “No! Take it away!”

She shook her captive arm wildly. When she tried to use her other arm to peel the head off her back, Keiki restrained that arm as well.

“Stop it! *Nooooo*!”

“Don’t be unreasonable. He’ll fall off.”

“Nooo! I said, *nooooo*!”

Youko screamed. The cold, paste-like sensation trailed from her back to her arms. At the same time, she felt a strong pressure against the back of her neck.

She collapsed to the ground and writhed, attempting with reckless abandon to release herself from his grasp. Her arms came free, and the momentum sent her tumbling. When she thrust her hands up to her neck, she no longer felt anything there at all.

“What? What’s going on?!” she exclaimed.

“Jyouyuu has simply taken control of your body.”

“Control?”

She instinctively patted her body with both hands. The unpleasant sensation was completely gone.

“Jyouyuu knows how to use a sword. Now you can use it too,” the man stated flatly as he presented her with the sword once more. “Kochou are fast. If you can’t cut that one down, it will never stop pursuing you.”

“‘That one’? There’s more?”

He was implying there were multiple beasts on her tail. Just like in the dream.

“I…can’t do it. And where did that Jyouyuu or Hinman thing go?”

The man did not respond to the question. Instead, he flung his head back to gaze at the sky.

“It’s here.”

7

YOUKO HEARD AN EERIE CAW FROM BEHIND HER. As she looked up to search for the source of the noise, she felt the sword being pressed into her hand. Not paying much heed to that, she strained her neck over her shoulder, and there she found it. The enormous bird was descending toward her, its wings outstretched.

She screamed. The thought fleetingly occurred to her that she could not escape. The bird swooped faster than she could run, and she couldn’t imagine using a sword even if she knew how. It’d take courage to face such a monstrous beast—courage she did not have.

The bird’s thick legs loomed large in her vision. And then she saw the talons. She wanted to close her eyes but found herself unable to do so.

All of a sudden, a white light flashed across her field of vision, followed by a violent screech. It was as though two boulders were clashing against one another. The talons, which looked as heavy as axes, stopped within an inch of her face.

The sword was blocking their advance. She plainly saw that it was drawn halfway out of its scabbard, but only her own arms could have done that.

She did not have the time to even ask herself how this was happening.

Her arm pulled out the rest of the sword and swung the exposed blade at the Kochou's feet. Youko felt the warmth on her face as red blood sprayed in the air.

She certainly wasn't using the sword herself. All she could do was watch on, dumbfounded as her limbs moved entirely on their own, hacking at the disoriented Kochou's leg in the air. Another wave of fresh blood smeared her face, its tepid heat hitting her chin and neck before dribbling down to her sleeve. The sensation made her tremble.

Youko's legs backed away to avoid the blood spray. Meanwhile, the bird retreated into the air and quickly righted itself before attempting another swoop. She slashed at its wings; whenever she moved, she felt a cold sensation crawling in her body.

The wounded bird let out a beastly cry as it plummeted to the ground. As her eyes watched it happen, Youko came to an understanding —this Jyouyuu creature was controlling her limbs.

The bird writhed in agony, its enormous wings beating against the ground as it attempted to dive toward Youko once more. Her body dodged the tackle smoothly, then delivered a deep cut to the bird's chest without missing a beat. As splotches of blood blanketed the beast's head, her hand throbbed with the sensation of cutting through flesh and bone.

"No," she mumbled aloud.

She spoke out of her own will, and yet her body refused to listen to her. Impervious to the blood spatter, her body stabbed the sword deeply into the fallen Kochou. After pulling the sword out, she slashed at the wings next—over and over and over. The bird screamed and spewed out blood as it convulsed in pain. Youko went for its head next.

"No… Stop."

The bird beat its damaged wings frantically in an attempt to turn the tables, but it was no longer capable of lifting its weight into the sky. Youko's arm evaded the flapping wings and skewered the bird's chest with an ugly *squelch*. She hastily averted her eyes, but the feeling of the sword sinking into flabby flesh would stick with her.

The sword bore down on the bird's neck without an ounce of hesitation. It only stopped when the blade met bone. Her hand withdrew the sword once more, then severed the bloodied head completely. Only then did the beast's spasming wings come to a total halt.

Youko screamed and flung the sword away at last.

Leaning over the edge of the pier, Youko emptied the contents of her stomach. She leaped off a tetrapod and into the sea, sobbing relentlessly all the while. Given that it was mid-February, the water was bone-chillingly cold, but this did not register in her mind in the slightest. All she wanted was to cleanse the blood that coated her from head to toe.

After frantically splashing water on herself for a while, she finally calmed down enough to realize that she was shivering so much that even crawling out of the water seemed impossible. When she at last managed to haul herself onto the pier, she let out another sob. The fear and repulsion were not something she could contain. She wept until her voice became withered and hoarse. Only then did Keiki speak to her.

"Are you done yet?"

"What…?" She gazed up at him vacantly.

Keiki appeared entirely unmoved. "That wasn't the last of our pursuers. There will be others soon."

"So?" Youko felt a sort of numbness. The word "pursuers" conjured no fear in her, nor was she intimidated by the man's unswerving glare.

"Our pursuers are formidable. The only way you'll be safe is if you come with me."

Youko's response was immediate. "No."

"You're not thinking straight."

"I've had enough. I'm going home."

"You would not be safe there."

"I *said* I've had enough. I'm cold, and I'm going home." She paused only to add, "Take the monster off of me."

The man stared at Youko, unwavering. She, in turn, gazed back at him flatly.

"It's stuck to my body, isn't it? That Jyouyuu thing or whatever. Take it off me."

"You need him right now."

“No, I don’t. I’m going home.”

“How foolish can you be?!” the man snarled, prompting Youko’s eyes to widen. “Your death would be a problem. If you will not come voluntarily, then I will bring you by force.”

“Stop being so unreasonable!” Youko snapped. As far as she could remember, this was her first time yelling at someone in anger. She found herself somewhat enjoying it. “What did I do to deserve this?! I’m going home. I’m done being yanked around. I’m not going anywhere except home.”

“Now’s not the time for tantrums.”

Youko waved around the sword she had never asked for. “I said I’m going home! I’m not letting you boss me around!”

“Don’t you understand the danger you’re in?!”

Youko smiled thinly. “Whatever. What does my life have to do with you?”

“Everything,” the man said in a low growl.

He turned his gaze to something behind her and nodded. A moment later, two white hands reached out to her from behind, grabbing Youko by the arms.

“What are you doing?!”

She looked back over her shoulder to see the birdlike girl from earlier. She restrained Youko’s arms, forced the sword into her hands, and gripped her in a nelson hold.

“Let me go!”

“You are my master,” Keiki told her.

Youko looked up at him. “Your master?”

“I would obey your every command, but your life is currently at risk. I ask that you allow me to take liberties. After your safety has been secured and you are privy to the situation, I would gladly deliver you home should you insist upon it.”

“When did I become your master? You just barged in out of nowhere and insisted on doing things your way. Without so much as an explanation at that! I’m sick of it!”

“I’ve no time to explain,” said Keiki as he shot a frigid look in Youko’s direction. “I never asked for a master like you either, but beggars cannot be choosers. I could never abandon my master. And I must certainly avoid the consequences that may come to innocent bystanders. I will take you with me—by force if necessary.” He paused, then said, “Kaiko, carry her.”

“No! Let me go!”

Keiki did not even look back over his shoulder at her. “Hankyo,” he intoned, prompting the bronze, doglike beast to appear from the shadows. “We need to split forces. Scatter the blood scent.”

Hyouki, the enormous leopard-like creature, showed up after that. The feathered girl climbed on its back, still restraining her in a full nelson.

When the man gingerly climbed on top of the other beast, Youko raised her voice in reproach. “I’m not joking! Take me home! At least get that monster off me!”

“He is of no impediment to you. You should not feel Jyouyuu possessing you.”

“But I don’t like it! Take it off!” Youko screeched at the man, throwing a look over her shoulder where the creature supposedly was.

“He will remain invisible,” he said. He then seemed to address Jyouyuu. “Pretend you are not there.”

Youko had no response to this.

Keiki nodded, and the beast Youko sat upon stood up. She clung to the arms of the girl restraining her as the beast soundlessly leaped into the air, facing no opposition from gravity.

“I said *nooooo*!” Youko wailed.

Yet the beast ignored her and increased its pace, flying through the air with no wings to speak of. The motion was strangely pleasant. If it wasn’t for the view, she could have been tricked into thinking that she was not moving at all.

The beast dashed through the sky. Before she knew it, the ground had slipped far away from her feet, revealing the dreamlike sight of her town bathed in the last rays of twilight.

8

A BLANKET OF STARS COVERED THE VAST NIGHT sky. Down below, one could barely make out the vague contours of a city.

The beast danced across the heavens as it made its way over the sea. Its movements implied haste, but for some reason, Youko could not feel the rushing wind at all. The only proof of their uncanny speed was her town shrinking into the distance.

No matter how much she objected, she was granted no answer. Even when demanding turned to begging and screams turned to tears, there was only silence in return.

Nothing Youko saw hinted at how high they were above the dark sea, so it conjured little fear from her. What was frightening, however, was the direction they were headed. The beast was making straight for the open sea with no land in sight. Furthermore, she could not see the beast Keiki was riding in her immediate vicinity. He must have split off in a different direction, just like he'd said.

Ultimately, fatigue crawled down Youko's spine, and she quit screaming. Only then did it occur to her that the beast's back was rather comfortable as it frolicked with all four limbs in the air. There was even something comforting about the cold body of the bird-girl, whose arms were still wrapped around Youko from behind.

She sighed, then finally broke the silence. "Um… Are they still chasing us?" she asked the girl behind her, half twisting her body.

The girl nodded. "Yes. A great many youma are in pursuit." Her voice had a soothing lilt to it, making Youko feel at ease.

"Who…are you people?"

"We are the Taiho's subjects. Now then, keep your head facing forward. You would not want to fall off."

Youko reluctantly turned her head back around. All she could see were the ocean waves shrouded in darkness, the faintly twinkling stars, and the moon shining high in the black sky.

"Hold tightly onto the sword. You mustn't lose it," said the girl.

Her words filled Youko with trepidation. Was she going to have to fight in another battle? Was she going to lose the contents of her stomach all over again?

“Will they catch up to us?” Youko asked, trembling.

“They will try, but Hyouki is faster. Please be at ease.”

“So…”

“You must keep hold of the sword and scabbard in case worse comes to worst.”

“The scabbard too?” Youko asked.

“The jewel within protects you. You must keep the sword and scabbard together.”

Youko looked at the sheathed blade in her arms. The scabbard was adorned with a decorative string, and there was a blue jewel, the size of a ping-pong ball, at the tip. “You mean this?” she asked.

“Yes. If you are feeling cold, try gripping the jewel.”

Youko did as she was told—and immediately felt warmth spread across her palm.

“It’s nice,” she mumbled.

“It is also useful for healing injuries, illness, and fatigue. The sword and scabbard are priceless hidden treasures. You must take care not to lose them.”

Youko nodded and was about to think of her next question when the beast took a sudden dive.

The white moon’s reflection shimmered in the inky black water, its form blending with the waves. The beast swerved sharply toward the reflected light. The sea’s surface bubbled and frothed from the beast’s momentum, as if feeling the pressure.

The beast dropped even lower, seemingly causing pillars of water to erupt across the surface like a boiling kettle. It flew straight into the circle of light glimmering over the tempestuous sea.

Sensing what was about to happen, Youko let out a scream. “I can’t swim!”

She clung to the pale arms holding her, prompting the birdlike girl to grip her tightly. “It is nothing to worry about,” came her gentle reply.

“But—!”

Youko had no time to finish her sentence. When the water’s surface closed in on her, her words morphed into an unintelligible scream.

She was prepared to experience an impact when they jumped into the moon’s shadow, but it didn’t come. Nor did the cold spray of the surging waves. They simply dropped into the silver light underneath, as if they were melting into it. The sensation was like being enveloped in thin cloth.

Youko opened her eyes and saw that they were in a tunnel of light —at least, it looked that way to her. There was no sound or wind. All she could see was light spreading out in all directions.

Peering at her feet, she saw the white light of the moon slice through the darkness like an enormous, cresting wave.

“What…is this?”

Another circle of light swam overhead, just like the one at her feet. The light above cast a white glow upon the lower one, it seemed. Or perhaps it was the other way around—the circular beacon at her feet was illuminating the light above her head. Either way, assuming they were the exits, it meant that this was a short tunnel indeed.

Youko’s mount sprinted through the dazzling light in an instant. She again felt as if a thin cloth stroked her body, and then they emerged atop the sea once more.

Sound abruptly returned to her ears. The ocean’s surface reflected a dull glow and extended as far as her eyes could see. She and the others had emerged from the moon’s reflection on the water the same way they entered.

Youko had no inkling of what lay beyond the horizon. She could only see the endless dark waters, awash in moonlight.

Large, rippling swells of water formed around the beast the same moment it emerged from the moon’s shadow. The water’s surface foamed over within seconds, brewing raging waves.

Judging by how the water sprayed, Youko could tell that a fierce wind had kicked up. Even though the air had been so still around the

beast, the once gentle wind now began to whip ferociously as clouds stirred overhead.

The beast leaped higher into the sky. When they were far enough away that the moon's shadow upon the water's stormy surface was all Youko could see, the birdlike girl spoke up abruptly.

"Hyouki."

There was something hard in her tone. Youko looked back over her shoulder and followed the girl's line of sight. Behind them, from the white moon's shadow on the sea's surface, there emerged a whole stream of dark silhouettes, dancing in the night.

The moonlight she'd been relying on was soon shrouded by the clouds, plunging them into darkness.

Yet within the abyss shone a faint crimson light. It came from the direction of the moon's shadow.

The faint light swayed and flickered like a roaring flame. She could see vague silhouettes illuminated against the red light—a horde of strange beasts. They darted away from the light, throwing their bodies about in a way that could almost be mistaken as a dance.

All manner of creatures numbered amongst the thrall: apes, rats, and birds. Some were red, while others were black or blue.

Youko watched on in a daze.

"That's…"

She knew it. She recognized this sight.

Youko let out a scream.

"No! Run!"

The bird-girl's hand cradled Youko as if to soothe her. "That is what we are doing. Please be at ease."

"Nooooo!"

The girl pressed Youko's body down. "Make sure you hold on tightly to Hyouki."

"What about you?"

"I will do what I can to slow them down. Cling tightly to Hyouki and, whatever you do, do not let go of the sword."

Youko nodded, and the birdlike girl released her hold. Then, she turned her back and kicked off into the pitch-black sky. Her back, vivid with gold and brown stripes, was soon swallowed by the night.

By this point, Youko could see nothing but pure darkness. The wind roared around her, and she felt a violent shake.

“H-Hyouki…san,” she called out, still flat on the beast’s back.

“What is it?” the beast asked.

“Do you think we can get away?”

“Hm. What do you think?” came the creature’s lackadaisical reply.

But then…

“Look above you! Watch out!” Hyouki exclaimed.

“What?” Youko looked up—a dim red light registered in her vision.

“A Gouyu.” No sooner had the words left the beast’s mouth than it twisted its body around and leaped to the side.

Something came swooping past their side with ferocious speed.

“What? What was that?!” cried Youko.

Hyouki made a swift descent, darting right and left all the while. “Use the sword. They have forces lying in wait for us. We’re surrounded.”

“Oh no!” Youko wailed.

In the darkness directly ahead, the faint red light continued to gleam. She could see the outline of the black mass against the beacon. The horde was prancing ever closer.

“No! Ruuuun!”

Just when she was thinking, *“Anything but the sword*!*”* she felt something cold slide up her leg.



Youko straddled Hyouki so tightly that her knees made an audible sound against his body. The cold feeling crept up her spine, forcing her torso to peel itself away from Hyouki's back.

As if possessed by a mind of their own, her arms readied themselves for battle. Her hands let go of Hyouki, unsheathed the sword, and tucked the scabbard away at her back between her skirt and belt.

"No… Stop it!"

Her right hand readied the sword. Her left hand clung so tightly to Hyouki that it threatened to tear the beast's fur right off.

"Stop it… *Please*!"

The eerie horde and Hyouki rushed toward each other like hurricanes. Hyouki dove directly into the fray. Youko's hand slashed at the enormous, deadly looking creatures as if it were the obvious thing to do.

"Noooo!" she yelled, scrunching her eyes shut. Her lungs and eyes were the only parts of her body that obeyed her commands.

She had no desire to slaughter living creatures. She even had trouble looking at raw meat when cooking. She truly wanted to avoid bloodshed at any cost.

As the sword moved relentlessly, Hyouki's voice rang out. "Do not close your eyes! Jyouyuu won't be able to act!"

"Noooooooo!"

Hyouki jerked to the side with enough force to jolt her head back. Even as the beast darted in every possible direction, Youko kept her eyes firmly shut. She had no desire to watch the violence play out. If closing her eyes stopped the sword, then she would do it happily.

Hyouki swerved hard to the left.

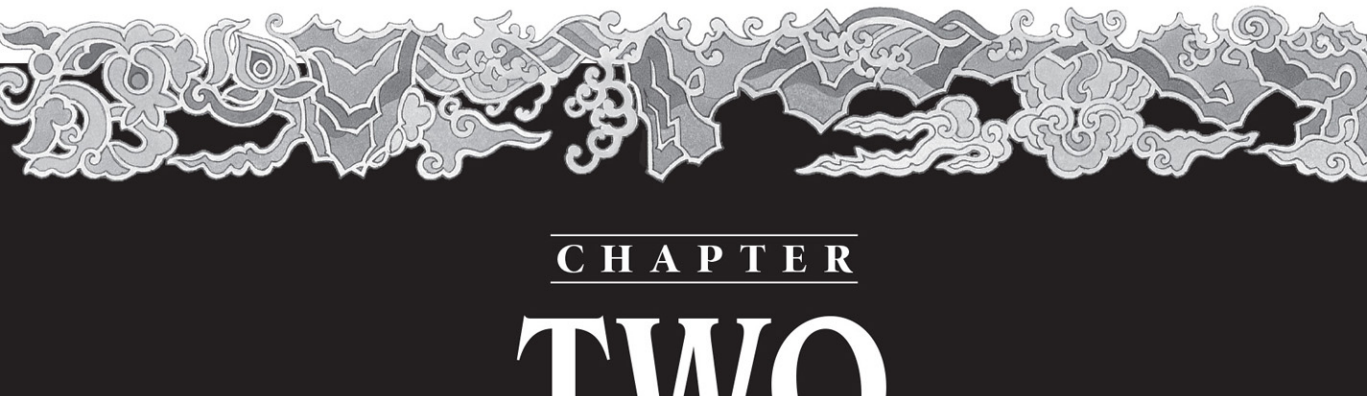
All of a sudden, she felt a hard impact, as if they had slammed into a wall. Hearing a cry that sounded exactly like a dog's, Youko snapped her eyes open. All she saw was a pair of beady black eyes.

There was no time to figure out what just happened. Hyouki's body lurched sharply, and the feeling of his fur disappeared from between Youko's knees.

Youko had no time to scream. Not when she was flung into the air.

Her eyes widened in pure shock, only to witness a boar-like beast charging straight for her. A heavy feeling came over her right hand—the sensation of cutting through flesh. A sharp howl pierced her ears, along with the sound of her own screams.

Then, all five of her senses receded into the darkness.



CHAPTER TWO

Chapter Two

1

THE TEMPESTUOUS WAVES DROVE HER TO THE shore.

When Youko came to, she was at the water's edge. Although there was a bit of distance between the wet sand and where she had collapsed, the tide was so fierce that sprays of water collided with her face. Clearly, that was what had woken her up.

Youko lifted her head as a particularly large wave crashed into the shore, sending water crawling up to the tips of her toenails. Strangely enough, it didn't feel cold, so she continued to lie there passively, letting the waves rinse her toes.

The thick scent of the sea assailed her nostrils. Dimly, she thought that it sort of looked like blood. It was as if seawater coursed through the human body, and so she could hear the sound of waves within herself if she listened for it. That was the impression she got, at least.

Another large wave came crashing in, this time splashing water all the way up to her knees. The wet sand tickled her, and the thick smell of the sea intensified.

As she gazed vacantly at her legs, she noticed that when the water receded, there was some red color mixed into it. Yet when her eyes pivoted to the open sea, she could only see the gray water and sky—not a hint of red.

Another wave. The receding tide certainly possessed something red. She opened her eyes wider, searching for the source of the color.

"Ah."

It was coming from her leg. Red poured out from her toes and shin, which were brushing up against the water.

She hurriedly pulled herself up with both hands. Looking closely, she saw that her hands and feet were tomato red, and even her uniform had turned a blackish red.

She let out a small scream.

Blood.

Her entire body was oozing bright red blood. Both her hands were so smeared with it that they almost looked black. When she clenched a fist, she could feel that they were woefully sticky. Gingerly, she touched her face and hair, realizing that they were similarly coated in fluid.

As a scream tore from her throat, yet another huge wave collided with the shore. This time, it pooled all around where she sat. The water advanced in gray and retreated in red.

Youko scooped up the water and doused her hands with it. When it dripped from her fingers, it was indistinguishable from her blood.

She scooped up the water from every wave and used it to wash her hands. Yet no matter how hard she rinsed and scrubbed, her hands never regained their natural color. At some point, the water rose all the way up to Youko's hips. It, too, was dyed red. The once gray surroundings had turned a vivid crimson.

Youko suddenly discovered the source of her hands' transformation. It was right there in front of her eyes.

She had grown claws.

Her protruding nails were now as long as the distance between her palm and the first joint in her fingers.

"Why?"

Staring intently at her hands, she realized another change—the backs of her hands had cracks all over them.

"What?"

A small red shard fell from her hand to the ground with a *plop*, where the wind carried it into the ocean. A very slight brush of red fur sprouted from where the shard had once been.

"Impossible…"

She scratched lightly at her hand, causing more shards to peel off and revealing more red fur in their place. Even more shards fell from her legs and face whenever she moved, sprouting yet more fur.

A furious wave washed over her, plucking off her uniform as if it were a wilted petal. What lay beneath was—unsurprisingly at this point—

red fur. The water washed over the fur as well, causing yet more red to bleed into the surroundings. Everything was now red as far as she could see.

Razor sharp claws. Red fur. It was as though she had transformed into a beast.

"No way!" Her voice cracked.

It can't be. *How did this happen*?

Now that her uniform had been torn off, she could see that her arm was twisted in a strange shape. It looked like the front paw of a cat or dog.

The blood. *It has to be because of the blood*. The monster's blood was making her body transform.

I'm turning into…a monster.

I…can't believe it.

No!

"Noooooo!"

She could not hear her own wailing voice.

The only sounds that reached her ears were the furious waves and the howl of a lone beast.

When Youko opened her eyes, she was within a clammy darkness. She inhaled, and pain racked her entire body. Her chest felt particularly awful. Instinctively, she brought her hands to her face, then let out a quick sigh. She could not see the claws or red fur.

Silence reigned. She let out another sigh of relief, this time inaudible. When she tried to piece together what had happened, a sudden recollection occurred to her. Hurriedly, she tried to sit up, but her body felt frozen to the spot.

She took a few more slow breaths before rising again. The pain receded with each deep exhale. When she sat up, a handful of pine needles fell off her body.

Pine tree needles?

Yes, that was indeed what they looked like. Glancing around, she saw that she was in a pine forest. A broken, bare branch hung overhead. That explained the needles.

Even now, her right hand tightly grasped the sword's hilt. Her first thought was disgust that she *still* hadn't managed to get rid of it, and then it vaguely occurred to her that her body had once again escaped injury. Although she was covered in very slight scrapes, she saw nothing that qualified as an actual wound. The sword also appeared totally unchanged from the last time she saw it.

She dug around her back. The scabbard was still there, wedged between her skirt and belt. She pulled it out and slid the sword back inside.

A white fog wafted faintly around her—the air just before dawn. The ocean waves reverberated on end.

"What a crazy dream…"

The revolting blood sprays, the fight with monsters, and the sound of waves.

"This sucks," she muttered as she looked over her surroundings.

Her eyes took in the view of the pine forest, a common sight in coastal areas. It was the break of dawn, and she was near the sea. Her body was miraculously intact—not only alive but completely unharmed. This was the extent of what she could discern. There was nobody in the forest as far as she could tell. No enemies were around, but no allies either.

When they had slipped through the moon's shadow on the ocean's surface, the moon was high in the sky. Now it was dawn. She must have gotten separated from Keiki and the others if they had left her alone for so many hours.

"Stay put if you're lost," she murmured quietly to herself.

She was sure that Keiki and the others were looking for her, especially after that lofty speech about protecting her. Figuring that they could very well walk right past each other if she made any reckless moves, she propped herself against a nearby tree trunk and gripped the jewel attached to the sword scabbard. Wincing in pain, she pulled it out slowly.

Strange, she thought.

Even on a second inspection, the jewel looked everything like an ordinary rock. It was a thick, viscous blue and shined with a glass-like sheen. Maybe there was some blue jadeite in it, she thought, as she gripped the jewel again tightly.

She sat still and let her eyes fold shut.

She must have dozed only a short while, because when she opened her eyes, a dim light filled her surroundings and bathed the world in the hue of early morning.

"They're late…"

She wondered what they were doing. Why would they—Keiki, Kaiko, and Hyouki—leave her to her own devices for so long?

The confusion drove Youko to speak.

"Jyouyuu…san?" she called out falteringly, figuring that he must be controlling her body still. However, there was no response.

Looking over her body once more, she could not feel Jyouyuu anywhere. Given that she could not sense his presence unless she was swinging the sword, it was impossible for her to tell if he was with her or not.

"Are you there? What happened to Keiki-san and the others?"

She felt nothing in response, no matter how many times she asked.

Fear reared its ugly head. What if Keiki and the others were *unable* to go looking for her? She recalled the scream she heard right before she plummeted. Was Hyouki okay after she left him behind in that horde of monsters?

It was this fear that pushed her to stand. She patted down her groaning body and rose to her feet, casting her eyes around. The pine forest surrounded her except to her right, where she could detect a gap in the trees. She figured it wouldn't be too dangerous to take a peek in that direction.

Beyond the forest lay an arid wasteland. Low shrubs dotted the light brown soil. Farther ahead was a sheer cliff, and beyond that, she could see the black sea. It appeared that color the night before, but she

assumed it was because of the time of day. If it still looked this dark after dawn, then it had to be terribly deep.

Youko's legs were drawn to the cliff. It was so high up from the coast that it felt like looking down from the roof of a department store.

For a short spell, she gazed vacantly at the water, not because of the high vantage point, but because she was struck keenly by the oddities of the all-encompassing sea. It was such a dark blue that it was the closest thing possible to black. Judging by the water trickling down the cliff, she could see that it was not inherently that shade. In fact, it looked clear more than anything. This meant the sea had to be unfathomably deep for it to look like a pit of darkness—so deep that not even light could penetrate it.

A tiny light was nestled somewhere within that deep sea. She had no inkling what it was, but either there were grain-sized lights scattered around the place, or perhaps a group of faintly glowing beacons.

Like stars.

A wave of dizziness came over Youko, and her knees gave out beneath her.

It did not look like space—it *was* space. The stars, constellations, and nebulae she'd seen in photos were all right there under her feet.

This is alien territory.

The thought sprang to mind. She had tried so hard to avert her gaze from that truth, but now it came to her in an uncontrollable flood.

This was not the world, nor the sea that Youko knew. She had stumbled upon another world altogether.

Please, *no*.

"This can't be happening…"

Where was this place? What existed around here? Where were the safe points? The dangerous points? What was she supposed to do?

And how did it all end up like this?

"Jyouyuu…san," Youko called out, her eyes squeezed shut. "Jyouyuu! Answer me! Please!"

The only sound that greeted her was the rumbling of the ocean within her body. The being that had supposedly possessed her gave no reply at all.

"Where are you?! Somebody help me! *Anyone*!"

She had already spent a night here. Back home, her mother would be getting worried. Her father would almost certainly be livid.

"I'm going home," Youko muttered after a while, tears welling in her eyes. "I'll get back there…"

Once the tears started, they could no longer be stopped. Youko hugged her knees and cast her head down. She let out a wail and began to sob helplessly.

She only lifted her head after she'd cried hard enough to make her face flush. It felt good to cry her heart out; it calmed her down a little.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Before her lay the sea of stars.

"How strange…"

It really felt like she was looking upon the vast expanse of the universe. The nebulae within the waters swirled around languidly amidst a black carpet of twinkling stars.

"It's strange, and yet so beautiful…"

She realized that her heart had finally settled down.

Youko gazed, spellbound, at the stars within the watery depths.

2

SHE STARED UNTIL THE SUN PASSED ITS ZENITH.

What *was* this world? What kind of place was it? These questions kept her mind occupied.

She ended up here through the moon's shadow, which was weird in and of itself. Grasping the moon's shadow was supposed to be just as impossible as catching hold of sunlight.

Keiki had to be a resident of this world, and so were those inexplicable beasts around him. Nothing like them existed in her world. That much was plain to see, at least.

What exactly did Keiki have in mind when he brought her here? He'd said she was in danger and that he would protect her, but now here she was, all alone and with no help in sight. What happened to him and his allies? Who were their enemies, and why did they attack her? And why did it all play out exactly like her dream? Speaking of that dream, there was still the mystery of why she had been seeing it over and over again for a month.

Just thinking about it all was making her head spin. Pretty much everything that happened after she met Keiki came with no explanation. She had far more questions than answers.

Youko could not help but resent the man. He had shown up out of nowhere and dragged her into an alien world without so much as a by-your-leave. If only she had never met him, she would never have wound up here, nor would she have killed any living things—even if they *were* monsters.

She had no fondness for Keiki, yet she had no one else to rely on. And now her sole benefactor and his compatriots were nowhere in sight. Maybe something had happened during that battle which made it impossible for them to come find her, or maybe it was something else. Either way, her situation was far from ideal.

Why did it all have to happen to me?

She hadn't done anything to deserve this, she thought. It was all Keiki's fault. He must've been the reason why the monsters attacked her in the first place.

In the staff room, someone had said, "We're being tailed." Keiki said it was "the enemy," but that did not necessarily mean that they were *her* enemies. She did not have the heart to regard the monsters as her personal foes.

Keiki also claimed that Youko was his master. Something told her that this was the root of the matter. Keiki's enemies came after her because of this supposed connection. And because of it, she'd had to use a sword to defend herself against them on top of being dragged here.

It was all made worse by the fact that she had no recollection of ever becoming his master. As far as Youko was concerned, she had done nothing to warrant it. So, either this connection was all in Keiki's head, or it was something he'd cooked up for his own ends.

Keiki had said he was "searching" for her. If he was looking for his master, then he must have made some huge mistake.

"So much for *protecting* me," Youko muttered darkly under her breath. "This all happened because of *you*."

When the shadows began to grow long, she finally stood up. The one thing she knew for certain was that sitting around and cursing Keiki would get her nowhere.

She scanned her surroundings. She couldn't see any gap in the cliff in either direction. She had no choice but to turn back to the pine forest. Although she had no coat, she did not feel particularly cold. It seemed this place had a more temperate climate than the town Youko lived in.

The forest, which was not particularly dense, had branches strewn all over the place, as if a typhoon had recently torn through. Pushing her way through the trees, she arrived at a vast swamp.

Or at least, that's what it had seemed like at first.

Upon closer inspection, she realized that it was not a swamp but a rice field overflowing with mud. Beyond the watery patches, she saw footpaths in a straight line between the individual paddies. The heads of thin green plants poked out from the mud, having evidently been blown over by the wind. She noticed houses some distance away from the sea of mud—evidence of a small human population. Beyond the buildings, she could see a row of imposing mountains.

Youko did not spot anything resembling telephone poles or steel posts. Nor did she see any hint of electricity lines or antennas in the human settlement off in the distance. The roofs were built from black tiles, and the walls appeared to be constructed from dirt that had yellowed with age. Short trees fenced off the settlement, but almost all of them were now lying on the ground.

Furtively, Youko put a hand to her chest in relief. She'd been bracing herself for a completely alien sight or a total lack of civilization, but the fields were strikingly similar to what one might see in Japan, albeit with slight discrepancies.

Feeling much more at ease, she scrutinized her surroundings more closely and spotted what appeared to be several people a fair distance away from the pine forest. She could not tell for certain whether they were human, but at the very least, they did not look like monsters. They appeared to be working the fields.

“Thank goodness…”

A sigh spilled from her lips. That initial sight of the sea had dumbfounded her, but this particular scene was not anything too outlandish. As long as she overlooked the apparent lack of electricity, it seemed like a village that one might find in Japan.

She took a deep breath and decided to call out to the human-looking people in the distance. As intimidated as she was by the thought of speaking to complete strangers, there was not much she could do alone. It occurred to her that they might not speak the same language, but asking for help was a necessary first step.

“I’ll ask them what’s going on and if they’ve seen Keiki and his friends,” Youko told herself, trying to muster her courage.

That was her only option, at any rate.

She looked for pathways between the rice paddies that were not totally swamped with mud and made her way toward the farmers.

As she approached, she realized these people were not Japanese. There were women with brown hair and men with red hair. Something about them reminded her an awful lot of Keiki. Though they did not look the slightest bit Caucasian in terms of their facial features and bodily stature, their hair stood out as a distinct exception. It was almost as if they were wearing wigs. Other than that, they looked completely conventional. They wore slightly unusual clothes that looked vaguely like kimonos, and all the men had long hair; otherwise, their fashion sensibilities didn’t seem too unusual.

They were stabbing shovel-like instruments into the ground—attempting to dig up the pathways between the fields, she assumed. One of the men lifted his head. When he noticed Youko, he nudged his neighbors and said something, though her ears were unable to catch it. All eight people turned to look at her, and she ducked her head lightly in greeting. She could not think of what else to do.

One of the men, who looked around thirty years old, soon came up the path.

“Where did ya come from?”

Youko was deeply relieved to hear Japanese from the man’s mouth. A smile naturally came to her face. It appeared her situation was not as dire as she thought.

“The cliff,” she responded.

The other men and women stopped what they were doing to watch Youko and the man.

“The cliff?” he said, frowning. “And before that?”

Tokyo, Youko was about to say, although she soon thought better of it. As tempted as she was to candidly explain her circumstances, she doubted they would believe her.

As she hesitated, the man asked another question. “That’s an odd outfit. Lemme guess. Ya came from the sea?”

Although that was not exactly the truth, it was close enough to it that she nodded. The man’s eyes widened.

“Now it’s addin’ up. What a surprise.” A wry smile came over his lips. For some reason that Youko could not discern, he seemed to have come to an understanding. He shot her a disquieting look before his eyes trailed to her right hand. “Now that’s quite the weapon. Where’d ya find it?”

Youko knew he was talking about the sheathed sword in her hand.

“I…got it from someone.”

“Who?”

“Someone named Keiki.”

The man walked all the way up to Youko. She found herself taking a step back.

“It looks heavy,” he said stridently. “Give it here. I’ll carry it for ya.”

Youko was slightly intimidated by the glint in the man’s eyes. It was hard to imagine that he was speaking purely out of kindness. She clutched the sword to her chest and shook her head.

“I’m fine,” she managed. “Anyway, where is this place?”

“Hairou. Ya shouldn’t go around askin’ questions with that scary thing on you. Give it here,” he repeated.

Youko shrank back. “I was told not to let go of it.”

“Give it over.”

Something about the man’s firm tone made Youko tremble. Lacking the nerve to tell him no, she reluctantly handed him the sword. The man practically snatched it from her and stared at it intently.

“This is quite the thing. Whoever gave it to ya, I’ll be betting he was loaded.”

The men and women who were initially watching from afar now drew near.

“What’s the matter? That a Kaikyaku?” one of them asked.

“It’s lookin’ like it. She’s got some fine stuff.” The man laughed and tried to unsheathe the sword. But for some reason, he was unable to draw it from its scabbard. “Just an ornament, eh? Oh well, it’s still a find.”

He smiled and tucked the sword away at his belt. Then, all of a sudden, he shot his hand out and grabbed Youko by the arm. Paying no heed to her screaming, he twisted her arm with violent, brute force.

“Ouch! Let go of me!” Youko exclaimed.

“Not gonna happen. Kaikyaku have to be delivered to the prefectural governor. Them’s the rules,” the man said with a laugh as he pushed Youko onward. “Now walk. Oh, but don’t you be worryin’. I’m not gonna do anythin’ *bad*.”

The man forced Youko forward, then called out to his neighbors. “One of you lot, lend me a hand. I’m takin’ her to the governor.”

My arm hurts. *I don’t know who this man is*. *Wherever he’s taking me*, *I don’t like it*.

As soon as these thoughts occurred to her, a cold sensation came over her wrist. She shook the man’s hand away, then her arm shot forward and yanked the sword—scabbard and all—from the man’s waist before swiftly retreating.

“You bitch!” the man spat.

“Watch out!” the onlookers cried out. “The sword—”

“It’s just an ornament. Hey, little girly. Come quietly.”

Youko shook her head. “No,” she managed to say with effort.

“Do you want me to drag you or somethin’? Don’t get cheeky. Come with me.”

“I said no,” Youko retorted. She could see some other people approaching from the distance.

The man took a step toward her. Youko’s hand drew the sword from its scabbard.

“What the—?!”

“Stay away from me… Please.”

The people stood frozen to the spot. As her gaze swept around them, Youko cowered back. When she turned around and ran, she heard footsteps pounding behind her.

“Stay away!” she shouted back over her shoulder.

At that moment, her body moved with a mind of its own, planting her feet squarely on the ground. Her hands readied the sword. The sound of it made her blood freeze.

“Stop…!”

The sword moved toward the man lunging at her.

“Stop it, Jyouyuu!”

No. That’s the one line I can’t cross.

The tip of the sword drew a vivid arc through the air.

“Don’t kill people!” she screamed, squeezing her eyes shut.

Her arm jerked to a halt.

At the same moment, something pulled her to the ground with tremendous force. Someone straddled her and peeled the sword away. Tears streamed from her eyes, more from relief than pain.

“Stupid bitch,” one of the men hissed.

Her pursuers manhandled her, but she was too distracted by her thoughts to feel the pain. Two men pulled her to her feet, grabbed her arms, and twisted them behind her back. It never even occurred to her to

resist. She just silently prayed with all her might that Jyouyuu would not move.

“Get her to the village. And take that weird sword too. We’re sending both of ’em to the governor.”

Youko had no idea which man spoke those words—her eyes were still closed.

3

THEY PULLED YOUKO TO HER FEET AND FORCED her along a narrow, twisting path between the rice paddies. Fifteen minutes of walking later, they arrived at a small town enclosed by high walls.

The settlement she saw earlier only consisted of a few houses, but this was a proper town with walls that stood almost forty meters tall. Large, sturdy-looking gates guarded the only exit. They were pushed open toward the inside, revealing red-painted walls with some kind of hand-drawn design on them. In front of the walls was an unoccupied wooden chair.

The men pushed her from behind, making her stumble into the town. Once she was past the red walls, she saw the street beyond the gates unfold in its entirety.

The sight looked vaguely familiar, yet deeply foreign at the same time. The buildings seemed somewhat Eastern in design, containing white walls and black roofs. The trees were twisted in shape, and their branches hung at different angles. However, it was not like any city Youko knew, and it was because she could not sense any people around at all. The street in front of the gate yawned wide, with small paths running off both sides, and yet they were deserted as far as she could see.

The buildings lining the path all followed roughly the same pattern—they were single-story structures with white walls that reached up to the eaves. Each house featured a small garden partitioned by the walls. Even the exterior designs of the buildings were similar, more or less, right down to the finer details. It all felt very inorganic.

Some of the houses' windows were open, their wooden frames supported by bamboo poles, but the sight only intensified the town's desolation. Not only were there no people in the streets, not a single dog could be spotted either outside or within the houses. It was utterly silent.

The street only went on for about a hundred meters before it opened into a plaza. Youko could see white stone buildings ahead, but there was something terribly artificial about the vivid colors that adorned them. The side roads ran into the city walls after about thirty meters, then turned off sharply. There didn't seem to be anyone around the corners either.

She saw no towering roofs, no matter how much she cast her gaze around. What she could see was the city's outer walls over the buildings' black rooftops, right down to their long, narrow, and rectangular shape.

It was a suffocatingly small town. Probably not even half the size of Youko's high school. The walls were disproportionately large for how tiny the place was.

Youko thought of it like being stuck in a goldfish bowl. The tank itself would always make its decorations feel minuscule.

The men dragged her into one of the buildings surrounding the plaza visible from the front gate. It was vaguely reminiscent of something one might see in a Chinatown, what with its red pillars and brightly colored furnishings. Yet there was still something fake about the place, much like the rest of the town. Inside the building ran a straight and narrow corridor, but it was dark and similarly devoid of people.

The men whispered something among themselves before marching Youko forward. They pushed her into a small room and locked the door.

To describe the place in one word…it was a prison.

The floor was made up of what looked like roof tiles, but it was cracked in spots and full of holes. The dirt walls were grimy and sooty. A single small window was perched up high with bars crossing it. There was one door, and it had bars too. Youko spotted a man standing on the other side.

Additionally, the cell sported a single wooden chair, a small table, and a rack the size of one tatami mat. That was it for furniture. A thick cloth lay across the rack—it seemed to be serving as a makeshift bed.

A mountain of questions filled Youko's head: Where was this? What kind of place was it? What was going to happen to her? But the guard seemed uninclined to explain, and her captors weren't chatty either. As a result, she sat on the bed and looked down silently. There was nothing else she could do.

Only after quite some time passed did she sense someone inside the building. Two men, dressed in blue leather armor reminiscent of kendo gear, came to the door to replace the previous guard. Their outfits gave Youko the impression that they were security guards or police officers. She held her breath in nervous anticipation, but the armored men merely shot her cold looks.

This was a bit harsh by itself, but it was nothing compared to the anxiety of not knowing what was going to happen to her. Although she tried speaking to the soldiers outside on numerous occasions, they never so much as uttered a word.

After an agonizingly long time had passed, enough for the sun to set and darkness to shroud Youko's prison, three women entered the room. An elderly, white-haired woman stood at the front, holding a light. She wore an old-timey Chinese dress that reminded Youko of something she once saw in a movie.

Youko was relieved to interact with other human beings. It also helped that they were women instead of gruff, stern men.

"You may leave," the elderly lady said to her companions, apparently her attendants. The two women put the lady's bags down on the ground and bowed deeply before exiting the prison.

The lady watched them go. Then, she pulled the table near the bed and set her candlestick, which vaguely resembled a lamp, onto it. She placed a bucket of water down as well.

"Before we do anything, you ought to wash your face," she said.

Youko simply nodded. Sluggishly, she applied the water to her face, arms, and legs. Her hands were crusty with blackish-red blood, though the color quickly washed away.

At this point, she realized her limbs were awfully stiff. She suspected it was Jyouyuu's doing. On multiple occasions, her body moved in ways that far surpassed her normal capabilities, which probably tensed up her muscles.

After washing her limbs as slowly as she could, Youko dabbed the water on the small cuts covering her body. She untangled her hair and undid the braid behind her head. That was when she noticed something strange.

"What…is this?" Youko stared fixedly at her hair.

She was used to having red hair that looked faded at the tips. But when she undid her plait, her hair came billowing around her ears. She saw the color…

What was this bizarre shade?

It was indeed red. But instead of a faded hue, her hair was now a vivid crimson, as if it were dyed in blood. The term "redhead" was not coined for hair like this. This particular tint looked unreal. Nobody had hair like this naturally.

Youko trembled at the sight of it. It looked all too much like the red fur she saw in her dream, where she had turned into a beast.

"What's the matter?" asked the elderly woman. When she told the woman that her hair seemed strange, the woman cocked her head. "Why do you say that? It is not a particularly unusual color. It is rare, yes, but it is a lovely shade of red."

Youko shook her head at the woman's words and reached into her uniform pocket. She pulled out a hand mirror, and when it showed her beyond a shadow of doubt that her hair was now a deep crimson, she also happened to notice another person's face.

For a moment, Youko did not understand what she was seeing. When she raised a trembling hand to her face, the stranger in the mirror did the same. That was when she realized that she was looking at her own reflection—and she stared at the sight, aghast.

That's not my face.

Even accounting for how different she would appear with a new hair color, the face in the mirror was not hers. The fact that it was more beautiful than her own face was the least of her objections. What she saw was a different person altogether—someone with sunbaked skin and mossy green eyes.

"This…isn't me!" Youko cried in alarm.

The old lady frowned, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

“I’m saying that this isn’t my face!”

4

WHILE YOUKO FLOUNDERED IN PANIC, THE OLD lady took the hand mirror from her. Then, with pristine composure, she gracefully brought the mirror to her face and peered at it before returning it to Youko.

“The mirror does not appear to show distortions,” the lady remarked.

“But this isn’t what my face looks like.”

Now that she thought about it, she got the impression that her voice sounded different as well. It was like that of a stranger. She did not sound like a beast or a monster, but…well…

“Then perhaps it is your body that is distorted,” the woman said lightly.

Youko cast her eyes up at her. “How can that be?” She looked back at the mirror. It felt strange to see a different person in the spot she occupied.

“Who knows? Don’t ask me,” said the old lady.

As she spoke, she took Youko’s hand and dabbed a damp cloth against the scrapes on her arm.

Looking closely at the face peering back at her in the mirror, Youko thought a vestige of her original self remained in her features—but only a very, very slight amount.

She put down the mirror. Never again would she look at it, she decided. She would not have to think about her face as long as she did not see it. Although she could see her hair without the mirror, she could pretend it was dyed. She was not particularly fond of her new appearance, but she lacked the nerve to face it directly a second time.

“I can’t explain what happened to you, but I do know that it’s not unheard of. Maybe you’ll figure it out when you calm down,” the lady said as she put the bucket down and picked up a large porcelain bowl in

its place. It was filled with soup—a sort of mochi-like filling floating in the broth. “Here, have some of this. There are seconds if you want.”

Youko shook her head. Eating was the last thing on her mind.

“You won’t eat?” the woman asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t have an appetite.”

“You might realize how hungry you are once you take a bite.”

Youko shook her head silently. The old lady sighed lightly and poured a cup of tea for her out of an earthenware teapot the shape of a tall water jug.

“Did you come from the other side?” the woman asked as she pulled up a chair and sat on it.

Youko looked up. “The other side?”

“The other side of the sea. Did you cross the Kyokai?”

“What’s the Kyokai?” Youko asked falteringly.

“The sea below the cliff. It is a pitch-black ocean that nothing lies within.”

So it was called the Kyokai. Youko stored the word away in her mind.

The old lady spread a paper out across the table and put down a box with an inkstone in it. She produced a brush and handed it to Youko. “What is your name?”

Youko hesitantly took the brush and wrote her name with it. “Youko…Nakajima.”

“A Japanese name, hm?”

“Are we…in China?” asked Youko.

The lady cocked her head. “This is the Kingdom of Kou. The Provincial Kingdom of Kou, to be precise,” she said as she took another brush and wrote the name down. “We are in Hairou, part of the Shin Prefecture in the Rokou County of the Fuyou District of Jun Province. I am the headwoman of Hairou.”

The characters looked subtly different from what Youko was used to, but they were still unmistakably kanji. “Do people use kanji here?” she asked.

“If you are referring to written letters, then of course. How old are you?”

“Sixteen. So, is there a kanji for Kyokai?”

“It is written with the characters for ‘abyss’ and ‘sea.’” The woman paused. “What is your occupation?”

“I’m a student,” said Youko.

The lady responded with a soft sigh. “You can speak our language and read our writing. Are you carrying anything besides that peculiar sword?”

Youko checked her pockets. She had a handkerchief, a comb, a hand mirror, her student ID, a broken wristwatch—and that was about it. She showed them all to the old lady, who shook her head for some reason. With another sigh, she packed the things on the table away into the folds of her garb.

Youko eventually broke the silence. “What’s going to happen to me now?”

“Who knows? The people above me will be deciding that.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Youko felt like she was being treated as a criminal.

The old lady shook her head at this question too. “No, you haven’t done anything wrong. It’s just a rule that all Kaikyaku must be sent to the prefectural governor. Please don’t take it personally.”

“What are Kaikyaku?” Youko asked.

“Visitors from beyond the sea. You write it with the characters for ‘sea’ and ‘guest.’ It is said that they come from a land far east of the Kyokai called Japan. Nobody has actually traveled that way to see it for themselves, but the people who wash up on this side are Japanese,” the old lady explained, peering at Youko. “Japanese people get caught up in Shoku on occasion and wind up on the eastern coast, much like what happened to you. Hence why we refer to you as a Kaikyaku.”

“And a Shoku is…?”

“You write it with the characters for ‘to eat’ and ‘insect.’ Let’s see… It’s like a storm. Unlike your average storm, though, they begin out of nowhere and end just as abruptly. A Kaikyaku usually washes ashore in the aftermath,” the old lady said with an uncertain smile. “Most of

them are deceased upon arrival, I should say. Alive or dead, all Kaikyaku are delivered to the authorities. They are the ones who will decide what happens to you."

"And what would that be?"

"I really don't know. The last time a living Kaikyaku washed up here was during my grandmother's time. Apparently, they passed away before reaching the governor's office. You were lucky to get here without drowning."

"Um…"

"What is it?"

"Where exactly is this place?"

"The Jun Province, like I said before." The old lady pointed to where the location was written on the paper, looking puzzled.

"That's not what I meant!" Youko insisted. "I don't know anything about this Kyokai. And I've never heard of this Kou Kingdom or whatever. Nothing about this world is familiar to me. Where is it?!"

The old woman did not answer. She merely sighed in consternation.

Youko finally got to the point. "Please tell me how to get home."

"There is no way."

Youko clenched both hands at this brisk response. "What do you mean, there's no way?"

"Humans cannot cross the Kyokai. Some may arrive from the other side, but it cannot be traversed from this direction. Nobody from this side has ever achieved it, nor has any Kaikyaku."

It took a short while for those words to sink in. "I can't…go back? That's ridiculous."

"You can't," the lady confirmed.

"But I-I…" Tears welled in Youko's eyes. "My parents are waiting for me. I have to go to school. I stayed the night away from home and skipped out on my classes. I bet everyone's worried about me."

The old woman averted her gaze in clear discomfort. She stood up and started tidying up the place.

“You’ll have to give up on your old home,” she said at length.

“But I never asked to come here!”

“All the Kaikyaku are like that.”

“Everything I have is over there. I didn’t bring anything with me. And you’re telling me I can’t go back?! I…”

Youko did not finish her sentence. Instead, she wailed and began to cry. The old lady left the room, not sparing her a second glance. She heard the lady pick up her belongings and the sound of a key clicking a lock shut.

She was alone now within the prison cell. The woman even took the candlestick with her, which meant that the last speck of light had disappeared.

“Take me home!”

It was too difficult for her to lift her body, so she simply cried while curled up on the makeshift bed. She wept and wept until she was too tired to do so anymore. Eventually, her consciousness faded; sleep claimed her instead.

She did not dream.

5

“WAKE UP,” SOMEONE SAID, SLAPPING YOUKO awake.

Her eyelids felt heavy from the exhaustion of crying. Light stung her eyes. As tired and famished as she was, her lack of energy did not translate into a desire to eat.

The men who came into her cell to wake her looped a rope around her body. Then they pushed her outside into the plaza, where two horses and a cart awaited her. As they loaded her onto the wagon, she took stock of her surroundings. A great many people along the road stared at her. She wondered where all these people were yesterday, when the place was like a ghost town.

Everyone looked East Asian, but they all had different hair colors, which looked particularly strange in such a large crowd. Their expressions were all some mixture of curiosity and revulsion. Youko felt as though she was a criminal being shipped off to face her sentencing.

How nice it would be if she opened her eyes right this instant and realized this whole thing was just a dream. The illusion instantly shattered when a man yanked at her violently.

The men did not give her any time to groom herself or wash her face. Youko was wearing her school uniform when she fell into the sea, and now it was pungent with the smell of the ocean. She watched as a man took a seat next to her, and the cart driver drew the reins.

Wish I could take a bath, she thought vaguely. She longed to sink into a tub of hot water and lather herself with nice soap. She yearned to curl up in bed, all cozy in some fresh underwear and pajamas.

When she emerged from this nightmare, her mother would make her breakfast, and then she would go to school. She would say hello to her friends and chat about nothing important. She remembered that half of her science homework was still unfinished. She needed to return a book to the library. She did not want to miss an episode of that evening TV show. She hoped her mother would record it for her.

Just thinking about home made her feel wretched, bringing fresh tears to her eyes. She turned her head down hastily. As much as she wanted to wipe the tears away, her hands were tied behind her.

You'll have to give up on your old home.

Youko refused to believe those words. Keiki never mentioned that it was impossible to return. There was no way things could continue like this—getting shoved into a dirty cart like a criminal, unable to get changed or even wash her face. Although Youko was certainly no saint, she'd done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment.

As she watched the gate shrink in the distance, she rested her cheek against her shoulder and wept. The man sitting next to her clutched a cloth bag to his chest and gazed impassively out the window.

"Um…where are we going?" Youko timidly asked the man, who appeared to be in his thirties.

He looked back at her suspiciously. "You speak our language?"

“Yes.” Youko tried again, “Where are you taking me?”

“You need to ask? We’re going to the prefectural governor’s office.”

“And then what? Will there be a trial or something?” She could not rid herself of the thought that she was the criminal here.

“You’ll be locked up until they figure out whether you’re a good Kaikyaku or a bad one,” the man said in a detached tone.

Youko cocked her head. “There are good and bad Kaikyaku?”

“Yep. A good Kaikyaku will get a guardian and a decent place to stay. Bad Kaikyaku are incarcerated or executed.”

Youko shrank back reflexively. Cold sweat ran down her back. “Executed?”

“Bad Kaikyaku will destroy the kingdom. They’ll part your head from your shoulders before you cause calamity.”

“What do you mean, *calamity*?”

“Some Kaikyaku bring war and natural disasters with them. You have to dispose of those ones quick, or the country will fall to ruin.”

“How do they determine that?”

A faint sneer flickered across the man’s face. “It’s a waiting game after they lock you up. If bad things happen after you arrive, it’s proof you’re the harbinger of calamity. Naturally.” His gaze turned to Youko, alight with hostility. “You look like the calamity-bringing type to me.”

Youko flinched. “What makes you say that?”

“There was that Shoku right after you came. Do you know how many rice paddies got swamped in mud? Hairou’s harvest this year is ruined.”

Youko closed her eyes. *That explains it*, she thought. No wonder people were treating her like a criminal. As far as the villagers were concerned, she was already the harbinger of calamity.

A piercing fear shot through her mind. The thought of dying terrified her, but being killed was even worse. No one would grieve or cry if she was executed in these strange lands. Not even her corpse would be returned to her family.

Why is this happening to me?

She could not possibly believe that this was her fate. Just the day before yesterday, she'd left her house like normal. The only thing she'd said to her mother was "See you later." It was a day that started like any other, and it was meant to end like normal as well.

Just where did everything go so wrong? Perhaps she should never have spoken to the villagers. Or maybe she should have stayed put at the cliff, or never separated from the people who brought her to this world… No, she should never have gone with them in the first place.

But it wasn't as if she had a choice back then. Keiki said he would take her by force. They were being chased by monsters, and even Youko wanted him to do something to protect her.

It was as though she had stepped foot into a trap. By the time that ordinary, commonplace morning had rolled around, she was already neck-deep in someone's machinations. By the time she noticed something was amiss, it was too late to slip away.

I have to run.

Youko suppressed the part of herself that wanted to panic and make a scene. Nobody here would give her the benefit of the doubt. Who knew what kind of punishment awaited her if she tried to escape and failed? She had to wait for the right opportunity and find her way out of this predicament.

The wheels in her brain turned furiously. It was perhaps the first time in her life that she had ever thought so quickly.

"How long will it take to reach the governor's office?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"About half a day by cart, I'd say."

Youko cast her gaze overhead. The sky was blue in the aftermath of a typhoon, and the sun was already high in the sky. She needed to find some way to escape before sundown. She had no idea what kind of place the governor's office was, but she did know that it would be difficult to outrun a horse and cart.

"What happened to the things I was carrying?" she asked.

The man threw a suspicious look at her. "Anything carried by a Kaikyaku is turned in to the authorities. No exceptions."

“That includes the sword?”

The man’s gaze grew even warier. Youko could tell he was on guard.

“What are you asking for?” he asked after a pause.

“It’s valuable.” She clenched her hands lightly behind her back. “The man who apprehended me looked like he really wanted it for himself. I was wondering if he stole it.”

The man snorted. “Nonsense. Of course it was given to the authorities.”

“I’m not so sure about that. It may be an ornamental sword, but it’s worth a lot of money.”

The man peered at her face and then opened the cloth bag on his lap. The sword was inside, glimmering brightly. “You’re saying this is ornamental?”

“Yes.”

Youko gazed back at the man, relieved that the sword was at least close by. The man put his hand on the hilt. *Please don’t come out*, she prayed. The man at the rice field had not succeeded in drawing the sword, and Keiki had told Youko that only she was capable of wielding it. She wondered if this meant that nobody else could pull it from its scabbard, although she had no way to be certain.

The man pulled hard. The hilt did not move one inch from the scabbard.

“Huh. So it really is just for show.”

“Give it back to me, please,” Youko said firmly.

The man responded with a jeering laugh. “This is going to the authorities. And you don’t have any use for it, seeing as you’ll soon be headless. You won’t even have eyes to appreciate it with.”

Youko bit her lip. She could have gotten the sword back if it were not for the rope around her. She was banking on Jyouyuu’s intervention, but she could not tear the rope no matter how much strength she put into it. His power did not come with superhuman strength, it seemed.

She cast her eyes around, wondering if there was some way—*any* way—of cutting the rope and getting the sword back. It was then that she spotted a golden light amidst the rolling scenery.

The cart approached a mountain trail. They were in a dark forest filled with neat rows of an unfamiliar species of tree. When Youko saw a more familiar color amid the foliage, her eyes widened. At that same moment, she felt something cold crawl up her skin—Jyouyuu.

There was someone inside the forest. The figure had long, golden hair, a pale white face, and they wore long-sleeved garb vaguely resembling a kimono.

Keiki, Youko thought.

And at that same moment, another voice—one that did not belong to her—chimed in her head.

Taiho.

6

"STOP!" YOUKO YELLED, LEANING FORWARD IN the cart. "Keiki! *Help me*!"

The man next to her grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her down. "Hey, don't be a nuisance."

Youko looked over her shoulder at him. "Stop the cart! Somebody I know is here!"

"As if. Like you've got any friends here."

"He was there! Keiki was there! Stop, I'm begging you!"

The horses slowed their trotting.

When Youko looked back, the golden light was already far off in the distance. But there was undoubtedly someone there, and somebody else stood with them, clad head to toe in dark clothing like a shinigami. Several beasts trailed behind them.

"Keiki!" Youko shouted, leaning forward once again.

The man beside her yanked her back, causing her to fall on her backside. By the time she lifted her head again, the golden light was nowhere to be seen. She could still see the spot where it should have been, yet the people and beasts had vanished from sight.

"Keiki?!"

"Quiet down already!" The man grew angry. "What people are you even talking about? Don't think you can fool me with these fairy tales of yours."

"He was there!"

"Noisy bitch!" he snarled.

Youko shrank back. With the cart moving relentlessly forward, she stubbornly kept her gaze fixed in Keiki's direction. Still, there was no one there.

Why?

She could have sworn she heard Jyouyuu's voice when she thought she saw Keiki. That meant that it *was* Keiki, no doubt about it. She even saw his beastly friends. They all looked unscathed.

So, why didn't they help her?

Youko's eyes darted around in confusion, searching for another glimpse of that golden light. When she heard a cry, she looked in that direction, and the man next to her followed suit.

A baby's cry. Somewhere, she could hear the intermittent sound of wailing.

"Hey?" As he pointed in the noise's direction, the man next to Youko called out to the cart driver, who had been silent throughout their journey thus far. The driver glanced at the two passengers before drawing the reins and quickening the horses' pace. "A baby—"

"Don't mind it," the driver interrupted. "If a baby cries in the mountains, it's best to keep your distance."

"But still—"

The baby started bawling as though it were on fire. It was a cry full of urgency, one that no sane human being could ignore.

As the man leaned forward in search of the baby's whereabouts, the driver barked, "Ignore it! The man-eating youma uses a baby's cry to lure its prey."

Youma. The word sent a chill down Youko's spine.

The man, still restless, looked back and forth between the forest and the cart driver. They were surrounded by trees on both sides, casting the sloping path in shadow. With a hard expression on his face, the driver beat further at the reins, prompting the cart to speed along the road, rocking violently as it went.

For a brief moment, Youko thought that Keiki was doing something to rescue her, but the tension that shot through her entire body was probably due to Jyouyuu's imposing presence. This was no time to celebrate.

"Waaah!"

The baby's cry sounded very close now, clearly getting nearer. Another cry broke out from a different direction, almost in response. Both cries rang out across the mountain path, as if drawing a net around the cart.

"Yikes…"

The man stiffened and looked around. Impervious to the sprinting horses, the voices continued to draw closer. These were no babies. They could not possibly be. Youko twisted around as her heart pounded. Something was filling her body—not Jyouyuu's presence this time but a sound like the roaring sea.

"Untie me!"

The man looked at her, his eyes still wide, then shook his head. "You got any way of protecting yourself if you're attacked?"

She could only shake her head in dismay. "Untie me. And give me the sword."

The voices steadily closed in on them. The cart jolted multiple times as the horses galloped faster, threatening to throw off its passengers.

"Quickly!" Youko shrieked.

The man shuddered as if stabbed. At that precise moment, a particularly violent impact shook the cart, flinging them to the ground.

Youko realized that the cart had finally toppled. The breath she was holding escaped her throat, along with a small pool of bile. She looked at the cart and saw that both it and the horses were now completely sideways.

The man, who had been flung nearby, shook his head as he lifted himself up. Even after all of that, he still clung tightly to the cloth bag. They could hear the babies' cries from the edge of the trees.

"I'm begging you! Untie me!" No sooner did the shout leave Youko's lips than the horses let out their own desperate screams. She looked quickly and saw an enormous black dog attacking one of the horses. The dog had a terrifyingly large jaw—when its mouth yawned open, it was as if its face split entirely in two. Its white muzzle instantly soaked red with blood. The men screamed.

"Untie me and pass the sword!" Youko demanded.

Once again, the man appeared to have not heard Youko. He clambered to his feet and ran down the slope, grasping the bag tightly in one hand and flailing with the other.

Multiple black dogs lunged out of the forest, primed for his back. Their silhouettes morphed into one as they descended upon the man, halting him in his tracks.

He was not merely stunned by the attack. He lost his head and an arm. Within seconds, his body toppled over, gushing blood all over the ground in a stark testament to the violence.

A horse neighed behind Youko, and she turned to head for the cart. Something touched her shoulder. Startled, she turned around and saw that it was the driver. When he grabbed her bound hands behind her back, she saw him gripping a small blade.

"Run. Now's your chance to slip past them," he said, standing up.

Youko felt her restraints fall away.

The cart driver pulled her to her feet and pushed her down the slope. The pack of dogs set themselves upon the horse at the top of the hill, while others flocked to the dead man at the bottom. From where she stood a short distance away, she could only catch a glimpse of his head past the small mountain of black beasts on top of him.

Even as she shrank away at the sight of the slaughter, her body, now freed of the ropes, began to prepare for battle. Her hands scooped up a bunch of rocks nearby.

What am I going to achieve with these tiny rocks?

Youko felt her body stand and face the slope. Her ears caught the sound of greedy chomping, and her eyes glimpsed the dead man's legs shaking in time with the sounds. She counted the number of furry beasts: one, two…five, six.

She approached the pack. The baby-like cries ceased, leaving only the sounds of crunching flesh and bone.

Abruptly, one of the dogs lifted its head. Its once white muzzle was now completely red. It let out a bark, and the other dogs lifted their heads in turn.

Now what?

Her body broke into a jog. She aimed a rock at the first dog that came flying at her, hitting it square on the muzzle. That was not enough to knock it out, of course. The beast merely stopped in its tracks for a moment.

It's hopeless.

The pack pulled away from what was left of the man. His body no longer resembled a human shape.

This is where I die.

The dogs were going to devour her, just like the poor man. Those jaws and fangs would rend her limb from limb, turning her into mere lumps of flesh for their sustenance.

Even as despair gripped her, Youko flung rocks at the dogs and ran. She had no way of stopping Jyouyuu now that he had sprung into action. *"Don't hinder Jyouyuu*" was her overriding thought. She could only pray that the end would be swift enough that she would not feel pain.

As she fled, she felt a series of blunt strikes come down upon her arms, legs, and back, followed by dull throbs of pain. She shot a look over her shoulder, searching for help, and spotted a man sprinting as he wildly waved a short blade. The cart driver was running into the forest on the opposite side of her. Just as his feet hit the undergrowth, something grabbed his body and pulled him into the shadows.

Youko was puzzled why he headed in that direction, until she realized he had been using her to buy time for him. While the beasts attacked her, he had undoubtedly been planning to run off into the forest, only for his scheme to end in failure. It was hard to believe that he fell victim while Youko still breathed.

Meanwhile, she ran out of stones to hurl. She was already about three steps away from the disfigured corpse of the other man.

She used her empty hand to whack the beast to her right straight on the muzzle. Sensing something closing around her ankle, she darted ahead. Something heavy collided with her back, but she pressed on. Soon enough, she crashed headfirst into the man's dead body.

No.

The scream never left her throat. Something in her heart felt terribly numb; all she could muster was a very faint sense of revulsion.

She lifted herself up off the ground and twisted around to face what was behind her. Not for a moment did she dream herself capable of intimidating a monster with her gaze, but surprisingly, the dogs did lower their heads for a split second. Yet this certainly could not go on forever.

Youko put her right hand on the dead man and searched under the dismembered remains.

In her mind's eye, she vividly saw the moment he swiftly became a corpse. There was no time. As soon as the beasts decided to press their attack, it would all be over for her just as fast.

Something hard bumped against her scouring fingertips. It felt like the sword's hilt had flown into her hand.

Ah… *Ahh*!

This was her lifeline. She tried to yank both the sword and scabbard out from beneath the man's remains, yet for some reason, she only managed to get the scabbard out halfway before it refused to budge. She'd been warned not to let the sword and scabbard be apart, but…

Youko floundered, but she knew this was no time for second-guessing. Even if it was just the blade, she tugged it out with all her strength. She used the tip to cut the string with the jewel and shoved the round stone into her hand.

The dogs moved at that same moment.

Her eyes caught sight of them—and the next instant, her right hand moved. The naked blade flashed through the air.

"Ahhh! *Arrgghhh*!*"* An unintelligible scream escaped from her.

She slashed left and right at her assailants. This gave her a fleeting moment of reprieve, which she used to run like the wind. Other beasts pursued her fiercely, but she slashed them down and fled with all her might.

7

YOUKO SLUMPED DOWN AGAINST A THICK TREE trunk.

She had gone down the slope, entered the mountains, and ran until her feet could carry her no farther. When she raised an arm to wipe off her sweat, she noticed that her sailor uniform was heavy with blood. Scowling, she took off the top layer and used it to wipe the sword.

She held the tip aloft, examining it. She once learned in a Japanese history class that katanas could cut only a few people before the blood and chipping on the blades rendered them unusable. Surely this sword should be all scratched up, she thought, and yet it only took a bit of wiping before it was as good as new.

"Strange…"

She always thought it was an unusual sword, given that she was apparently the only one capable of unsheathing it. It felt heavy the first time she held it, but it was awfully light without the scabbard. She wrapped up the sword—which had already regained its luster—with her clothes. She held the bundle in her arms for a while, attempting to steady her breathing.

She'd left the scabbard behind, and she wondered if she should go back for it. The fact that she was told not to separate them made her wonder if the scabbard had significance in its own right. Or perhaps it was because the scabbard was attached to the jewel?

Having stripped down to her T-shirt in order to wipe her sweat, she shivered in the wind's biting chill, though she did not feel like putting a dirty jacket back on. Now that she had calmed down, she noticed that her

whole body was in pain. Scratches covered her arms and legs. Multiple bite holes riddled her shirt, and there were splotches of blood all over the white fabric. Her skirt was torn in places, and her legs were scraped all over. Most of her wounds still bled, though she had to be grateful—she got off lightly, considering how quickly those fangs took the man's life.

How bizarre, she thought. It just did not seem plausible to come out of that ordeal with only minor injuries. It reminded her of when the glass broke in the staff room—all the teachers around her got badly hurt, yet she remained unharmed. Even when she fell off that beast high up in the sky, she escaped with only grazes. That was weird, though perhaps not nearly as worrying as how her very appearance had changed overnight.

Youko found herself exhaling. After letting out a breath that was sort of like a sigh, she noticed her left hand was clenched into a tight fist. When she opened her fingers, the blue jewel came rolling out. Clenching her hand again, she realized her pain was receding.

She held the jewel for a short while, and when she eventually opened her eyes, a bunch of her bleeding wounds had already dried up.

"Weird…"

Something was gnawing away at the pain in her body. She could also feel her fatigue fading. Yes, the jewel was certainly invaluable. She could not be more grateful for it. She was pretty sure that she was told not to let go of the scabbard because the jewel had been tied to it.

Youko took the scarf off her uniform and used the sword to cut it into a fine thread. Then, she looped the thread through a hole in the jewel and hung it around her neck. It was the perfect length for a pendant.

Once that was done, Youko surveyed her surroundings. She was in a forest situated on an incline. The sun was already setting, and a faint darkness was beginning to permeate beneath the tree branches. She had no way of orienting herself and no inkling of what to do next.

Eventually, she broke the silence. "Jyouyuu," she called out to the presence in her back, but there was no response. "Please…say something."

Predictably at this point, Jyouyuu did not answer her.

"What do I do now? Where am I meant to go? What am I supposed to do?"

Youko heard nothing in the way of voices. Jyouyuu had to be there, yet she could not consciously bring him out. Her ears picked up the faint rustling of leaves, but it only accentuated the silence.

"I don't know left from right," she went on, mumbling forlornly. "I'm completely clueless about this place. Are you just telling me to make do? You know that if I show myself in front of people, they'll tie me up and kill me. Am I supposed to run around avoiding civilization and figure out some way to survive? Then what? Do I look around for some door that will take me back home? I bet that's not happening."

She was here to accomplish some task, and she had no idea what it was. She knew that nothing would get done from her sitting around, but she was stumped on where to go next.

Twilight swiftly descended on the forest. She had no way of producing light or a place to sleep, nor did she have food or drink. It was too dangerous to approach anywhere with people, but she was also afraid to roam unpopulated areas.

"What did you bring me here to do? Tell me that, at least!"

Silence, unsurprisingly.

"Just what is going on? What happened to Keiki and the others? That *was* Keiki back there, right? Why did he disappear? Why didn't he help me? Come on, tell me!"

The only answer was the rustling trees.

"I'm begging you, just say something," Youko pleaded, tears sprouting from her eyes. "I want to go home…"

She could not say she loved her old world. But now that she was away, her heart yearned so much for the familiarity that it brought her to tears. She would do absolutely anything if it meant getting back home—and she would never leave it again.

"Home… Just let me go hoooome."

As she sobbed like a child, a thought occurred to her—she had somehow managed to get away. She did not get sent to the governor, nor did she get eaten by wild beasts. Here she was, hugging her knees and still breathing. But was that really a good thing?

If it's too painful…

She shook her head to dispel the train of thought. It was too frightening to consider—because surely it made all too much sense. She hugged her knees to her chest.

It was then that she abruptly heard a voice.

It sounded strangely shrill and elderly, and with a laugh, it put into words what Youko forced herself not to think.

“If it’s too painful, you can end it in an instant.”

She swung her head around. Her right hand was already clenched around the sword’s hilt. It was now well into the night; at best, she could see the tree trunk and how tall the undergrowth was if she squinted.

A faint blue phosphorescent light glowed from within the darkness about two meters away from where she sat, somewhere in the undergrowth. As soon as she caught sight of it, Youko gasped lightly.

It was a lone monkey, its fur gleaming like a will-o’-the-wisp. Only its head was visible above the tall grass. As it peered at Youko, it sneered, revealing its gums.

The monkey let out a screeching laugh. “It would have been over right away if you’d just let yourself be eaten.”

Youko pulled the sword out from its wrapping, then said slowly, “Who are you?”

The monkey laughed even more shrilly this time. “I am me. What a foolish girl you are, trying to escape. You would not be in such agony if they ate you.”

Youko readied the sword. “Who are you?” she repeated, more forthrightly this time.

“As I said, I am me. I’m on your side, you know. I was thinking of giving you a hint.”

“A hint?”

She found the monkey’s words difficult to swallow. Jyouyuu did not tense up, which meant that this creature probably wasn’t hostile, but it looked so terribly craven. It was impossible to see it as an organic living creature.

“You can never return home,” declared the monkey, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Youko glared at the monkey. “Shut up.”

“You can never return home. It is completely and utterly impossible. No method even exists, for starters.” The monkey paused. “Now, shall I give you an even nicer hint?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’ll tell you anyway. You’re being fooled,” the monkey said, screeching in glee.

“Fooled…how?” Youko felt like she had just been splashed with water.

“Because you are a fool, yes? You were caught in a trap right from the very start.”

Youko gasped.

A trap.

Was it Keiki who did it? Was he behind all of this?!

Her hand trembled as she gripped the sword, but she could not think of any words to refute the monkey.

“You must have an inkling. You were brought here against your volition. And now you are trapped, never to return to the other side.”

The shrill voice pierced her ears.

“Stop it!”

Youko swung the sword wildly. She heard a dull, dry sound as blades of grass swayed beneath her. Swinging the sword with her own strength, she only managed a haphazard strike that completely failed to land.

“Shutting your ears won’t change the truth. The way you cling to that sword…I suppose it explains why you’ve escaped death.”



“Stop it!*”*

“It’s such a lovely old thing. You ought to use it better.” Another pause. “Oh, yes. You can use it to chop off your head. How about that?” The monkey flung its head back, cackling.

“Shut your mouth!*”*

Youko reached out to swat the monkey away but touched nothing but air. The creature made a short retreat—once again, only its head was visible.

“Do you really want to cut me down? Without me, you won’t have anyone to talk to.”

Youko blinked, wide-eyed.

“What have I done to wrong you? I’ve been ever so nice to you. I spoke to you, gave you my company, even,” the monkey said.

Youko clenched her teeth and shut her eyes tightly.

“I feel sorry for you, getting dragged to this place.”

It took a while for her to respond. “What am I supposed to do?” she asked.

“There’s nothing you *can* do.”

“I don’t want to die.” The thought was too frightening to consider.

“Do what you want, then. It’s not as if I want you dead.”

“Where should I go?”

“Everywhere is the same. The humans and the youma will pursue you wherever you go.”

Youko covered her face. The tears were beginning to leak out again.

“Cry while you still can. Before long, even your tears will dry up,” the monkey said with a cackle.

When she heard its laughter recede into the distance, Youko lifted her head. “Wait!”

The last thing she wanted was to be left alone. Even if it was a bizarre creature, having someone to talk to was infinitely better than being by herself.

But when she looked up, the monkey was nowhere to be seen. Only its high-pitched laughter reached her ears, echoing endlessly within the velvety blackness even as it faded away.

8

IF IT'S TOO PAINFUL, YOU CAN END IT IN AN INSTANT.

The words lodged themselves somewhere deep within Youko's chest. Try as she might, she could not rid them from her mind.

Her eyes flitted to the sword at her knee several times. A dim, almost imperceptible light gleamed from it, and it was cold and hard to the touch.

If it's too painful…

She did not finish that train of thought. However much she shook her head to brush off those words, she kept on winding up in the same place.

Unable to go forward or back, she simply stared at the blade.

When it eventually began to emit a faint light, Youko's eyes widened. Slowly but surely, the sword's white form stood out visibly in the darkness. She picked it up and held it aloft experimentally. The width of the glimmering, double-edged blade was about the span of her middle finger, and it had a supernatural glint to it that she studied intently.

She could tell that the blade was reflecting something. She assumed that it was her own face—until she realized that it wasn't. When she moved closer to take a better look, she saw that the blade was showing a person's silhouette moving about.

She heard the sound of something dripping from up high. She recalled the water dripping in the cave. The person reflected in the blade became clearer the more Youko concentrated, coming into sharper relief every time a droplet traced ripples in the water's surface. It was a woman pacing around a room.

When Youko realized who it was, her eyes welled with tears.

“Mom…”

The sword’s reflection showed her mother, and the room was unmistakably her bedroom, what with its white ivory walls, floral curtains and bedcovers, soft toys on the bookshelves, and the copy of *The Long Winter* on her desk.

As she paced around in agitation, her mother put her hand on the book and flipped its pages. She pulled open the drawer, peered inside, then sat down on the bed and sighed in weary disappointment.

Mom…

Her mother looked haggard. It tore at Youko to see her forlorn face. She must’ve been worried sick about her daughter. It had already been two days since Youko arrived in this strange world. She was never once late for dinner until now, nor had she ever gone out somewhere without telling her parents beforehand.

Her mother fiddled around in the room for a while before eventually sitting on the bed. She picked up one of the toys leaning against the wall and gave it a light tap. Then, as she stroked it, she let out a muffled sob.

“Mom!” Youko cried out instinctively, as if her mother were right there in front of her.

The next moment, the scene cut off. Youko blinked, startled, and refocused her vision. By then, the sword was back to being an ordinary object. The sparkle was gone, and she saw no shadows within the blade. The sound of water ceased as well.

“What on earth was that?”

The scene left her bewildered—it was almost as if she just watched something play out in reality.

Youko looked at the sword once more. No matter how much she stared at the blade, the images never appeared again, nor did she hear the sound of water…of droplets.

It was then that she remembered she heard that sound in her dream. Every night for a month, she listened to the sound of water dripping from up high. The dream became reality—so what about that vision she just saw?

She shook her head. No amount of pondering would give her any answers. If what she saw was indeed her mother, then it just made her even more desperate to get home.

She turned her head toward where the monkey had disappeared.

You can never go back, the monkey had said. *It's a trap*. If Youko acknowledged that, she would lose all hope.

This was not a trap. The reason Keiki did not rescue her earlier was not because he had abandoned her—there must be some kind of extenuating circumstance.

Wait, she reminded herself. She never actually saw his face back there. Maybe she just mistook that mysterious figure for Keiki.

"I'm…sure that's it."

The person she saw had looked like Keiki, but it wasn't him. The people in this world had a wide array of hair colors. She assumed it was Keiki because of the golden hair, but she never actually got a proper look at the person's face. Now that she thought about it, she got the impression the figure was a little shorter than Keiki.

"Yeah. Now it makes sense."

That wasn't Keiki. He would never abandon her. Which meant that if she could just find him, she would be able to return home.

As she gripped the sword's hilt like a vise, a jolt abruptly ran down her spine.

"Jyouyuu?"

Her body sprang up on its own accord, pulling the sword out of its wrapping and taking up a defensive stance.

"What is it?" Youko asked aloud as she scanned her surroundings, knowing full well that she would get no response. Her pulse quickened, and her ears picked up the sound of something rustling through the grass right in front of her.

Something's coming.

A beat later, she heard a snarl. It was the sound a dog would make when trying to be threatening.

Them again.

Was it the same sort of beast that attacked the cart? Whatever they were, it was impractical to fight in the dark. Youko glanced behind her, looking for somewhere at least a little bit brighter.

She took a step, and another chill shot down her spine. She broke out into a sprint. At the same time, she could hear something enormous racing through the grass toward her.

She sped through the dark forest. Despite being fast enough to catch up to her, her pursuer did not seem particularly clever. It hurtled between tree trunks, occasionally bumping into them.

She then launched herself out of the woods, dashing toward the source of light. It was a vantage point midway down the mountain, where the trees were cut off like a terrace. With the moon shining brightly overhead, it was possible to see the gentle slopes of the mountain range below.

Cursing the lack of flat ground, she turned around and readied herself as the hulking figure made its noisy entrance.

It looked somewhat like a cow, except it had long fur that bristled whenever it exhaled. Its gruff snarling sounded just like the dogs'.

Youko felt no fear or surprise. Although her pulse raced and she breathed raggedly, she was already starting to feel numb toward the strange-looking beasts.

She focused her attention on Jyouyuu's presence. She heard the sound of a raging ocean within her body.

I don't wanna get soaked in blood again, she thought vacantly.

At some point, the moon had risen high in the sky. In the clear, bright moonlight, the sword's blade looked even whiter than usual. It cut swiftly through the darkness, and in three strikes, Youko felled the enormous monster.

As she walked up to the beast and finished it off with a piercing strike, she saw a group of gleaming red eyes in the dark forest around her.

She had to fight multiple youma as she walked along the brightly lit areas. From how frequently she encountered these creatures throughout the long night, she surmised that the monsters were mainly active after sundown.

Although she did have breaks between fights, her fatigue grew even with the aid of the jewel. By the time dawn arrived at the secluded mountain path, she was stabbing her sword into the ground and using it as a walking stick. Even then, she found it difficult to walk.

The monster attacks lessened in frequency as the sun rose, and they completely stopped when the morning rays shone. Youko was tempted to nod off right there on the edge of the road, but she knew it would be trouble if humans found her.

She hauled her weary limbs to a forest off the side of the path, and when she found some bushes that were not too close nor too far from the road, she curled up with the sword in her arms and sank into heavy slumber.



CHAPTER THREE

Chapter Three

1

THREE DAYS PASSED, BY YOUKO'S RECKONING. She would wake up close to evening, and at night, she would walk around aimlessly for miles as she fought off any monster who came near. Patches of grass were her choice of bedding, and her diet consisted of sparse fruit from trees.

Her exhaustion was deep enough that she had no issue sleeping in less-than-stellar accommodations. Hunger was the bigger concern. Holding the jewel seemed to stave off death from starvation, but it did nothing to fill her belly. It felt as though there were a million insects gnawing inside her.

On the fourth day, she gave up on walking around with no destination. She persisted in vain for a while, holding the vague hopes of finding something—though what it was, she did not know. Yet she had to concede that just walking was getting her nowhere.

It was imperative for her to look for Keiki. To do so meant going somewhere with people around, but if they found out that she was a Kaikyaku, they would capture her like before.

Youko looked down at herself. She absolutely needed to get something to wear at the very least. If she changed her outfit, she would not be exposed as a Kaikyaku at first glance…hopefully.

The problem was how to *get* an outfit. She knew nothing about the currency here, and she had no money anyway, which made it impossible for her to buy anything. This limited her options. Either she had to use the sword to extort someone or resort to plain old theft.

This dilemma had occurred to her long ago, but she dragged her feet on taking any action. She just didn't have the guts to commit to stealing. After four days of wandering the mountains, however, she finally made up her mind—staying alive was her highest priority. Besides, she wasn't planning on killing someone and plundering their

dead body. The longer she hesitated, the more the choice would be made for her.

From the shadow of a thick tree trunk, Youko spied a small settlement nearby, where a bunch of shabby-looking houses were clustered in a valley. The sun was still high in the sky, and from a distance, she could see people in the rice fields. The residents seemed to be in the middle of their farmwork.

Steeling her nerves, she slinked out of the forest and approached the closest house in the village. Surrounded by a small field, it had nothing in the way of walls. The house featured a black roof and white, half-cracked walls. There was a hole in one wall that might have been a window, though it had no glass. There was also a wooden door that resembled a shutter, but it was wide open as well.

Youko sidled up closer to the building, her nerves straining with vigilance. These days, she never batted an eyelid at monsters, but in this moment, she could not stop her teeth from chattering unless she gritted them tightly.

Carefully, she peeked through the window into a small room. She spotted a stove and table on the dirt floor, which made her think that it served as a dining room and kitchen. She saw no one around, and her ears picked up no sounds.

Creeping up to the wall, Youko walked past a well. When she reached the wooden plank that probably served as the door, she put her hand on it and pulled it open. The plank put up no resistance.

Holding her breath, she peered inside; only then was she satisfied that the house was unoccupied. With a light exhale, she went in.

The room was about six tatami mats wide. In spite of the simple design, it certainly *felt* like a home. Four walls completely enclosed the room, and it held furniture and items for daily living. It was all so familiar that she wanted to cry.

When she saw that the first room contained just a few shelves, she walked up to the only door. She opened it carefully and looked inside—it appeared to be a bedroom. There were two beds on either side of the room, both of which were a marked improvement over the makeshift bed in the prison cell she'd stayed in days earlier. There was a shelf, a small table, and a large wooden box in the room as well. These were the only two rooms in the entire house, it seemed.

After making sure that the window in there was open, she went inside and closed the door. Her first destination was the shelf; when she found nothing of note inside, she turned to the wooden box. There were all kinds of fabrics crammed inside, but it was hard to describe them as outfits at a glance. Youko looked around the room, but she didn't see anything else that could store clothing. She surmised she could find something resembling clothes within the pile, so she pulled the layers out from the top.

Once she had emptied the box, which was about the size of a large TV, she found an assortment of smaller boxes. These only contained sheets, thin bedding, and some children's clothes that were definitely too small for Youko. But still, she thought, there must be *something* for an adult to wear.

Just as she swept her eyes around the room again, she heard the door in the other room open.

Youko literally jumped, her heart racing. Her eyes instantly darted to the window, but it seemed so terribly far away. It was impossible for her to get there before the person on the other side of the door noticed her.

Stay away.

The newcomer paced around the room next door with light steps, then quickly moved to the bedroom door.

Youko stood in a frozen daze in front of the box, its contents strewn around her. She instinctively reached for the sword, then decided against it. She had only resorted to theft out of self-preservation. Although it would be all too easy for her to go on the offensive and use the sword to threaten the newcomer, what if that failed to intimidate them? Then she would *have* to use the sword in earnest. She could not bring herself to cut down a human being, which meant that this could be the end of the line. Youko had rolled the dice and come up short.

If it's too painful, *you can end it in an instant*.

The door opened, revealing a large, hearty-looking woman on the cusp of middle age. She moved to step into the room, only to stop in her tracks, trembling violently.

Youko did not even feel like running—she simply stood there in silence. As she felt her wits returning to her, it sank in that being caught here would mean a trip to the prefectural governor and her inevitable execution. And if everything ended there, it would also mean she could finally forget about her fatigue and hunger.

The woman looked at Youko, then at the scattered items at her feet. "I…don't have anything worth stealing," she said tremulously.

Youko waited for the woman to start shouting, but there was only a short period of silence.

"Or were you looking for clothes, perhaps?" the woman said finally. "You want something to wear?"

Confused, Youko didn't reply.

The woman seemed to take that as a yes, because she strode into the room and said, "The clothes are over here."

She walked right past Youko and knelt by the bed. She peeled the bedding away, revealing a drawer beneath the bed frame.

"I don't use anything from inside the box. Those clothes were for my child who died," she said as she opened the drawer and started pulling out the clothes inside. "What would you like to wear? Not that you have any options besides my hand-me-downs."

She looked over her shoulder at Youko. As she stood there, wide-eyed and speechless, the other woman took that as her cue to lay out the clothes on the floor.

"I wish my daughter could have survived. None of these clothes are too fancy."

At last, Youko found her voice.

"Why…?"

Her voice was choked with tears. Why wasn't this woman screaming for help? Why wasn't she running away?

"Why…?"

The woman looked at Youko expectantly, but she couldn't finish her sentence.

The woman smiled somewhat stiffly as she continued spreading out the clothes. "You came from Hairou, didn't you?"

Youko hesitated. “Yes.”

“There was a big fuss about an escaped Kaikyaku.”

Youko said nothing. The woman made a sheepish smile.

“There are a lot of hardheaded people out there, going on about how the Kaikyaku will destroy our country and how they make bad things happen. They pretty much said that a Kaikyaku was behind the recent Shoku. How’s that for a laugh?” she said as she eyed Youko from head to toe. “Where did that blood come from?”

“The…youma in the mountains…” Youko trailed off.

“Ah, so you were attacked by the youma. There have been a lot of them around lately. Good on you for pulling through,” said the woman, standing up. “Anyway, have a seat. You must be starving, I’m guessing? You seem like you need a proper meal. Your face looks dreadful.”

Youko simply shook her head and looked down. It was her first instinct.

“Well, I’ll give you something to eat. You’ll need some hot water too. Let’s get that grime off you, and then we’ll think about the clothes.” With a cheerful and industrious spring in her step, the woman headed off to the other room. When she reached the door, she looked back at the still-frozen Youko. “What’s your name?”

Youko tried to answer, but she failed to make a sound. Tears started falling, one after another, and she collapsed onto her hands and knees.

“Poor girl,” said the woman. She patted Youko on the back with her warm palm. “You poor girl. It must have been tough for you.”

The dam broke; a hoarse cry pierced Youko’s throat. She curled up on the spot and sobbed like a despondent child.

2

“ANYWAY, PUT THIS ON FOR NOW.” THE WOMAN handed Youko a white kimono from behind a partitioning screen. “You’re staying the night, I suppose? Take these nightclothes.”

Youko bowed her head deeply. The woman comforted her through her tears, made her sweet rice porridge with adzuki beans, and prepared a tub of hot water for her. After going through all that hunger and misery, having a hot bath and clean nightwear finally made her feel human again.

"Thank you so, so much." Youko emerged from the partition she'd used for the bath and bowed once more. "I'm really sorry about everything."

She had tried to steal from this woman. Looking directly at her now, Youko could see her blue eyes crinkling into a smile.

"It's fine. I've been through worse. Okay then, have something warm to drink and get a good night's rest. I laid out the sheets for you."

"I'm really sorry," Youko repeated.

"I said it's fine. Anyway, ah… Sorry, but may I ask you to put away your sword? It's bad for my heart, you see."

"Of course… Sorry."

"You're always saying sorry, aren't you? Oh right, I never asked your name."

"It's Youko Nakajima."

"An odd one. That's a Kaikyaku name for you. Everyone calls me Takki," said the woman as she handed Youko a teacup.

She took it and said, "Takki? How is it written?"

The woman traced the characters on the table for "friend" and "older sister."

"By the way, Youko, what are your plans after this?" Takki asked.

Youko shook her head. "I don't know… Takki-san, do you happen to know a man named Keiki?"

"Keiki? Never heard of him. Are you looking for him?"

"Yes."

"Okay, where's he from? The Kou kingdom?"

"All I know is that he's from this side…"

Takki grimaced. "That's not enough to go on. Do you at least know which area and country he lives in?"

Youko looked down at her feet. “I don’t know anything about this side…”

“Well, no, I suppose you wouldn’t,” said Takki as she put down her teacup. “This place has twelve kingdoms. This is the southeast kingdom, called Kou.”

Youko nodded. “By east, do you mean the direction the sun rises?”

“Yep. And we’re in east Kou, in a place called Goso. You’ll find tall mountains a ten-day walk north from here. Cross them, and you’re in the Kei kingdom.”

Youko’s eyes took in the characters Takki wrote on the table.

“Hairou is straight east from here along the coast. It’s about a five-day walk along the highway.”

This totally inscrutable land finally took shape in Youko’s mind. For the first time, it occurred to her that this was an entire world. “How big is Kou, roughly?”

Takki cocked her head, bemused. “That’s a tough one to answer. Let’s see… I suppose it would take about three months of walking to get from the east edge of the country to the west.”

Youko’s eyes widened. “That long?” Although she did not know exactly how long walking was as a unit of time, she suspected it would take less than seven days to get from one end of Tokyo to the other.

“Well, of course. It *is* a whole country, after all. I suppose it would take about as long north or south. It’s more of a four-month journey to get to a neighboring country, seeing as you have to cross the mountains or the sea.”

“And,” Youko said slowly, “there are twelve kingdoms.”

“Indeed there are.”

Youko closed her eyes. She realized that she had been thinking of this world as a microcosm for no real reason. Could she really find a single person in this vast land? She had nothing to go on other than Keiki’s name. It would take four years just to travel this entire world.

“What’s this Keiki fellow like?”

For a moment, Youko struggled to respond. “I don’t know,” she said finally. “I think he belongs to this side, but that’s about it. He’s the person who brought me here.”

“He *brought* you?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that was possible,” said Takki with a hum of interest.

“Does it not happen often?”

“I’m not very educated, so I couldn’t tell you,” Takki said with a self-effacing grin. “Can’t say I know much about Kaikyaku either. You never see them around these parts.”

“I…see.”

“Yep.” Takki paused. “That aside, I’m guessing he’s not your average chump. He can do things we can’t. I suppose he’s a friend of the gods, or a sage who transcended earthly fetters, or a youma in human form…”

Youko looked back at Takki in confusion.

Takki smiled. “No ordinary person can go to your side or bring over someone from there. Which means he’s some mystical sage or a youma.”

“I know there are youma here…but are there gods and sages too?”

“Yep. They live in the upper world and have no connection to us. They practically never come down here,” Takki explained.

“What do you mean by ‘upper’?””

“Above the sky. I won’t say there are *no* sages on the ground, though. The provincial lord is one.” Takki smiled awkwardly at Youko’s puzzled look. “Each province has a single ruler. They preside over the province on the king’s behalf. Normal folks can’t become the provincial lord. They’re immortal and have divine powers. They’re basically people from a different world.”

“So, you think Keiki must be one of those people?”

“That’s just my guess.” Takki’s smile deepened into a grimace. “The kingdom’s bigwigs are all sages. Heck, even the maids who work in the palace are sages. People can’t fly above the sky where the palace is.

That's just how the world works. The kings are family to the gods, and they appoint the sages. There are some people who ascend to that status through other means, but they're generally hermits. That's what I mean when I say they're from a different world. I've never laid eyes on one myself."

Youko mulled over Takki's words; every little morsel of information counted.

"They say that the sea has a dragon god that presides over the waters, but I've no idea whether that's real or a fairy tale. If a kingdom of dragons really does exist, I suppose its people wouldn't be your ordinary humans either. Other than that, there are youma that can take on human form. We call them ninyou. Although most of them only vaguely appear human, some of them can be indistinguishable," said Takki as she refilled Youko's cold tea with an earthenware jug. "They say this world has a country for youma somewhere, but I can't say if that's true. At the end of the day, humans and youma don't have much to do with each other."

Youko looked down at her feet. Although she knew more information now, it only made the situation more jumbled in her mind.

Apparently, Keiki wasn't human. What was he, then? The strange beasts with him, Hankyo and Kaiko, were probably youma of some sort. Did that make Keiki a ninyou?

"Um…are there any youma by the names of Hyouki, Kaiko, or Jyouyuu?" she asked.

Takki's face twisted in bewilderment. "Never heard of them. Why do you ask?"

"What about a Hinman?"

Takki's expression turned almost severe. "A Hinman, you say? They're youma that get deployed in armies. They say they don't have physical bodies, and their eyes are red." She paused. "Why do you know about them?"

Youko trembled slightly. So Jyouyuu was a youma known as a Hinman. And at this very moment, the creature was possessing her body.

Suspecting Takki would be horrified if she mentioned this, Youko simply shook her head. "And how about Kochou?"

“Kochou.” Takki stirred slightly and then wrote the characters for “vermin” and “chisel.” “They’re birds with horns. Savage creatures that eat humans. Why do you bring them up?”

“I was attacked by one.”

“Really? Where?”

“On the other side… A Kochou attacked me, and I escaped it by coming here. I think it was after either me or Keiki… He said the only way to protect myself was to come here.”

“The more you know, huh?” Takki said in a low voice before sighing heavily.

Youko returned her gaze. “Is that unusual?”

“Very. It’s a big deal to us humans here if there’s a youma prowling around the mountains somewhere. They hardly ever show up around our villages—they aren’t like that.”

“Oh…really?”

Takki nodded at the wide-eyed Youko. “Lately, there do seem to be more of them around for some reason. We don’t leave our houses once the sun is down just to be safe. A savage beast like a Kochou would cause a big commotion. But you know…” Takki frowned. “Youma are like wild beasts. They don’t go out of their way to target specific people. And the idea of them traversing to the other side, well, that’s the first I’ve heard of such a thing. I have to say, Youko, something must be up for them to go to your side.”

“Is that so?”

“Not that I know much of anything. The fact that there’s so many youma around these days gives me a bad feeling.”

Hearing the uncertainty in Takki’s voice, Youko also felt unsettled. She had assumed it was normal for youma to be in the mountains and for them to attack people.

Just what have I gotten myself into?

Takki spoke up brightly in an attempt to mollify the pensive Youko. “Oh well, there’s no point in thinking about all that complicated stuff. Anyway, Youko, do you have an idea about what you want to do next?”

Youko lifted her face at this question. She met Takki's eyes and shook her head. "Looking for Keiki is my only option."

Even if Keiki and his companions were youma, Youko knew that they weren't out to harm her.

"That will take time," said Takki. "It's not something you can do overnight."

"I know," Youko said quietly.

"Well, for now, you need to get by somehow. You're welcome to stay here, but I imagine that if the neighbors catch sight of you, you'll get shipped off to the governor again. I could pass you off as a distant relative, but that's not going to cut it for long."

"I couldn't possibly impose on you like that."

"There's a town to the south of here called Kasai. My mother lives there," Takki said with a smile. "She runs an inn. I guarantee my mother won't hand you over to the governor when she hears your story. She could give you a job," Takki explained, then paused. "Are you willing to work?"

"Yes." Youko nodded without hesitation. Looking for Keiki was going to be a very difficult task, which meant she would not get anywhere unless she found a place to live. She was also eager to put an end to fighting youma at night and camping outside with nothing to eat.

Takki smiled and nodded. "Well, aren't you a big girl? Oh, but don't worry, it's not such a tough gig. You'll be with other good-tempered, hardworking kids. I'm sure you'll like it." She paused. "Think you can head off tomorrow?"

"That's fine with me."

Takki smiled in relief. "Okay then. Sleep well tonight. If you wake up tomorrow and decide that traveling is too burdensome at the moment, you can always stay here a little longer."

Instead of simply nodding her head, Youko lowered it very, very deeply.

YOUKO WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT; the bed felt like sleeping on a thin futon on a hard floor. Glancing at the bed on the other side of the room, she saw the good-natured woman deep in slumber. Sitting up in the bed, Youko hugged her knees, her clean pajamas brushing softly against her clean skin.

With the window covered by a wooden plank, the room was dark and silent at this late hour. Shielded as she was by the heavy roof and thick walls, not even the scurrying of small animals could impede her sleep. The air was peaceful and still, deepening Youko's impression that this was a place of respite.

She climbed out of the bed and went into the dining room, where she picked up the sword from a shelf. It had not been long since she had made a habit of waking up in the night, and she already felt restless whenever her hand was not on the hilt. She sat on a chair, clutched the sword—which was wrapped in a new cloth that Takki had given her—and exhaled softly.

Takki said that Kasai, the town in which her mother ran an inn, was three days' walk from here. If she went there, she would have a place to belong. Although she had no experience with working, she felt more excited than nervous about the prospect. She wondered what kind of person Takki's mother was. What would her coworkers be like?

She would sleep away from the elements inside a building and wake up in the morning. Then, she would work for a day and go to bed at night. If she started working, she would probably have no room to think about anything besides the job. For now, at least, she got the feeling she wouldn't mind it too much, even if she never went back to her home world or never got the opportunity to look for Keiki.

Having found her footing at last, she felt a tug on her eyelids.

Just then, a clear sound rang out from underneath the cloth resting on her chin.

Startled, Youko looked at the sword. A faint light brimmed underneath its wrappings. Nervously, she pulled the sword out from the cloth—the blade shimmered in the same way it did that night however long ago. A small, faint shadow emanated from the steel.

As her groggy eyes fell on the shadow, it weaved together to form an image. She found herself looking into her bedroom, as if she were in the audience of a movie theater. It looked so realistic that she could almost reach out and touch it, and yet it wasn't truly there. The dripping sound from the cave rang out on end.

Just like last time, she saw her mother in the blade. She restlessly paced around Youko's room, opening the drawers and fiddling with the shelves over and over again as if searching for something. When she repeated this for the umpteenth time, the bedroom door opened, and Youko's father appeared.

"Hey. What about my bath?" his voice rang out clearly.

Her mother shot him a glance as she went on inspecting the drawers. "Go ahead. The water's ready."

"And my change of clothes?"

"Put them out yourself." There was a sharp edge to her mother's voice.

Her father responded with a barb of his own. "You're not accomplishing anything by dawdling around here."

"I'm not dawdling. I have things to do. Go put out your own change of clothes."

Her father said in a low voice, "Youko ran away. How long do you expect to mill around in here? She's not coming back."

I ran away?

"She didn't run away," her mother said.

"Yes, she did. Didn't they say a strange man picked her up from school? And he had some friends outside break the windows. She must have snuck away with that seedy lot."

"She's not that kind of girl."

"Maybe you just didn't notice. What if Youko really was dyeing her hair?"

"She wasn't."

"There are more kids than you can shake a stick at who get mixed up with delinquents and run away from home. She'll come back when she gets bored."

Her mother glared. “She’s not that kind of girl. I didn’t raise her that way.”

Her father glared back. “Every parent says that. The man who barged into the school had dyed hair too, apparently. She must have been influenced by that sort of crowd. That’s how she turned out rotten.”

Dad, *you have it wrong*!

“How dare you say that!” her mother spat with venom in her tone. “What do *you* know? All you ever think about is work, work, work. You pushed everything about our child onto me!”

“But I can still tell. I’m her father.”

“Really now? And what do you do to show it?”

“Come now, Ritsuko.”

“You think making money is enough to call yourself a father? You didn’t take a single day off work even when our daughter went missing. You, a father? Really?! How dare you sit there and lecture me about how Youko went ‘rotten’ when you don’t know a thing about her!”

Her father looked more surprised than angry. “Calm down. Don’t be an idiot.”

“I *am* calm. I’m calmer than I’ve ever been. I can’t let myself be a mess when Youko’s in trouble.”

“You still have a job to do. If you’re as calm as you say you are, then you can worry about her without skipping out on your duties.”

“Oh, so my duty is putting out your clothes? Is that so important that it comes before worrying about my child?! You’re thinking only about yourself!”

Her father fell silent. Her mother gazed scornfully at him, her face bright red in anger.

“She turned out rotten, you say? She was always a good girl,” her mother said. “She never talked back or acted out, always quiet and sincere. I never once had a reason to worry about her, and she never kept secrets from me. I tell you, she’s not the kind of girl who would run away from home. She was never unhappy about her home life.”

Her father looked away, not saying anything.

“Youko left her bag at school, didn’t she? She even left her coat behind. Now why would a runaway do that?! Something must have happened to her. That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

“Okay, so what then?”

Her mother’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, what then?”

“Let’s say she got caught up in some terrible incident. What would *you* be able to do about it?” her father replied with a scowl. “The police are already aware of the situation. Do you think spinning our wheels here will bring Youko home?”

“Why must you speak to me like that?!”

“It’s the damn truth, that’s why! Or are you thinking about sticking posters on telephone poles? You really think that’s going to accomplish anything?” Her father paused, then said, “Do you want me to be completely frank?”

“Stop it.”

“If Youko didn’t run away from home, if some sort of trouble fell on her, then she must be dead by now.”

“Stop it, please!”

“You see this stuff on the news, don’t you? How often do people who disappear without a reason show up again alive? Go on, name an example! That’s why I’ve been saying she ran away from home!”

Her mother collapsed, sobbing. Her father stared at her in disdain before stomping out of the room.

Mom, *Dad*…

Watching them was unbearable.

A haze fell over Youko’s vision. Instinctively, she closed her eyes. When she felt tears roll down her cheek, she opened them again. She could see clearly now, but the illusion was already gone. All that was left was the sword, absent of its light. She put it down, totally drained of energy.

The tears would not stop.

“I’M…NOT DEAD…”

Arguably, Youko would be better off dead right now, but she was alive nonetheless.

“I didn’t…run away from home…”

Oh, how she longed for home. How she longed to see her parents.

“That was my first time…seeing Mom and Dad fight…”

She rested her head against the table and covered her ears. The tears kept streaming out, one after another.

“I’m such a mess…”

She had no idea what to make of the scene she saw in the sword. She could not even tell if it was reality.

At length, she sat up, wiped her tears, and wrapped up the sword. From what she could tell, it was the sword that showed her the visions. There was no way to determine their veracity, but something told her they *were* real.

When she rose to her feet, Youko’s heart still felt heavy with emotion. She opened the back door and wandered through the night. The sky twinkled brightly with stars, yet she recognized none of the constellations. Not that she ever had much interest in stargazing to begin with. Perhaps she was just a foolish, ignorant girl in general.

She sat down on the edge of the well. The cold touch of stone and the wind on her back soothed her ever so slightly. As she curled up and hugged her knees, she heard an unpleasant voice ring out from behind. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

“You can never return, you know.”

Slowly, she looked behind her. Just above the other side of the solid stone well floated the disembodied head of a blue monkey. It appeared to hover above the stone, unbound by flesh or gravity.

“Have you still not resigned yourself to your fate?” it said, laughing. “You can’t go back. You want to, yes? You want to see your mother? But you can’t, no matter how much you want it.”

Youko’s hands fumbled for the sword, but it was not on her person.

“That’s why I told you, remember? To cut off your head. Then you’ll be at ease. It will all be over, for better or for worse.”

“I’m not giving up,” Youko said. “I’ll get back home eventually, even if it’s far off in the future.”

The monkey cackled. “Hey, it’s your funeral. Oh, but let me fill you in on something.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Youko stood up.

“Are you sure? It’s about that woman.”

That made Youko turn. “Takki-san?”

The monkey bared its teeth. “You might want to think twice about trusting her.”

“What…are you talking about?”

“She’s not as good a person as you hope. You’re lucky she didn’t poison your food.”

“That’s enough out of you,” Youko said.

“Either she wants to kill you and take your belongings or keep you alive and sell you off. That’s the usual story. Doesn’t that explain why she’s being so nice to you? You’re such a naive little thing.”

“Quit screwing around.”

“I spoke to you out of the kindness of my heart, didn’t I? And you still don’t get it. Nobody is on your side here. They won’t care if you die. If anything, your existence is a burden to them.”

Youko glared at the monkey; it responded with another cackling laugh.

“That’s why I’ve been telling you—if it’s too painful, you can end it in an instant.” The monkey laughed again, and then its expression grew ominous. “Go ahead and cut her down. I won’t tattle on you.”

“What?”

“Cut down the woman, take her money, and run. If you’re so bent on surviving, it’s what you should do to protect yourself, for what it’s worth.”

“I told you to shut it!”

With another crazed shriek, the monkey disappeared, leaving only the sound of screeching laughter.

Youko merely stared icily ahead as the laughter faded into the distance. *What abominable slander*, she thought. *I won't believe a thing that monkey says*.

She could not trust any word out of the mouth of such a hideous monster.

The next morning, Youko's eyes opened with a start. She woke to a shabby-looking room and the anxious face of a stocky woman peering down at her.

"Are you awake? You still look tired. Breakfast should do you some good."

"Sorry," Youko mumbled as she hurriedly roused herself. Judging from Takki's expression, she must have been asleep for quite some time.

"Nothing to apologize over. Are you all right? Think you can leave the house? Or should we put it off for tomorrow?"

"I'll be fine," Youko replied as she sat up.

Takki smiled, then pointed at her own bed. "Clothes are over there. Do you know how to put them on?"

"I think so…"

"Call me if you need any help," Takki said before disappearing into the other room.

Youko got off the bed and picked up the clothes Takki laid out for her. There was a knee-length skirt which fastened with a string, a blouse that looked like a short kimono, and a coat of the same length. There was something uncomfortable about putting on an outfit for the first time. After contorting her neck many times, she managed to get the clothes on.

When she walked into the other room, breakfast was already out on the table.

"Oh, you look nice in that." Takki smiled, setting down a large bowl of soup. "Good thing I kept the outfits I wore when I was a young lass. It looks a little plain, though."

For a moment, Youko struggled to find her voice. “You’ve done more than enough for me. Thank you so much.”

“I’m too old for that style now, you see. I figured it was about time to pass those clothes on to someone else. Now, chop chop! Breakfast won’t eat itself. You’ll need a full belly with all the walking you’re going to do.”

“Right.”

Youko nodded, bowed her head, and took a seat at the table. For a moment, when she picked up the chopsticks, she recalled what the monkey said, but none of it felt real to her.

She’s a nice person.

Takki would get in trouble if her neighbors found out she was sheltering a fugitive. How could Youko spit in her face by suspecting her?

5

YOUKO LEFT TAKKI’S HOUSE A LITTLE PAST NOON.

The journey to Kasai was surprisingly fun. At first, she tensed up whenever she ran into another person, but when she saw that nobody suspected her true origin (perhaps because, as Takki told her, she had colored hair), she started to enjoy seeing new faces along the road.

The country had the look of ancient China, but its residents came in all sorts. Their facial features looked vaguely East Asian, but their hair and skin colors ran the whole spectrum. Some were as pale as White people, while others were as dark as Black people. Their eye colors, too, ranged from black to aqua blue, and their hair colors contained more variations than Youko could count. The people she saw had purple, red, blue, and even white hair. In some odd cases, different parts of their hair were separate colors, as if cordoned off into sections. Youko thought it peculiar at first, but she quickly acclimated to it. Now she found the variations interesting—although she never found anyone with Keiki’s golden hair.

The clothing was in the style of ancient China as well. The men wore jackets and short trousers, while the women generally wore long

skirts. Although the garb certainly looked East Asian in design, Youko occasionally saw groups of travelers wearing clothing from no discernable era or country. Takki told her these people were traveling entertainers.

Youko was glad that all she had to do was walk. Takki told her where to go and even organized her food and lodging. Since Youko had no money, Takki paid for it all, of course.

"I really am so sorry," Youko said as they walked along the highway.

"I'm just being a busybody," Takki said with a hearty laugh. "Don't think too hard about it."

"I can't pay you back."

"Oh, come now. I finally have an excuse to see my mother for the first time in ages, and it's all thanks to you."

Youko felt truly relieved to hear that.

"Takki-san, did you move to Goso to get married?" she asked.

"No, I was assigned there," Takki replied.

"Assigned?"

Takki nodded. "When you turn twenty, the authorities give you a rice field. Mine was over in Goso."

"Does everyone get a rice field when they're twenty?"

"Yep. Everyone." Takki paused. "My husband is the old fart who lives next door. We separated after our child died."

Youko looked at Takki's smiling face. Come to think of it, she had mentioned a dead child. "I'm sorry," Youko said quietly.

"Don't worry about it. I got what I deserved, letting my child die after she was gifted to me."

"Oh no, don't say that."

"Children are gifted from above. If the heavens decide to take my child away from me, it means I wasn't fit for the responsibility. Hard to blame them for humanity's incompetence. I do feel sorry for the children, though."

Youko smiled awkwardly, unsure of how to respond.

Takki gave her a slightly forlorn look. “I’m sure your mother must be beside herself right now. I hope you can get back home soon.”

Youko nodded. “Yes,” she answered, choosing her words carefully. “But I wonder if I can make it back. The headwoman at Hairou said it was impossible.”

“If you can get here, then you can go back. I’m sure of it.”

Youko blinked at Takki’s carefree smile. Relief flooded her heart, and for a moment, she was speechless.

“You’re probably right,” she said finally.

“Of course I am.” Then, Takki said, “Oh, it’s this way.”

She pointed at a three-way junction. A stone monument stood at the edge of the road with the names of destinations and distances carved into it. It seemed the people here used “ri” as a unit of distance. The words “Sei: five ri” were written on the monument.

From her Japanese history textbooks, Youko knew that one ri measured about four kilometers, but a ri here could not have been any longer than a few hundred meters. Five ri was not very far at all.

Although the scenery could not be described as verdant by any stretch of the imagination, it was tranquil and beautiful. The land was hilly, and the mountains were generally steep and rugged. The clouds hung low in the sky. In the distance, she could faintly see a mountain peeking above the clouds, though it didn’t appear to be snowcapped.

Spring seemed to have come to this side one step faster than Tokyo. Flowers bloomed here and there on the footpaths between rice paddies. Although Youko recognized some of the flowers, others were totally unfamiliar.

Clusters of small houses dotted the endless rice fields. Takki told her these were hamlets—places where the rice field workers lived. After some walking, they came across a slightly larger settlement surrounded by high walls. These were villages, and the locals stayed there during the winter.

“So, people live in different houses over the winter,” Youko remarked.

“You can’t do much with rice fields in the winter, after all. Some odd folks stay in the hamlets in wintertime, but there’s more entertainment in a village. They’re safer as well.”

“I can tell from those thick walls. Are they to ward off the youma?”

“Youma don’t usually bother attacking hamlets. The walls are more for conflicts against people and beasts.”

“Beasts?”

“Like wolves and bears. Tigers and leopards are also a danger, although they don’t lurk around here. When they run out of prey in the mountains in winter, they come down to human settlements.”

“What’s the deal with the winter houses? Are they rented property?”

“Just like the hamlet houses, the authorities give them to people when they turn twenty. People sell them for the most part, although some lease them out to merchants while they’re living at their hamlets. It’s more common to sell them and then pay the new owner to use them for the winter.”

“Oh, I see…”

High walls thoroughly enclosed the town. There was only one entrance, which was guarded by sturdy-looking gates. Guards stood stationed at the scene, inspecting travelers as they came and went.

The guards normally just stood there minding the gate, Takki said, but given that they were stopping young female travelers with red hair, they were probably on the lookout for the escaped Kaikyaku from Hairou.

Youko saw a dense cluster of houses and rows of shops inside the gates, and there were a lot of homeless people on the streets. They lived in tent-like shanties set up directly below the town walls.

“If people are guaranteed to receive land, why do they do that?” Youko pointed below the walls.

Takki frowned slightly. “Those are refugees from the Kei kingdom. Poor fellows.”

“Refugees?”

“Kei is in turmoil right now. Between the war and the youma, people are fleeing Kei in droves. There’s bound to be more of them now that it’s getting warmer.”

“Does this country have civil unrest too?”

“It does. Unrest is not just a Kei problem. Tai up in the north has it too, I’ve heard. And their situation is even worse.”

Youko simply nodded. She got the impression that Japan was a more peaceful country in comparison. This land was war-ridden, and there didn’t seem to be much in the way of law and order.

She did not let go of the cloth-wrapped sword in her arms. She’d been catcalled by vulgar men on multiple occasions, and she was even surrounded by a dangerous, thuggish group at one point. Takki always came in to protect her with her sharp, cheerful tongue, but instances like that were probably the reason why people never traveled at night. Since the town gates closed when the sun went down, Takki and Youko needed to arrive at the next town before the end of the day.

“You said it takes about four months to get from one country to the next, right?” Youko asked.

“I did, yes.”

“Are there any means of travel besides walking?”

“Some people ride horses or go by cart. The rich folks, I mean. I’ll never get to travel that way, that’s for sure.”

Compared to the world Youko knew, this one was not very developed at all. Never mind automobiles, this place did not even have gas, electricity, or a sewer system. As she kept talking with Takki, she guessed that this was not just because technology hadn’t progressed as far. A lack of oil and coal appeared to be a big reason.

“Why do you know so much about other countries, Takki-san? Have you been to Kei or Tai?”

Takki seemed amused by the very thought. “Hardly! I’ve never stepped foot out of Kou. We farmers almost never go on long trips. We’ve got our fields to tend to, after all. We hear about other countries from the entertainers.”

“Entertainers? The traveling ones?”

“Some go around the entire world. They’ve got these things called novels as part of their shows, you see, and they know all kinds of bits and bobs about other countries and towns.”

“Ooooh…”

Youko recalled that even in her old world, the cinemas of yesteryear would show newsreels. Takki was probably referring to something similar.

In any case, she was glad to have someone answer her questions. She did not know a single thing about this world. Being ignorant made her anxious and afraid, but now that there was a kindhearted soul next to her to explain everything, this world started to seem like an interesting place. Before, it was full of nothing but hardship, but it transformed after an easy journey under Takki’s wing.

She still saw strange illusions through her sword every night, and she desperately longed for home. Whenever the blue monkey came calling, she trembled with anxiety. However, the negative feelings did not last for long. In the mornings, she would wake up, leave the village, and see all sorts of novel sights. Besides, nobody could have been kinder to her than Takki. By drawing on the jewel’s power, she could walk for miles on end without tiring. Knowing that she would eat a proper meal and sleep every night helped a lot as well.

As homesick as she was, Youko at least had someone kind and caring to protect her. She could only be grateful for her stroke of good fortune.

6

THE THREE-DAY JOURNEY SOON ENDED, MAKING Youko wish it had lasted a little longer. Large buildings appeared along the bank of Kasai’s river—it was her first time laying eyes on a proper city in this world.

“Wow… It’s so big.” Youko gawked at her surroundings as she passed through the gate.

Takki chuckled. “The only city bigger than Kasai in these parts is Takkyuu, where the county’s governor’s ward is.”

According to Takki, a county was a significantly large sector of a prefecture. The extent of a county’s scale was not quite clear, and Takki didn’t seem to know either. A village hall was the equivalent of one of Tokyo’s ward offices, while the prefectural office handled bigger issues.

Shops of all sizes lined the main street out of the gate. Unlike the villages Youko had encountered thus far, every shop loomed large and sported flashy signage, reminding her of a Chinatown. The large buildings had glass windows, which made a very strong impression indeed. Although evening was still far off and the street was relatively unpopulated, Youko could easily imagine what a bustling place it would be during peak hours.

The thought of life in such a lively city brought a little cheer to her heart. She couldn’t complain about staying in a village as long as she had peace of mind, but it went without saying that the big city felt glamorous.

Takki took a turn off the main road. The shops in this block were all a notch smaller. Although this street gave off a vaguely back-alley vibe, it still looked populous. Takki entered one of the grander-looking establishments—a three-story building with green pillars and a vivid exterior.

The first thing past the large door was a spacious food hall. As Youko looked around the lavish interior, a man who appeared to be an employee approached them.

Takki seized the opportunity. “Could you call the proprietress? Tell her that her daughter Takki is here. She’ll know.”

The man smiled brightly at her and disappeared into the back. Takki watched him go, then ushered Youko to a nearby table.

“Sit here. I’ll get you something to eat. The food here is pretty good.”

“Are you sure that’s okay with you?” Youko asked hesitantly.

This place was far bigger than the inns and restaurants they’d frequented along the journey.

“It’s either my treat or my mother’s. Now help yourself.”

Even so, the menu confused Youko. Takki seemed to anticipate this, because she called over a waiter and ordered a few items. Just as the waiter bowed his head and left, a woman of ripe old age emerged from the back of the establishment.

“Mother.”

Takki stood up, a smile on her face. The old woman reacted with a cheerful smile of her own.

Youko watched them both, relieved that Takki’s mother appeared to be an agreeable sort of person. She figured it wouldn’t be too bad working under her.

“You wait here, Youko. I’ll go and have a chat with my mother,” Takki said.

“Okay.” Youko nodded.

Takki smiled and ran over to her mother. The two of them clapped each other’s backs and laughed before disappearing into the back of the establishment. Youko found herself smiling as she watched them go. Then, she grabbed Takki’s bag, which she had left on the table, and looked around the building.

There did not appear to be any female employees in the establishment. All the waiters hopping between tables were men, and most of the customers were male as well. When she noticed some of them peering at her, she felt vaguely uneasy.

After a short while, a group of four men entered the building. When they sat at a table near Youko, they gazed at her with openly lascivious eyes. And when they whispered something among themselves and laughed, her stomach churned.

She glanced toward the back of the establishment, but Takki still had yet to return. She put up with the stares for a while, but when she saw one of the four men climb up from his seat and start to approach her, she stood up, unable to stand it any longer.

Ignoring the man’s advance, Youko called out to a waiter. “Excuse me… Where did Takki-san go?”

The waiter merely pointed curtly at the back. She took that as a sign that she was allowed to go there. She picked up the bags and made her way down the hall. Nobody tried to stop her.

When she arrived at the narrow hallway down the back, she came upon what appeared to be a terribly cluttered stage. As she walked carefully along with a vague sense of unease in her chest, a beautifully carved door opened. She heard Takki's voice from behind the partitioning screen, which served to obscure the interior of the room.

"Don't be so nervous."

"But of all the people, you chose that Kaikyaku," said the old lady.

Youko stopped moving. The old woman's voice sounded nervous. Youko's head jolted up in unease. She would not be surprised if Takki's mother refused to hire her because she was a Kaikyaku. Tempted though she was to go in and beg for a job, she thought it would come off as desperate. However, she did not have the heart to turn around and wait back in the front room.

"What does it matter if she's a Kaikyaku? She's just a lost young girl is all. Do you really believe that superstition about them causing misfortune?"

The old woman hesitated. "Not necessarily, but what if the officials find out?"

"They won't know if you just keep mum about it. *She's* not about to go blabbing, that's for sure. When you think of it that way, she's a rare find, isn't she? A nice face and a good age too."

"But, well…"

"Her upbringing doesn't seem bad either. Just give her some tips on handling the customers, and you can put her to work straight away. And I'm giving her to you with no strings attached. So why the hesitation?"

Youko cocked her head. There was something strange about Takki's tone. Although she knew that it was wrong to eavesdrop, she kept on listening. Her ears picked up a faint sound like the roaring sea.

"But she's a Kaikyaku…"

"Well, that means she's got no ties to anyone, doesn't it? Her parents or brothers aren't going to come yelling at you. She's basically a nonexistent person. Much less of a hassle, don't you think?"

The other woman went silent for a moment. "And you're saying she's genuinely willing to work here?"

“She said so herself. I told her that this place is an inn. If she got the wrong idea and assumed she’d be scrubbing floors, that’s on her. The girl is none too bright, you see.”

Her ears took in Takki’s words. Something was terribly wrong. “The girl” had to be referring to Youko. She detected none of the warmth in Takki’s voice from when she had spoken to her. What was going on? She sounded like a different person altogether.

“Yes, but…”

“The green pillars mean it’s a brothel,” said Takki, as if nothing could be more obvious. “It’s her fault for not knowing. Now hand over my due.”

Youko’s eyes widened. All she could do was clutch at the bags as shock crashed over her.

The monkey explicitly warned her about this. Why did she not take it seriously?

Her pulse quickened violently either from shock or fury. Her stifled breath felt hot in her throat, and the roar of the sea pounded in her ears.

I should have known, she thought as her right hand clenched the object inside the bundle of cloth.

A second later, she relaxed her grip and turned around stealthily instead.

When she reached the other end of the narrow hallway, she crossed the front room with a neutral expression and swiftly strode outside. When she emerged from the door, she looked up once more at the establishment, and sure enough, the pillars, beams, and even the window frames were painted green. The odious display made the truth of it all finally sink in.

Youko was still carrying Takki’s bag, but she naturally had no desire whatsoever to waltz back inside and return it to her.

As if on cue, a window on the second floor opened. A woman wearing gaudy accessories around her wrist leaned over the balcony and peered outside. The sleeves of her vividly colored kimono parted wide open, exposing her upper body for all the world to see.

Youko trembled, anger and revulsion surging within her. Having noticed Youko looking up at her, the woman closed the window with a faintly mocking smile.

7

"HEY THERE, LITTLE MISS."

Youko hurriedly turned her gaze away from the second floor when she heard a voice behind her. The speaker was one of the four men from earlier; he was standing very close to her.

"Are you one of the girls here?"

"No," she stated, more venomously than she had anticipated. With that, she swung around, only for the man to grab her by the arm and place himself in front of her.

"Are you shitting me? What woman goes *here* to eat?"

"The person who took me knows the owner."

"Oh, and where did this person go off to, eh? You sure you didn't get sold off?" The man put his hand on Youko's chin.

She slapped it away. "I am quite sure. Don't touch me."

"Plucky, aren't you?" The man laughed and yanked her by the arm. "So how about it? Wanna get a drink together?"

"I'm not interested. Now let go."

"You *were* sold off, weren't you? I'd be willing to keep it between us that you tried to escape. Hear what I'm saying?"

"I…" Youko channeled all her strength into shoving the man's arm away. "I won't work in a place like this," she spat. "I wasn't sold off."

She tried to leave, yet the man grabbed her by the shoulder again. She wriggled out of his grasp and clutched the sword hilt before he could catch her again.

There was a sea inside of her—and right now, it was being whipped up by a storm. She wanted nothing more than to unleash the tidal wave and strike the man before her.

"Don't touch me."

She waved her arm, pulling off the cloth. The man jerked back, startled.

“Hey…”

“Get out of my way if you don’t want to get hurt.”

The man’s eyes skirted between Youko and the sword. A stiff smile swiftly came over his face. “Can you even use that thing?”

Youko wordlessly raised the sword. Without an ounce of hesitation, she pointed the tip at the man’s throat. This blade was her set of claws, a deadly weapon she could call her own.

“Out of my way. Get back in that brothel. Your friends are waiting for you, aren’t they?”

Someone in the vicinity let out a scream, but Youko did not even bother looking in their direction. She figured drawing a sword out of nowhere would disturb the peace, but at that moment, she felt no hesitation.

The man looked between Youko and the sword tip multiple times before backing down, evidently disgruntled. Just as he turned on his heel and started running for the brothel, a shrill voice rang out.

“The girl! Catch the girl!”

Youko swiveled her gaze to see Takki yelling by the door. The bitterness within Youko only grew. It was so very similar to the red *something* in the sea that she saw in her dream.

“She’s a runaway! Catch her!”

The revulsion flared in her like bile forcing its way up her throat. She had no idea whether it was directed at the kindly face Takki had put on to trick her or at herself for being fooled.

People flooded out of the brothel in droves. Youko brandished the sword without missing a beat. Turning the hilt around in her hand, she pointed the wide blade at the crowd. She left it entirely up to Jyouyuu whether she resorted to murder. In the heat of that moment, she was not against killing someone if it meant evading capture.

She had no allies in this world.

She thought she had found salvation. She even felt grateful to Takki and for what she thought was a stroke of good fortune. And because those

feelings were so deeply earnest, her rage was almost physically uncontainable.

When she saw the men charging at her, a cold sensation crawled down her limbs. Youko cleared away the obstacles in front of her with perfect ease.

"Catch her! That's our profit running away!"

Upon hearing Takki's hysterical shout, Youko turned over her shoulder to look at the woman. The eyes of the trickster and her victim met. Takki looked ready to yell something but then abruptly fell silent. She shrank back several steps in fear.

Youko then turned her cold eyes to the charging men and readied herself. Her body evaded one man, then a second. She struck down the third with the flat of her blade.

Before she knew it, the crowd formed a wall around her. Seeing how dense the throng of people was, Youko clicked her tongue in frustration. It seemed she would not get out of this without killing someone.

"Hey! Anybody! I'll pay you handsomely! Just grab her!"

It happened just when Takki stamped her feet.

Someone let out a yell at the back of the wave of people. Everyone turned to look—and just like that, all hell broke loose.

"What's that?"

"There's a runaway."

"No, what's *that*?"

The human wall wavered.

Peering down the alleyway, Youko saw a stream of people push against the crowd. They screamed, seeming to be scrambling away from something.

"A youma!"

Youko's hand prickled in response.

"It's a youma…"

"A Bafuku!"

"Run!"

The human wall crumbled instantly.

As the crowd split off in an attempt to flee from the monster, Youko broke out into a sprint as well. Before long, an ugly scream erupted behind her. She saw a beast mowing people down as it darted toward her.

It was an enormous tiger with a face the spitting image of a human's, save that it was already covered in red splotches. It jumped around the people fleeing the nearby buildings as it made a beeline for Youko, closing the distance between them almost instantaneously. Faced with no other choice, she stopped running.

Startled though she was by the youma's human face, she held the sword at the ready. When the tiger charged, creating a rush of wind behind it, she dodged out of the way and slashed the sword with all her strength.

She heard the sound of steel tearing into flesh, followed by the sight of blood spraying in the air. If she had averted her eyes the moment she swung the sword, the beast could have dodged it.



She got out of the tiger's way as its enormous body collapsed sideways on the ground, its striped legs streaming blood. Then, she ran. As she sprinted down the alleyway, she used the sword and the sprightliness of her feet to evade the beast's attempts to catch up with her.

When she emerged onto the main street, she ran into a crowd of people who had no idea what was going on.

"Out of the way!" screamed Youko.

Between the sound of her shout and the sight of the beast running behind her, the wall of people soon dispersed. But then…

"What?!"

Youko spotted a golden light beyond the crowd.

It was too far away to make out the person's features. Though she did not have time to look closely, Youko knew by now that golden hair was rare in this world.

"Keiki!"

She instinctively gave chase, but the rush of scrambling people meant that she lost sight of the golden light in an instant.

"Keiki?!"

All of a sudden, the sun's light was obscured as the giant tiger leaped right over her head.

The youma descended on the wave of fleeing people. Screams rang out from beneath the beast's thick front limbs. With her escape route blocked, Youko twisted around.

Was it Keiki? Or…

She had no time to ponder it. She brandished her blade against the charging beast once more and fled the city of Kasai amid the chaos.

8

"I TOLD YOU SO."

That night, the blue monkey's face floated above the stone monument on the highway.

Upon leaving Kasai, Youko continued along the highway after some slight wavering. Although she was back to traveling alone, she now carried Takki's possessions. The bag contained clothes and a wallet. There was enough money in the wallet to keep her going for a while as long as she settled for the cheapest inns and eateries. She felt no qualms about using it.

"I warned you. Foolish girl."

She ignored the monkey. As she walked in silence, the monkey's disembodied head trailed after her, its form emitting a phosphorescent light. She refused to look at the monkey as it continued shrieking in laughter. She cursed herself for her naivete, and she did not want the monkey rubbing it in.

Besides, the bigger concerns on her mind were the golden-haired person she saw in Kasai and the youma that showed up in town.

Aren't youma not supposed to show up in human settlements?

Takki had said as much, at least. According to her, it was a rare occurrence.

Aren't youma also not supposed to show up in the daytime?

Every youma she encountered until now showed up after dark—except for the tigerlike youma in Kasai, the doglike ones that attacked the cart, and the Kochou that appeared at her school.

Keiki was definitely there. *Why*?

As she ruminated on the subject, the monkey's shrill laughter pierced her ears.

"I told you that you're being tricked."

This she could not ignore. "You're wrong!"

"No, I'm not. Think about it. Don't you agree that it's all so strange?"

Youko bit her lip. She had decided to trust Keiki. If she didn't, she would have nothing to cling to. Yet the seed of unease lingered within her regardless.

“You were hoodwinked. It was a setup from the start. He trapped you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I understand why you’re defensive. If you’re wrong, you’d be in trouble,” the monkey said with a roar of laughter.

“Keiki protected me from the Kochou. He’s on my side.”

“Oh, really? Ever since you came here, he hasn’t lifted a finger to help you. What if he only felt like it just that once?”

Youko squinted at the monkey, unable to believe her ears. Did the monkey know about what happened on the other side? There was something inscrutable about his tone.

“What do you mean, just that once?”

“When you were attacked by the Kochou on the other side, of course.”

“How do you know about that?”

The monkey laughed uproariously. “I know everything about you. I even know that you’re suspicious of Keiki. You’re trying to deny that part of yourself. You don’t want to believe that he set you up.”

Youko wrenched her gaze away, choosing instead to stare at the dark highway road. “That…can’t be.”

“Then why has he not come to your aid?”

“He must have his reasons.”

“Like what? Wasn’t it his duty to protect you?” The monkey paused for effect. “Think about it. It’s a trap—can’t you see?

“I didn’t clearly see his face on those two occasions. It wasn’t Keiki, I’m certain.”

“Who else has golden hair?”

Stop talking.

“Didn’t Jyouyuu recognize Keiki?”

How does he know about Jyouyuu? When she turned to look at the monkey, the question burning in her mind, the creature’s sneering gaze bore into her.

“Didn’t I tell you? I know everything.”

Recalling the voice that had said *“Taiho,”* Youko shook her head. She could not forget the sheer astonishment that the voice’s owner poured into that single word.

“You’re wrong,” she finally managed to say. “There must be some mistake. Keiki’s not my enemy.”

“Are you sure? Are you really, truly sure? Would be nice if it were true.”

“Would you give it a rest?!” Youko snapped.

The monkey thrust its head up at the sky and laughed, then lowered its voice into a whisper. “Come now, you really don’t have it in you to use your brain a little?”

“Stop talking.”

“Keiki is the one sending those youma after you.”

Youko stiffened. She stared at the monkey, her eyes wide. The monkey’s mouth curled up in response.

It took a while for her to collect herself. “Impossible,” she breathed.

The monkey burst out laughing, its crazed cackling ringing out on end.

“Impossible!” Youko repeated herself.

“Is it really so impossible?”

“He doesn’t have any reason to do that!”

The monkey’s face twisted into a lopsided smile. “Are you sure about that?”

“What would he get out of it? He’s the one who saved me from the Kochou. He gave me the sword and stuck Jyouyuu on me. It’s thanks to him that I’m still alive.”

The monkey simply cackled.

“If he really wanted me dead, he could have just left me alone back then,” Youko said.

“Maybe he set it up so that he could rescue you and win your trust.”

Youko bit her lip. “But as long as I have Jyouyuu, I won’t be killed so easily. He could just call Jyouyuu back if he wanted to kill me.”

“Maybe his goal isn’t to kill you.”

“Then what *is* his goal?”

“Don’t ask me. You’ll see for yourself eventually. The attacks aren’t letting up anytime soon.”

Youko glowered at the monkey’s grinning face, then walked faster, scowling all the while.

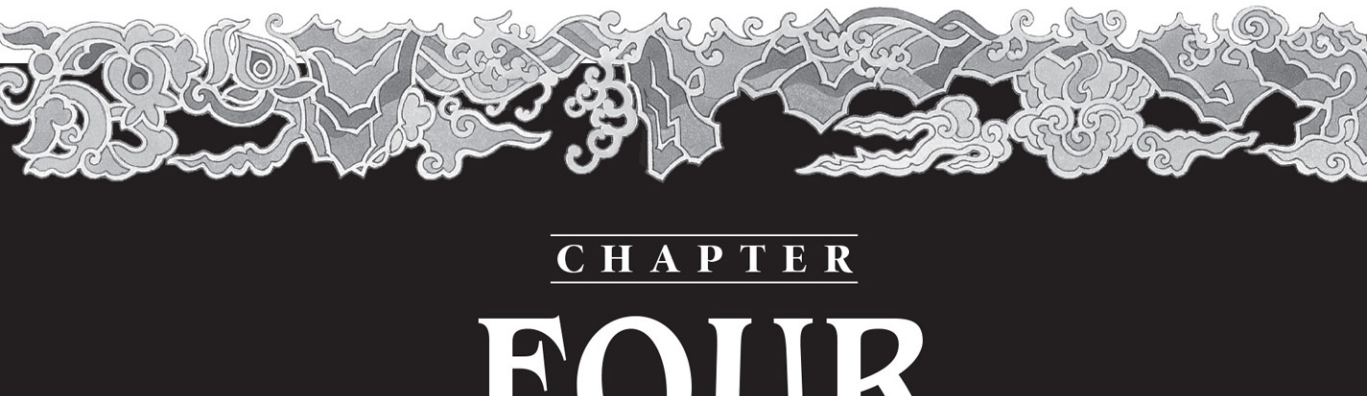
“You can never go back,” the voice trailed after her. “You can never return. You will die in this land.”

“I never asked for this.”

“That makes it simple, doesn’t it? If it’s too painful, you can end it in an instant.”

“Shut your face!”

Youko’s shout was swallowed by the night.



CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter Four

1

WITH ONLY THE BLUE MONKEY FOR COMPANY, Youko wandered aimlessly down the highway for two entire days. Her only goal was to get as far away from Hairou and Kasai as possible.

Every town employed strict security, and the gatekeepers were highly vigilant about inspecting travelers. She figured word had gotten out about an escaped Kaikyaku being in Kasai. Very few travelers visited the small towns, making it impossible for Youko to slip in with a crowd.

Left with no other choice, she camped outside along the highway. On the third day, she came upon an even bigger town than Kasai. This one was practically a fortress, enclosed in tall and impenetrable-looking walls. The frame on the gate said that this was Takkyuu Castle. Youko understood that this was where the governor's ward was.

Every town was covered in rice fields immediately outside its walls, but the area around Takkyuu looked more like an outdoor market. Tents stood outside the gates, all filled with things to sell. The roads around the walls bustled with buyers and sellers.

There were all sorts of wares inside the spartan tents. Walking through the hustle and bustle in front of the gates, Youko spotted a tent piled with clothes. She bought some used men's clothing on impulse—a young woman journeying alone was bound to attract trouble. Although Jyouyuu made it easy enough to escape, she would much rather avoid getting caught in any sticky situations before they even arose.

Youko bought an outfit made of thick, canvas-like material. It consisted of a sleeveless, knee-length jacket and a pair of short trousers. Although the outfit was mostly associated with male farmers, plenty of poor women and female refugees from Kei wore them too.

Youko left town and changed her clothes in the shade, away from human eyes. In just half a month, her body had lost much of its curves, and she no longer felt that weird about wearing men's clothing. She had

mixed feelings about losing so much fat; although her limbs were thin, there was evident muscle now, no doubt due to all the strenuous activity she'd been through. There was something ironic about that, given how sensitive she once was about her weight. She even made herself sick from unsuccessful diets before.

A sudden flash of blue came to mind—the color of navy jeans. Youko had always wanted to wear jeans. Back in elementary school, she participated in a long-distance athletics race where the boys and girls competed against each other. Since she couldn't run in a skirt, she begged her mother for jeans, but her father was furious when he saw them.

"I don't approve of girls wearing tomboyish clothes."

"But everyone's wearing jeans."

"It's unbecoming for a girl to dress or speak like a boy. I forbid it."

"But it's a race. I'll lose if I compete in a skirt."

"Girls don't have to win against boys."

Youko wanted to retort, but her mother stopped her. Her mother bowed her head deeply to her father.

"I'm very sorry. Youko, you should apologize to your father as well."

They returned the jeans to the store, just as her father told them to.

"I don't wanna return them."

"Youko, you don't always get everything you want in life."

"Why do I have to apologize to Dad? I didn't do anything wrong."

"You'll understand one day when you get married. It's for the best…"

A smile flickered on Youko's face at the recollection.

Her father would certainly be horrified if he saw her now—wearing men's clothes, swinging a sword around, and sleeping outdoors instead of at an inn. He'd no doubt blow a gasket.

It was best for girls to act modestly and be pretty. They were supposed to follow the rules. There was no such thing as being *too* meek. Girls did not need to be clever or strong.

Youko herself had always thought the same.

“But that can’t be right…”

Should she have stayed put and allowed herself to be captured? Should she have let Takki sell her to a brothel?

Her hand clenched around the sword in its wrappings. If only she possessed a bit more self-respect back then with Keiki, she would not have let him push her around so much. She should have at least asked him for the bare minimum amount of information, like where they were going, what kind of place this was, and when she would return. If she had just done that, at least, she would not be so lost now.

She needed to be strong to survive. She would not last unless she stretched her brain and body to their limits.

I will survive.

She would live to see the day she returned home. It was the one wish she allowed herself.

She was able to sell the outfit she had been wearing and Takki’s clothes at a used clothing store for a bit of cash. Clenching the money, she slipped into the crowd and went through the gate. The first thing she did was head to the other end of the street. She wanted to get as far away from the gate as she could, and she knew from Takki that the inns were cheaper at the far end.

“What’ll it be, sonny?” someone asked when she entered an inn, which brought a faint smile to her face. Most inns doubled as restaurants; it was common for the employees to inquire about one’s order upon entering the door.

Youko glanced around the establishment. She could tell how good the lodgings would be based on how the restaurant looked. This place wasn’t good, but it didn’t seem terrible either.

“Can I stay a night here?” she asked politely.

The innkeeper looked at her in suspicion. “You on your own, boy?” Then, when Youko simply nodded, he said, “One hundred sen. You got enough?”

She silently showed him her wallet. It was normal to pay after the fact.

This world used coins as currency. They came in multiple shapes and sizes, from round to square ones (which were worth more). The currency was called “sen”—much like in historical Japan—and the denomination was inscribed on the coins. Apparently, there were gold and silver coins in circulation, and Youko never saw any paper bills around.

“You need anything?” asked the man, to which Youko shook her head.

Free amenities at inns mainly just amounted to complimentary use of the water well. She knew from her travels with Takki that it cost money to run a bath or have tea, so she paid for her meal up front at the counter.

The man nodded curtly before calling out to the back of the inn, “Hey, we got someone staying the night. Show ’em around.”

On cue, an elderly man emerged and bowed. He jerked his head down the hallway without so much as smiling at Youko. Relieved that she managed to secure a room for herself, she followed.

2

THE OLD MAN ASCENDED THE STAIRS IN THE back and went up to the fourth floor. The buildings in towns were mostly wooden and three stories tall. This inn appeared to have four floors, and the ceilings were rather low to make up for that. Youko could touch it just by raising her arms very slightly. A large woman like Takki would need to stoop.

Her room was small, only about two tatami mats wide. The floor consisted of planks, and instead of a bed, there was a shelf at the back packed with thin futons. Because the shelf hung from the ceiling, Youko had to bend over, even when she was on her knees. Lying down sideways took up the entire room’s width.

The inns she stayed in with Takki were neat and trim, with tall ceilings and even a bed and table. Apparently, those cost five hundred sen per night for two. But even an inn of this shabby quality had doors that

could be locked on the inside, probably to maintain some semblance of law and order.

The old man handed her the key and was about to walk off when she called out to him. “Excuse me, where is the well?”

The moment she spoke, the man snapped his head back, eyes wide as saucers. For a moment, he stared straight at her.

“Um…”

Assuming that the elderly man had not heard her, Youko repeated her question.

His eyes still wide, he said, “That’s Japanese…”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he trotted back down the hallway toward her.

“Perchance…did you come from Japan?”

Youko was speechless.

Before she could muster a response, the old man grabbed her by the arms. “Are you a Kaikyaku? When did you come here? From whence did you come? Pray, speak again.”

Youko merely looked at the man’s face, wide-eyed.

“I beg of you, say something. It has been forty years since I last heard Japanese.”

“Um…”

“I, too, once hailed from Japan. Now please, speak to me in Japanese.”

The eyes in the man’s wrinkled face grew mistier by the second. Youko wanted to tear up as well. What a miraculous coincidence to find another lost soul from the other side, nestled away in a big city.

“Are you a Kaikyaku as well, sir?”

The old man nodded over and over again, as if he could not do it enough times. He seemed lost for words. His knobby fingers grasped her hand like a vise. The sheer time span of his loneliness was evident from the strength of his grip. She squeezed his hands back.

“Tea,” the man mumbled finally, his voice trembling.

Youko cocked her head. “What about tea?”

“Have you any desire for tea? I have a smidgeon of green tea. Would you…care to have some?”

For a moment, Youko struggled to respond. “Thank you very much,” she said.

A short while later, the old man returned with two cups of tea. When he showed up in the room, his sunken eyes were bright red.

“It’s not very good tea,” he said hesitantly.

“I really appreciate it.”

The crisp scent of green tea reminded her of home. As he watched Youko bring the cup gently to her mouth, the old man sat down on the floor in front of her.

“I was so overjoyed that I feigned sickness to avoid work… Now then, sonny boy—or are you a young miss? What is your name?”

“Youko Nakajima,” Youko said falteringly.

The man’s eyes blinked in comprehension. “I’m Seizou Matsu-yama… Young Miss, does my Japanese sound strange to your ears?”

Youko nodded, inwardly feeling puzzled. The man had an accent, but she could more or less understand him.

“I see.” The old man smiled in genuine happiness, crying tears of joy. “Where were you born?”

“Where was I born? Tokyo,” Youko answered.

Seizou’s hand clenched his teacup. “Tokyo? So it’s still around. Huh.”

“What do you mean?” Youko asked.

Instead of answering her question, the man wiped his cheeks with his sleeves. “I was born in Kochi. I was in Kure when I came to this side.”

“Kure?”

“Kure in Hiroshima,” the man said. “Do you know of it?”

Youko cocked her head as she tried to recall her classes on historical geography. “It rings a bell,” she said after a pause.

The old man responded with a grim smile. "'Twas a military port, complete with an arms factory. I worked at the harbor."

"You moved from Kochi to Hiroshima?"

"Indeed. My mother's family lived in Kure. When my house burned down from the air raids at the start of July, my maternal uncle took me in. One cannot expect to eat if they don't make themselves useful, so I went out to work, but then the air raid happened. Nearly all the ships at port sank. I fell into the sea during all the chaos."

Youko knew he was talking about World War II.

The old man paused for a moment and then continued. "Before I knew it, I was in the Kyokai. People found me while I was drifting in the sea."

The man pronounced "Kyokai" slightly differently than she did. It sounded closer to "Kokai" than "Kyokai."

"Is that…so?"

"There were many air raids even before then, and the arms factory was barely functioning. The port was in the same situation; there were ships, but none were seaworthy. Not that any ships could pass through—the naval mines across the Seto Sea and Suounada blocked their path."

Youko simply hummed to show that she was listening.

"In March, a major air raid scorched Tokyo to the ground. Then they hit Osaka in June. After we lost Luzon and Okinawa, I felt like we had no hope of winning… Did we lose?"

Youko hesitated and then said, "Yes."

The old man let out a heavy sigh. "Figures… I always had a feeling."

Youko did not really understand. Both her parents were born after the war, and she did not live near her grandparents, who could talk about their experiences. It all seemed like ancient history to her, a world she only knew about from textbooks, movies, and television.

Yet the world the old man described was not nearly as alien as their current world. As difficult as it was to picture the things he described, it warmed her heart to hear such familiar names and history.

“So, Tokyo is still around. I suppose it must be occupied by the Americans now?”

“Not at all.”

Youko’s eyes widened. So did the old man’s.

“Oh, I see.” He seemed to think about it. “By the way, Young Miss, what happened to your eyes?”

Youko was momentarily confused, but then she remembered that her eyes had turned green.

“It’s a long story,” she said reluctantly.

The man dropped his gaze and shook his head. “Not to worry. I do not mind if you cannot tell me. I merely assumed your appearance was because Japan became an American colony. If that is not the case, I am not curious as to the reason.”

The old man must surely have sought closure about his former land’s fate the whole time he lived beneath another world’s sky. Youko was similar in how she was ignorant of what was happening in her home country, but the passage of time alone meant that the old man’s feelings were undoubtedly heavier than hers.

Just the experience of being thrown into a world like this had to be a trial of its own, but the fact that the old man had spent over forty years brooding over the fate of his country caused a stab in Youko’s heart.

“Is His Imperial Majesty in good health?” he asked after some silence.

“Do you mean the Showa Emperor? Well, he was…fine. I mean, he did di—” She was about to say that he was already dead, but she hurriedly chose more delicate phrasing. “He passed away.”

The old man looked up with a start, then lowered his head deeply and pressed his sleeves against his eyes. After some hesitation, Youko gently patted his hunched back. The old man showed no aversion to the contact, so she kept stroking his bony back until his sobs subsided.

EVENTUALLY, THE OLD MAN SPOKE. “MY APOLOGIES. My eyes have been getting leakier with age.”

Youko shook her head silently.

After a pause, the old man said, “So…what year?”

“Huh?” Youko asked back.

The old man looked back at her, his expression inscrutable. “When did the Greater East Asian War end?”

“I think…it was 1945…”

“What year of the Showa era was that?”

“Let’s see…” Youko took a while to mentally dig up the Japanese calendar she memorized for her high school entrance exams. “I think it was Showa 20.”

“Showa 20?” The old man stared at her. “I came here in Year 20. When was it in Year 20?”

“August…15th.”

The old man clenched his fist. “August? The 15th of August in Showa 20?”

“Yes…”

“I fell into the sea on July 28th.” He looked huffily at Youko. “It was just half a month away!”

Youko simply looked down at her feet. She could not think of a word to say. She stood there in silence as the old man tearfully recounted the sacrifices made in the name of war.

As midnight approached, the old man began to ask Youko about herself, her family, and where she lived. It hit her that this man was separated from his home long before she was ever born. She wondered if she would end up like him, living an entire life across the boundary, never to return home. Perhaps it was a good thing that they crossed paths, if only because of their shared plight as Kaikyaku. When she considered how long the old man must have been alone, she supposed that their meeting truly was a blessing.

“I wonder what I did to deserve this.” As the old man sat cross-legged, he rested his elbows against his knees and held his head in his hands. “I lost my friends and family when I came to this strange place. I resigned myself to dying in the air raids, only for it all to end in half a month. Just half a month.”

Youko simply watched him in silence.

“My fortune would have improved if only I saw the end of the war. But instead, I found myself here, not knowing a life of joy with a full belly.”

“Yeah…”

“Perhaps I should have died in that air raid. That way, I would never have arrived in this forsaken land, ignorant of its geography or language…”

Youko’s eyes turned wide.

“You…don’t know the language?”

“Not at all. Even now, I speak it brokenly. It’s why I can only work jobs like this,” he said before eyeing Youko quizzically. “Do you know the language, Young Miss?”

“Well, yes…” Youko stared at the old man. “I assumed it was Japanese.”

“Absolutely not.” He looked stunned. “It’s nothing like Japanese. This is the first time I’ve heard Japanese spoken save for when I talk to myself. I have no idea what language they speak here. It sounds somewhat similar to a Chinese dialect, but it’s not.”

“But they use kanji, don’t they?”

“They do, but the language they speak is not Chinese. I knew some Chinese people at the port, and this is not what they spoke.”

“That…can’t be right.” Youko stared at the man in confusion. “I’ve never encountered any language barriers here. And I don’t know any languages besides Japanese.”

“You can understand what they say in the inn?”

“I can, yes.”

The old man shook his head. “Even so, what you are hearing is not Japanese. Nobody speaks Japanese here.”

What was going on? Youko's confusion intensified. She was certain she'd heard Japanese in this world. But the old man was saying it *wasn't* Japanese—even though she detected no difference between the language she'd been hearing this entire time and what the old man spoke.

"This is the Kingdom of Kou," she said. "It's written with the characters for 'clever' and 'country.'"

"Indeed."

"We are Kaikyaku, and we came from the Kyokai."

"Yes."

"There is a governor's ward in this town."

"A governor's ward? What are you referring to? The castle? The county?"

"It's like a prefectural office."

"A prefectural office," the old man repeated her.

"And there's a prefectural governor."

"There's no prefectural governor here. The most important person in the prefecture is the Kensei."

"No way," Youko muttered to herself. "I've been hearing it as 'prefectural governor' this entire time."

"That doesn't exist here."

"People spend the winters in villages, and when spring comes, they go back to their hamlets," Youko continued.

"Their winter homes are in ri. Their spring homes are called ro."

"But I…"

The old man glared at Youko. "Just who are you?!"

"I…"

"You and I are not the same. I am all alone in this foreign land. I went from war-torn Japan to a place where I do not understand the language or customs. I have reached this ripe old age without ever having a wife or children. I've been alone in the truest sense of the word."

How did this happen? Youko desperately searched for a reason, but however much she racked her brain, nothing she'd seen or heard could possibly begin to explain it.

"I started at rock bottom and only went lower," the old man went on. "Why are you, a child who has never experienced a day of hardship thanks to *our* sacrifices in the war, allowed to have such an easy time in *this* world too?"

"I don't know!" Youko screamed.

At that moment, a voice called out to them from the other side of the door. "Is something the matter, Miss?"

The old man hurriedly put a finger to his lips.

Youko looked toward the door. "Sorry, it's nothing."

"Is that so? Remember that you're not the only one staying here."

"I'll try to be quieter."

As the sound of footsteps receded into the distance, Youko let out a light sigh. The old man stared at her with a frown. "Did you understand that just now?"

Realizing he was talking about the language, she nodded. "I did," she said after some hesitation.

"That was the language of this land."

"What language…was I speaking?"

"It sounded Japanese to me," the man said.

"But I had no problems communicating."

"Indeed."

Youko had only spoken one language this entire time, and she only heard one language as well. What explained this phenomenon?

The old man's face softened. "You're no Kaikyaku. Or at least, you're no ordinary Kaikyaku."

The way he pronounced "Kaikyaku" not only had a different intonation but also sounded slightly different to Youko's ears.

Silence stretched between them for a moment.

"How do you know the language?" asked the old man.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, you say?”

“I really don’t. I can’t explain why I came here, or why you and I are different.”

Or why my appearance changed, she silently added as she touched her stiff, colored hair.

The conversation fell into another lull. “Do you know how to get back?” Youko asked, breaking the silence.

“I’ve been searching for a way out. The short answer is…no. There is no way back,” the man said with a dry laugh. “I would have returned long ago were it possible. Then again, even if I were to make it back, I’d be an Urashima Taro.”

He fell into a morose silence.

“Young Miss,” he said, looking at her, “where are you going?”

“I don’t have a destination in mind.” Youko paused. “Can I ask you just one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Did you manage to evade capture this whole time?”

“Evade capture?” Seizou’s eyes widened, and then a look of realization dawned on him. “Oh, right. They apprehend Kaikyaku in this country. No, that did not happen to me. I washed up in the Kingdom of Kei, you see.”

Youko blinked. “Really?”

“Different kingdoms treat Kaikyaku differently, I hear. I received citizenship when I arrived in Kei. I was in Kei until last year, when the kingdom fell apart after the king’s demise. I came here looking for somewhere to live.”

Youko recalled the refugees she saw in town. “So if I were in Kei, I wouldn’t have to run?”

Seizou nodded. “That is the short of it, although I can’t recommend living there right now. The country is in a terrible state due to the ongoing civil war. The hamlet I lived in was attacked by youma. Half the people there died.”

“Youma? Not a civil uprising?”

“The youma appear when a country falls into disarray. And not just the youma—daytime floods, landslides. ’Tis a flood of misfortunes. I ran away because of it.”

Youko lowered her eyes. In Kei, she wouldn’t be hunted. Would it be safer for her to keep running around Kou or to venture to Kei?

“The women ran away first,” Seizou went on, interrupting her thoughts. “The monarch drove them out of the country. Goodness knows what the ruler was thinking.”

“Really?”

“’Tis true. I heard that the remaining women were killed in the capital at dawn. It always was a rotten country, and so many took that as their cue to escape. I urge you to stay away. It is a hive of demons now. Many have escaped in the past, but there are remarkably fewer making it across the border these days. I suspect the worst.”

“I…see,” Youko muttered.

Seizou flashed her a self-deprecating smile. “I had to ask you about Japan, yet I can still tell you all about this side… I’ve totally assimilated, it seems.”

“Oh, don’t say that.”

Seizou smiled and raised a hand. “Kou is leagues better as a country than Kei. Though that might not be the case for a Kaikyaku on the run.”

“Sir, I…”

Seizou smiled, teary-eyed. “I know. It’s not your fault, Young Miss. I know that, but it just hurts. I’m sorry for lashing out at you. I know you have it worse than me, living life on the run and all.”

Youko simply shook her head.

“I must return to work. Breakfast needs making, you see.” He paused. “Take care on the road.”

That was all he said before he slinked outside.

Youko was about to stop Seizou but then thought better of it. “Good night,” was all she said.

YOUKO PULLED OUT A THIN FUTON FROM THE SHELF. As she lay down on it, a sigh escaped her mouth. Even though it was her first time sleeping on a futon in a very long time, she was wide awake. She knew it must be because of everything on her mind.

Why had she never encountered language issues? She would have been totally lost if she could not understand the people here. Yet she could not fathom *why* there was mutual communication if they were not speaking Japanese. Just what language had Youko been speaking when she conversed with the person outside the door? To the old man, it sounded like Japanese, and to other people, it sounded like the local language…

When the old man used keywords particular to this world, his pronunciation changed slightly. That was peculiar in and of itself, to say nothing of the fact that he claimed the words "prefectural governor" did not exist in the other language. So, what exactly were the words Youko was initially mishearing as "governor's ward" and "prefectural governor"?

She stared at the low ceiling.

Our words are being translated.

Through some means or another, the words were being translated into their easiest equivalent so that she could understand.

"Jyouyuu? Is this your doing?" she murmured at her back.

As usual, there was no response.

Youko slept with the sword clutched against her chest as always. When she awoke, her other possessions in the corner of the room were gone.

She sprang to her feet and hurriedly checked the door. It was locked.

She caught hold of the inn's employees and told them about what happened. They checked the door and the inside of the room with evident skepticism before turning to Youko with hostile gazes.

“Were those bags of yours really there?”

“They were. My wallet was inside. Someone must have stolen it,” Youko said.

“But the door was locked.”

“Are there spare keys?” Youko asked.

The mens’ gazes turned even darker.

“Are you trying to say that one of us stole your things?” one of them demanded.

“Was this your plan to begin with?” said another. “Pretend there was a problem with us and skip out without paying?”

The men closed in on Youko. She furtively gripped the sword.

“No,” she insisted.

“Before we do anything else, you gotta pay up.”

“I said my wallet was stolen.”

“You’ll change your story at the ward office, I’m sure.”

“Wait a moment.” Youko loosened the cloth. A sudden thought came to mind. “Could you call over the old man from yesterday?” She wanted to ask him to put in a good word for her.

“The old man, you say?”

“He came from Kei. His name’s Matsuyama.”

The men exchanged glances. “What about him?”

“Call him. He’s seen my things.”

One of the men stood imposingly by the door and thrust his chin at a young man behind him. The young man ran off down the hallway.

“What’s that thing in your left hand?” asked the man by the door.

“Not money.”

“Let me check it.”

“Do it after the old man comes,” Youko said flatly.

The man eyed her skeptically. Before long, she heard the sound of rushing footsteps, signaling the young man’s return.

“He’s not here,” the young man said.

“He’s gone?”

“No bags either. The old fart skipped town.”

The man by the door clicked his tongue. Youko gritted her teeth at the sound of it.

Him.

The old man stole it all.

Youko closed her eyes. So even a fellow Kaikyaku would betray her. Was he unable to stand how she grew up in the bountiful postwar era? Was he jealous that she could understand the language? Or maybe he planned on stealing from her from the start.

She thought she had found a kindred spirit. She was convinced that the old man felt the same. After Takki tricked her, she was unable to bring herself to trust the people of this country. Yet even Seizou, a fellow Kaikyaku, took advantage of her.

A bitter sensation surged within her. Her anger evoked the image of the raging sea. Every time she grew angry, it felt as if she were transforming into a beast.

Youko let the wave sweep her. “He stole my things,” she spat.

“He’s a drifter,” said the young man. “I’m guessing he didn’t like this place.”

“Quit nitpicking and hand that thing over,” said the man at the door. “Let’s see if there’s money in it.”

Youko gripped the hilt. “I’m the victim here.”

“And we’re a business. We can’t just let you stay for free.”

“But the management’s at fault.”

“Shut up and hand that thing over.”

When the man attempted to close the distance between them, Youko pulled off the cloth and readied herself. Light peeked through a small window, casting a shine on the blade.

“Y-you bitch!”

“Get out of my way. I already told you that I’m not at fault.”

The young man yelped and ran off, leaving the sole remaining man to stumble back in confusion.

“Out of my way,” Youko repeated herself. “If you want money, go after the old man.”

The man finally found his voice. “This was your plan all along.”

“How many times must I correct you? Go find the old man and get the fee out of *my* bags.”

She brandished the sword, prompting the man to retreat. When she took three more steps forward, still pointing the sword, the man fell over himself and ran.

Anticipating what would happen next, Youko broke out into a sprint herself. The young man must have called for help, because several others came running after her. She scared them off with the sword and burst out of the inn. Then she ran away, blending in with the hustle and bustle on the street.

She felt a terrible ache in her arm where the old man had so earnestly gripped her. It was a painful reminder to never trust a person again.

5

YOUKO’S DAYS OF SLEEPING OUTDOORS BEGAN anew. Although her travels along the highway took her to the next town, she didn’t have any money, and even if she did stay the night at an inn, she wouldn’t be able to eat. Perhaps she could have slipped into the gates like a refugee and slept inside the city walls, but there were always sentries on duty, and she could not stand to mingle with most people.

She had no allies here. Nobody would rescue her. This world would not grant her a single moment of respite.

Thinking of how she had been fooled and betrayed, Youko found she vastly preferred a life out in the fields, cutting down the youma that came her way.

Her new clothing meant she was no longer seen as a woman, though on the flip side, it meant that she was often mistaken for a younger child. Law enforcement here was terrible. After multiple experiences of

being surrounded by hostile strangers, she no longer felt any hesitation about threatening people with the sword.

Day and night, she walked. During the day, she kept her guard up around the people she passed, and in the night, she fought youma. If she slept at night, she risked being ambushed by the youma, so she walked as much as she could through the darkness and found places to sleep during the day.

Some of the houses in the hamlets along the road sold food, but this was only during the daytime, and Youko had no money anyway. Naturally, she went without eating. Unable to withstand her starvation, she tried swallowing her revulsion and looked for a job, but with the massive influx of refugees in town, there was nothing for her. The fact that she looked to all the world like a frail child meant that nobody in their right mind would even consider hiring her.

Youma appeared every night, but the fact that they occasionally showed up in the daytime as well caused Youko no end of grief. She had to keep toiling on, never spared from her exhaustion and hunger for even a single moment.

Yet this was nothing compared to the anguish she felt from the sword's visions and the blue monkey.

It was hell seeing her mother cry. The monkey continued to egg her into suicide. Despite it all, she caved to her desire to see her mother's face and the place where she once lived. And a part of her still wanted to talk to someone—anyone.

The sword always showed her the visions at night, which was when Youko pined most for home. She had no way of knowing whether the time of day triggered the sword's mysterious power, or if it had something to do with the sword itself.

The nights when the youma attacked incessantly, distracting her from thoughts of her homeland, were physically draining, but the nights with some small reprieves were mentally draining. Despite knowing she could just ignore the sword when it started shining, she could never find the fortitude to do so.

One night, just like the others, Youko gazed at the sword as it began to glow. She had escaped from the youma into the mountains, her back resting against a white tree.

She occasionally saw these trees deep in the mountains, but they were nothing like the trees she knew. The bark was almost pure white, and though the branches spanned the length of a single small house widthwise, they were not tall at all. Even the tallest branch was barely two meters off the ground by her reckoning. The branches without leaves drooped low enough to hit the ground. While thin, they were extremely durable, and Youko could not cut them even with the sword. It made her think that the tree was made almost entirely out of some kind of white metal. Yellow fruit grew from the tree, but she couldn't pick them off—it was as though they were glued to the branches.

Youko was fond of these trees. The white branches were beautifully bright even at night, and the moon accentuated their sheen. Although they hung low, there was room for her to sit if she parted them to the side. For whatever reason, the youma attacks were infrequent whenever she sat there, and she did not have much to fear from wild beasts either. This made the white trees ideal resting spots.

She nestled herself against one such tree as she peered at the sword. It had been over ten days since she encountered the old Kaikyaku at Takkyuu.

The sword glowed dimly, causing the nearby branches to shine white and the fruit to reflect a yellow light.

Youko expected to see her mother as usual. This time, however, multiple figures came into view—a crowd of people in black clothes, all of them young girls. They were in a spacious room with rows of desks.

She was peering into a classroom.

Girls in uniform hung out at the scene. It appeared to be lunch break, which Youko rarely stayed in the classroom for. The girls had immaculately straightened hair, ironed clothes, and spotless skin. It was such a world of difference from her own appearance that she could not help but crack a smile in self-deprecation.

"I heard Nakajima ran away from home," came the familiar voice of a friend.

The sound of lively chatter streamed into Youko's ears.

"She ran away? You're kidding!"

“It’s true! Nakajima skipped school yesterday, remember? I heard that’s when she ran off. I was shocked when her mom called me last night.”

This must have happened a while ago, Youko thought.

“Wow!”

“Who would have thought the class rep had it in her?”

“Guess you never know what those straitlaced types are doing while people aren’t looking.”

“So true.”

Youko had to laugh. Their theories could not be more different from reality.

“Y’know, I heard this weird guy came to pick her up at school. Apparently, he looked pretty shady.”

“A guy? Oooh!”

“Did she, like, elope with him?”

“I bet. Remember how all the glass in the staff room broke? That was all Nakajima’s guy.”

“Seriously?”

“Hey, what kind of guy was he?”

“I dunno the deets, but I heard he had long hair. And it was dyed, apparently. Oh, and he was wearing some loose, weird-looking clothes.”

“Was Nakajima secretly a rebel?”

“Looks like it.”

Keiki…

Like a ghostly spirit, Youko sat frozen to the spot as she watched the bustling scene play out.

“I called it. I always thought she was dyeing her hair.”

“Wasn’t she always saying it was natural?”

“That was a lie, duh. No one’s born with hair *that* color.”

“But I heard she left her bag and coat in the classroom.”

“Really? What’s up with that?”

“Morizuka found her stuff yesterday morning.”

“It’s ’cuz she eloped for real, right? Like, she and the guy were a thing…or something.”

“Don’t be stupid. I mean, doesn’t that sound less like she ran away from home and more like she was kidnapped?”

“Yikes…”

“There are posters up in front of the station.”

“Her mom’s been putting up posters and billboards around town.”

“Something like, ‘Please find my daughter,’ right?”

“Wow, you guys are being really shitty right now.”

“I mean, it’s got nothing to do with us.”

“Yeah, she ran away from home. Obviously.”

“For sure. Even model students like her can go off the deep end.”

“She totally ran off with that guy. She might act all goody-two-shoes, but you never know what those types do when they’re overcome by love.”

“Jeez, you’re cold. Weren’t you guys good friends with Nakajima?”

“I mean, we talked, if that’s what you’re saying. But if I gotta be honest, I didn’t really like her that much.”

“I know what you mean. She was kind of a teacher’s pet.”

“Yeah.”

“She always went on about her strict parents. What was she, an heiress or something?”

“You said it. But hey, it was nice of her to let us copy her homework.”

“Oh, for sure. I haven’t even touched my math homework, to be honest.”

“Yeah, same here.”

“Hey, has anyone done it?”

“No one’s as good with homework as Nakajima.”

“Youko-chaaan, come home!”

The girls tittered with laughter. All of a sudden, the peaceful scene turned hazy in Youko's vision. Seconds later, it bent and warped out of shape. With a single blink, Youko cleared away the tears in her eyes, but by then, the sword's light had already dimmed.

6

YOUKO LOWERED THE SWORD. HER HAND FELT terribly heavy.

She always had an inkling that none of the people she called friends were truly friends to her. They had merely brushed shoulders during a short period of their lives in which they were trapped in the same cage. They would forget each other once they went up a grade and split off into different classes, and they would never see each other after graduation. In all likelihood, that was all they were to each other.

The tears welled up regardless. Yes, some part of her always knew that her friendships were superficial, but another part hoped that a shred of genuine connection lay hidden beneath it all.

If only she could jump into the classroom and explain her situation. She wondered how the girls would react. Surely even they, who lived in a distant, peaceful world, would be mortified at the very thought—just like she was, once upon a time.

Hilarious, she thought as she rested her head against the ground and curled up into a ball. She was alone after being betrayed by everyone and everything in this world, and now here she was, all hunched up by herself—the very picture of utter solitude.

Whenever she felt glum after arguing with her parents or upsetting her friends, she always muttered to herself about how she was all alone. That seemed so silly now. Back then, she at least had a home to return to. There were people around who were not her enemies, and she had things to cheer her up. Even if she were to lose them all, she could always make new friends, superficial as they were.

At that moment, an unpleasant sound rang out, one that Youko could never get used to no matter how often she heard it. She scowled.

"I told you that you can never return," the monkey taunted her.

“Shut up.”

“Go on, give it a try if you think you can pull it off. Nobody will be waiting for you when you get back. I can’t say I’m surprised. You are a worthless person who never does anything for herself.”

There seemed to be some kind of relationship between the monkey and the sword’s visions. It always appeared before or after the sword glowed. It did not do anything in particular to hinder her; it merely uttered unpleasant barbs in that obnoxious tone of voice. It was probably why Jyouyuu never reacted.

Youko retorted, “I have my mother.”

She pictured a scene the sword had shown her on multiple occasions—her mother weeping as she stroked her plush toys. Even if her classmates were not real friends, her mother, at least, had always been on her side. Her heart ached from missing her so much.

“My mother was crying. I need to return.”

The monkey’s laugh sounded even shriller than usual. “Yes, because she’s a mother. Of course she’s sad about losing a child.”

“What are you talking about?”

When Youko lifted her face, the blue monkey’s shining head was right there within arm’s reach on the short grass.

“She’s not sad because *you* disappeared. She’s sad because she lost a child and feels sorry for herself. You don’t see it?”

It was a shock to her system. Youko could not muster a response.

“It’s not about you. A mother would be sad about losing even the worst child. That’s how biology works.”

“Shut your mouth.”

“Why the scary face? I’m just telling it like it is.” The monkey burst into ear-piercing cackles. “You’re just like a little pet. Anyone would feel attached to something they’ve raised over a long time. Right?”

“Shut up!*”* Youko sat up, brandishing the sword.

“Oooh, scary.” The monkey kept on laughing. “You miss your parents? Even though they don’t miss you?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“You know it already. You just want to return home. You don’t necessarily want to see your parents. You want a warm house and people to back you up.”

“What?”

The monkey cackled. “You’re not worried about your parents betraying you? Are you sure that’s wise? You’re just a pet to them, you know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re no different than a dog or cat. It’s all well and good when you sit there quietly looking cute, but it all ends once you bite your owners’ hands or trash their house. They won’t hit you for the sake of appearances, of course, but there *are* parents out there who would strangle their children to death if not for the social stigma. I guarantee it.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“You think it’s ridiculous, eh?” The monkey winked mischievously. “People like themselves when they’re fawning over children. That *is* a ridiculous thought, isn’t it? Oh, how parents love to act as if they care about their children.”

The cackling pierced Youko’s ears. “Why you little…”

“But you’re complicit, yes?”

Youko stopped her hand on the hilt.

“You enjoyed acting like the good child. Did you obey everything your parents told you to do because you thought they were correct? Or did you want to appease your owners because you sensed that they would hit you if you rebelled?”

Youko reflexively bit her lip. She had never worried about being struck, but she *had* been concerned about whether her parents would yell at her, or refuse to buy her the things she wanted, or whether the mood in the house would become awkward. At some point, she had started studying her parents’ faces in case their whims changed. She was well aware of that.

“You’re not *actually* a good girl. Oh no you aren’t. You just pretend to go along with your parents because you’re afraid of abandonment. They’re not good parents either—they just go along with what society says because they’re afraid of what people might say otherwise. Liars will

backstab each other. That's guaranteed. You'll betray your parents, and they'll betray you. That's what all people are like. They lie to each other and stab each other in the back over and over and over."

For a moment, Youko was lost for words.

"You…monster."

The monkey's laughter reached a new fever pitch. "You've learned how to use that mouth. Why yes, I am a monster. But that's because I'm honest. I never lie. I'm the only one who will never betray you. Too bad I had to be the one to tell you that."

"Shut up!"

"You will never return home. You're better off dead. If you don't have the guts to die, you ought to choose a better way of living. Because, you see…" The monkey peered at the sword in Youko's hand. "I'll level with you. You have no friends, only enemies. Even Keiki is your enemy. Aren't you starving? Wouldn't you like to live comfortably? Use that thing—it's perfect for getting people to do what you want."

"I said be quiet!"

"You know every man and his dog only has dirty money. What's wrong with taking it from them? Do that, and I guarantee you'll have a better life."

Youko swung the sword down at the source of the screeching laughter, but the monkey's head had already disappeared. There was only the sound of its mocking laughter receding into the night.

She scratched the dirt. Her intuition told her that something fell between her now clawlike fingernails.

7

YOUKO WANDERED THE ROADS AIMLESSLY. SHE had lost track of how many days it had been since she left Takkyuu, or even how long it had been since she'd left home. She had no idea where she was or where she was headed; she had already lost interest in the question.

She gripped the sword and stood up whenever the sun went down. She fought the monsters that came her way. When the sun returned, she looked for a place to sleep. That was her entire life for days on end. It became her everyday routine to grip the jewel and use the sword as a walking stick. She sat down whenever the enemies retreated; she dragged her feet whenever she was in the clear. If there were no people around, she moaned on end instead of speaking.

Hunger melded with her body, becoming an indefatigable part of her. Starvation once drove her to carve up a youma's dead body, but it stank so abnormally that she could not even manage to get the slightest morsel in her mouth. Occasionally, she brought down wild beasts, but their bodies were already stiff by the time she chewed on them, making them impossible to digest.

After she survived yet another night, the dawn came. When Youko tried to step off the highway and into the mountain, she tripped over a tree root and tumbled diagonally across the ground. She ended up falling asleep right there in her undignified state. She did not even take stock of her surroundings before sleep claimed her.

A dreamless rest later, she woke to find she was unable to stand. She lay in a basin, surrounded by thin trees that cast their shadows around her. The sun was already setting, signaling the return of the night. If she remained immobile in this spot, she would be easy pickings for the youma. Although Jyouyuu could push her through one or two fights, her body would probably stop functioning soon after.

She dug her nails into the ground. She needed to at least get back on the highway and find someone to help her. If not, death was her only option here. Her hands fumbled for the jewel hanging from her neck, but no matter how desperately she clenched it, she could not manage to stand up—not even when she thrust the sword into the ground in lieu of a walking stick.

"Nobody's coming to help you."

She lifted her head at the sudden voice. It was her first time hearing it while the sun was still out.

"You'll finally find relief, I suppose."

Youko simply gazed at the monkey's grainy-looking fur. *Why's he showing up at this hour*? was the only hazy thought she could muster.

"Even if you were to crawl out into the highway, you'd just be captured. Although I suppose you would be saved in a certain sense. They might even choose a painless way of killing you."

True, Youko thought.

She felt compelled to seek help. And because she wished so deeply for someone else to aid her, she knew that it would never happen. Nobody would help her, even if she managed to get onto the highway. Even if someone happened to pass by, they would not spare her a second glance. They might even scowl at her dirty, haggard appearance. If not that, then they would probably rob her. They would approach her, and when they found nothing on her worth stealing, they would take the sword. Perhaps they would stab her with it to put her out of her misery.

I wouldn't expect anything better from the people of this country, she thought—and then something else occurred to her.

This monkey fed on her despair. Just like the Satori yokai, it could read her mind and verbalize her anxieties. It appeared before her in order to taunt her and crush her spirit.

Youko smiled thinly, happy to have solved one little mystery. This gave her enough strength to turn over to her side. With a great deal of effort, she sat up.

"Don't you think it's about time to give up?"

"Shut up."

"Don't you want to be at ease?"

"Quiet."

Youko stabbed the sword into the ground, using it to support her wobbly legs. With a cry, she clung to the hilt as she attempted to lift her body. Unfortunately, she lost her balance. Was she really that heavy? She felt like a newborn creature, capable only of crawling on the ground.

"You're that desperate to live, huh? What do you get out of living, eh?"

Youko said, "I'm going back."

"You'd put yourself through all this misery just for that?"

“I’m going back home.”

“You can never return. There’s no way of crossing the Kyokai. The people of this country will stab you in the back, and you will die here.”

“You’re wrong,” Youko said.

The sword was the only thing she could rely on here. Youko clenched her hand around the hilt. She had nothing else to protect her or cling to—just this sword.

This sword is my only hope, Youko thought. Keiki, who gave her the blade, did not say she could never return home. If she could just find him, perhaps she could discover a way out.

“Can you honestly say that Keiki isn’t an enemy?” the monkey continued.

She could not allow herself to think otherwise.

“Do you really think that he’ll come save you?”

But still…

Regardless of whether Keiki was a friend or foe, looking for him was more productive than wandering around without a lead. She had a mountain of questions to ask him: Why did he bring her to this world? Was there a way to return or not?

“And what would you do if you *did* manage to return? You think that would tie a nice little bow on your problems?”

“Shut up already.”

Youko knew. She knew that even if she did return, she would never be able to forget the nightmare that was this country. She could never go back to her old life, pretending that none of this ever happened—not to mention there was no guarantee she could get her old appearance back. Which meant that there might not even be a place for “Youko Nakajima” to return to.

“What a wretched thing you are. You never learn.”

As she listened to the monkey’s retreating cackles, Youko sat up again.

She could not explain her behavior either. She agreed that it was foolish and wretched. But still, if she were to give up, she might as well have done it long ago.

She knew her body was covered in gashes, blood, and grime. A foul stench wafted from her torn and ragged clothes whenever she moved. But after going to such desperate lengths to protect her life, she could not cast it aside so easily. If she really was better off dead, then she should have perished right at the beginning when the Kochou attacked her on the school roof.

It certainly wasn't as though she had *no* desire to die. Nor did she have a burning desire to live. She was simply being stubborn.

She would return. She swore she would return to the place she called home. As for what awaited her there, she would cross that bridge when she came to it. She would protect her own life because it was a necessary component in her goal of returning. She did not want to die in this forsaken place.

She stood up, clinging to the sword. She thrust it diagonally up the scrub-covered slope and began climbing. Although it was a short and gentle slope as far as things went, she had never encountered such difficulty in ascending. Coaxing herself whenever her feet slipped and her spirits flagged, she aimed for the top. After much ordeal, her hand finally reached out onto the road.

She buried her claws into the slope and crawled onto the road, grunting all the while. When at last she reached level ground, she collapsed on the spot—and that was when she heard a faint sound.

A bitter smile formed on Youko's face when she heard the voice from the mountain path.

They're good at this.

Every inch of this world hated Youko, it seemed.

The encroaching voice sounded uncannily like a crying baby.

8

A PACK OF BLACK DOGS CAME HURTLING TOWARD Youko, the same type of beast that attacked her on the mountain path all that time ago.

The sword felt like lead in her hands. By the time she felled most of the dogs, her entire body was covered in blood. She cut down one more dog, only for her knees to give out beneath her. A deep bite wound bled on her left calf. Her sense of pain was dulled, but everything below her ankles felt slow to respond.

She looked at her red-stained leg, then scanned the mountain road for any remaining foes. One dog was left. The last survivor was distinctly larger than its fallen companions. This youma was clearly tougher to boot, given that it did not seem even slightly cowed by the long sword.

As she watched the beast crouch low, Youko readjusted her grip. The sword felt so heavy that merely lifting the tip was a struggle. Stars swam in her vision, and her consciousness grew dim.

She swung the sword at the beast as it jumped, holding the hilt as if striking with the blade rather than slashing. At this point, she was relying entirely on Jyouyuu's strength; all she could do was perform the motions of swinging the sword around.

The sword struck true, and the black figure in her vision fell to the ground—only to immediately spring back up and resume its attack. When it bared its fangs, she wasted no time in thrusting the sword in front of her. The tip managed to cut the beast's face, but the creature's keen claws sliced into Youko's shoulder in return.

The impact almost caused her to drop the sword, but she just barely managed to withstand it.

As the beast fell on the ground with a shriek, she brought the sword down with all her strength. The momentum was enough to let her cut into the beast's neck even as she tumbled to the ground herself. After slicing through black fur, the sword sank into the soil. Dark red blood erupted around the tip of the blade.

Youko could not move in her prone state, but neither could her foe. A mere meter separated them. All they could do was lift their heads, gazing at each other warily. Her sword stayed buried in the ground, while the doglike youma coughed up blood.

Before long, their staring contest ended—Youko made the first move.

As drained of energy as she was, she managed to get her hand back around the sword's hilt and use the tip to lever herself off the ground. The dog stood up just a beat later, only to immediately fall back down.

With great effort, Youko managed to lift the sword and shuffle her way over to the youma. She swung the sword with both hands. The dog lifted its head, groaning as blood spewed from its mouth. Its limbs flailed weakly, but it was not able to lift itself up.

Raising the sword with both hands, she dropped it toward the beast's neck and let gravity do the rest. As the gleaming, bloodstained blade sank into the creature's fur, all four of its limbs spasmed, even as its claws remained outstretched.

More blood spewed from its mouth. At the same time, Youko got the strange impression that it was muttering something.

Once more, she used all her strength to draw the weighty blade before dropping it again. This time, the beast stopped moving altogether.

When she saw that the sword was buried halfway into the beast's neck, she finally let go of her grip and fell onto her back. Clouds were forming overhead. For a while, she gazed up at the sky, grunting and sighing in pain. Her flank felt like it was on fire. Every breath she took tore up her throat. She could not feel her arms or legs either; it was as though they had been severed from her body.

She wanted to hold on to the jewel, but she couldn't even move her fingers. All she could do was blink back the dizziness and watch the rolling clouds, which looked faintly red.

The urge to vomit suddenly surged within her. She jerked her head to the side and spewed over her shoulder, foul-smelling gastric juice trailing across her cheeks. She took a panicked breath, only to choke violently on the air she sucked in. Reflexively, she rolled over and fell on her front, launching into a coughing fit.

She survived.

Somehow, inexplicably, she was still alive.

The thought pounded in her head as she heaved more coughs. When her breathing finally settled, Youko heard the faint sound of something treading on the ground.

She was startled. *Another enemy*? Her head sprang up, but her vision swam—darkness lay before her. Her head plopped back down on the ground.

She couldn't even get up.

But still, for just one brief, fleeting moment, her dazed eyes took in the sight of something she could never forget: the color of gold.

"Keiki!" she screamed, her head still planted on the ground. *"Keiki!"*

So, it was you. You're the one. The one who—

"Tell me why!"

Footsteps echoed close by. With an unbearable amount of effort, Youko lifted her head.

The first thing she noticed was a vivid-looking kimono. The next thing she saw was the golden hair.

Her voice croaked. "Why?" She could not even manage to finish the question.

The face she was straining to look up at…did not belong to Keiki.

"Ah…"

It was a woman.

The woman stared directly at Youko. She gazed back at her, eyes wide.

"Who…are you?"

The golden hair suited her slim and elegant appearance. She seemed to be about ten years Youko's senior. A large, bright parrot was perched on her dainty shoulder.

The woman's expression of sorrow looked hauntingly beautiful. Peering at her from below, Youko thought that the woman might break into tears at any moment.

"Who are you?" She repeated her question in a strangled whisper.

But the woman merely stared back at Youko without answering. Tears silently fell from her misty eyes.

"What…?"

The woman blinked slowly. The glistening tears ran down her cheeks.

As Youko was struck speechless by this inexplicable sight, the woman turned her head away, gazing toward the dead beast next to Youko. She stared at it for a while with an expression of terrible pain, then took a slow step forward so she could kneel by the corpse.

Youko simply watched all this unfold, unable to move or form any words. She could have lifted herself up with effort until just a short while ago, but now, she could not even move a finger.

The woman gently brushed her hand against the beast. When something red fell on her finger, she retracted her hand as if she had touched a hot iron.

"Who…are you?" Youko asked yet again.

The woman still did not answer. She reached her hand out once more, this time to clench the sword still skewering the beast. She pulled it out and cast it on the ground, then clutched the beast's head on her lap.

"Did you…send that beast my way?" Youko asked.

The woman wordlessly stroked the beast's fur, causing blood to spatter across her expensive-looking kimono.

"And the other youma too? Do you have some grudge against me?"

The woman shook her head as she clutched the beast's face. Just as Youko's brow creased into a frown, the parrot on the woman's shoulder flapped its wings.

"Kill her!"

The shrill voice undoubtedly came from the parrot. Youko turned to it in surprise, and the woman looked at the bird on her shoulder with wide eyes as well.

"Finish her off," intoned the parrot.

The woman opened her mouth for the first time. "I cannot."

"Kill her. Snuff her out!" the parrot squawked.

The woman shook her head wildly. "Forgive me! Anything but that!"

"This is an order. Kill her."

“I cannot!”

With a mighty flap of its wings, the parrot took off into the air. It flew a single circle around the woman before landing on the ground.

“Then take her sword.”

The woman let out a beseeching cry. “The sword belongs to her. It would be fruitless for me to take it.”

“Fine, then. Slice off her arm!” the parrot shrieked shrilly, flapping its enormous wings and hovering above the ground. “That’s doable for you, Shiro. Slice off her arm so she can never use the sword again.”

“I cannot. I am incapable of even wielding the sword.”

“Use this, then.”

The parrot opened its beak wide. At the back of its mouth—even further back than its round tongue—something glimmered.

Youko gaped as the parrot spat out the tip of something long, black, and glossy. She watched on in astonishment as the parrot continued expunging the contents of its throat. It took an entire minute for the object to fully emerge: a katana-like sword in a black scabbard.

“Here,” said the parrot.

“Please don’t ask this of me.” The woman’s face paled in despair.

The parrot flapped its wings again. “Do it!”

The woman covered her face as if physically struck by the parrot’s words.

Youko flailed on the ground. She simply *had* to get up and run—but despite the urgency of the situation, all she could do was scratch the ground with her fingertips.

With a tearful face, the woman turned to Youko.

“Stop…it…” Youko’s voice was so weak that it barely reached even her own ears.

The woman reached out for the sword expunged by the parrot. With a hand stained by the doglike beast’s blood, she drew the blade from the scabbard.

“Stop it… Who are you?”

What on earth was that parrot? What was up with those beasts? Why was any of this happening?

The woman's lips moved faintly. Youko's ears picked up a very faint, almost imperceptible *"Please forgive me."*

"Please," gasped Youko. "Stop it…"

The woman pointed the katana's tip at Youko's hand, which was still scrambling against the ground. Strangely enough, judging by her expression, the woman was currently more distraught than Youko.

Presiding over all of this, the bird flew to Youko's arm and dug its fine nails into her skin. For some reason, the parrot felt as heavy as a small boulder. She tried to wave it off, but it would not budge from her arm.



“Do it!” the parrot screamed.

The woman swung the katana.

“Stop it!*”*

Youko poured everything into moving her arm, but between her frail state and the weight on top of her, the woman was quicker at swinging the blade.

Youko felt no pain, only a sense of impact. It was beyond her capabilities to even watch her own life expire.

Before the sensation could transform into pain, Youko lost consciousness.

9

YOUKO AWOKE TO EXCRUCIATING AGONY.

Her eyes flew open, and she looked at her arm to find the katana embedded there. At first, the sight confused her. The blade stood straight and tall, pointing directly at the cloudy sky.

A moment later, the pain snapped her out of her reverie.

The katana’s slender blade pinned her right hand to the ground. The pulsating pain in her palm shot straight to her head. When she tried to move her arm, she felt as if she were being torn apart. An anguished scream escaped from her mouth.

As she fought the dizziness and pain, Youko sat up. With a great deal of effort, she let go of her own sword and raised her left hand, taking care not to inflict any further torment on herself. It trembled as it grabbed the hilt of the katana. She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and pulled.

Pain exploded through her, enough to make her entire body convulse.

She tossed the katana away. As she hugged her injured hand to her chest, she writhed about on the beast’s dead body. She could not even muster a scream. The agony was so overwhelming that she felt a violent urge to vomit.

As she writhed on the ground, her left hand fumbled for her chest and found the jewel. She tore at the string and pressed the jewel on her right hand, gritting her teeth and groaning all the while.

The pain gently began to recede as the jewel's miraculous power saved her life. For a while, she remained curled up in a ball, trying to steady her breathing. When the pain was finally within a tolerable level, she sat up.

She tried moving her fingers while the jewel was pressed up against the wound on her right hand, but she felt nothing past her wrist. As a stopgap measure, she used her left hand to close the fingers of her right hand around the jewel.

With her right hand clutched against her chest, she lay on the ground and opened her eyes slightly. The clouds were still crimson. Not much time had passed since she lost consciousness.

There was a lot to mull over, like who on earth that woman was and why she did what she did, but her brain was not working well enough to ponder such things. In any case, Youko fumbled around for her own sword. For a while, she remained curled up in a ball, clutching both the sword and her right hand.

It was not very long after that when she heard the voice.

"Ah."

She looked toward the sound and saw a small girl standing there. The young child looked over her shoulder and called out to the woman behind her. "Mother!"

The girl came trotting toward Youko.

She was the spitting image of her mother, had a guileless face, and was shouldering a large basket over her slight frame.

Both mother and daughter rushed over to Youko, each of their expressions the perfect picture of concern. Their faces scrunched in discomfort as they stepped over the dead monster.

Unable to move from her prone position, Youko gazed vacantly at the pair.

For just a moment, she thought, *They've come to my rescue*. But her mind soon clouded in unease.

Youko desperately needed help right now. Although she managed to suppress the worst of the pain, it had not entirely receded. Her stamina was spent. She felt as though she would never be able to stand again.

This was the precise reason why she was more suspicious than relieved. This all looked too good to be true.

“What’s the matter? Are you okay?” The girl touched Youko’s face with her tiny hand.

Meanwhile, the mother lifted Youko in her arms. For some reason, the warmth that came through the woman’s clothing sickened her.

“What’s wrong? Did those monsters attack you? Are you hurt?” As the mother spoke, her eyes fell on Youko’s right hand, and she let out a small shriek. “My goodness! Would you look at that? Wait a moment, okay?”

The woman fished inside the sleeve of her kimono, pulled out a thin cloth for wiping one’s hands, and pressed it against Youko’s right hand.

The little girl put down her basket and produced a bamboo container for Youko. “Want some water, Mister?”

Youko hesitated for a moment. She was getting a bad feeling about this.

The fact that the little girl pulled the water container out of her bag implied that it was for her own use. This meant that it probably wasn’t poisoned. It did not look as if she put something into it before giving it to Youko either.

That was what she told herself as she nodded. The girl used her tiny hands to pull out the stopper and press the container to Youko’s lips. Warm water trickled down her throat—just a single gulp of it was rejuvenating.

“Oh, I just realized… Are you hungry?” the mother asked Youko.

She simply nodded. Although she was not currently experiencing hunger pangs, she knew that her stomach was completely empty.

“How long has it been since you last ate, I wonder?”

It was too much bother to count, so Youko remained silent.

“I have some deep-fried bread, Mother.”

“Oh, don’t give her something she can’t swallow. Give her a small sugar sweet.”

“Okay.”

The girl opened the basket that her mother had put down. There were bottles of various sizes inside, from which the girl pulled out a stick of syrup. Youko had seen people with those containers on a few other occasions—they were probably traveling vendors who went around selling small snacks.

“Here you go.”

This time, Youko did not hesitate to take the snack with her left hand. The syrup was so sweet that it threatened to sting her mouth.

“Are you traveling somewhere? What happened to you?” asked the mother in a benevolent tone.

Youko did not answer. She could not tell the truth, nor did she have the energy to think of a lie.

“Look at you! Attacked by a youma, and you came out just fine.” The woman paused. “Can you stand? The sun will be down soon. It’s not far to the hamlet—it’s at the foot of the hill. Can you manage that?”

Youko shook her head. She had no desire to go to a hamlet, but the mother must have taken the gesture to mean that she could not move, because she turned to her daughter behind her.

“Gyokuyou, go run to the village and call someone. There’s not much time. Run as fast as you can.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t have to,” Youko said, heaving her body up and letting her eyes flit over the pair. “Thank you for your help,” she said coolly as she struggled to her feet. She turned to the path on the opposite side of the basin, where the incline was forbiddingly steep.

“Oh dear, where are you going?” asked the mother.

Youko did not reply—not even she knew the answer.

“Wait! It’ll be dark soon. Going into the mountains is suicide.”

Youko inched her way across the path. Her right hand stung with every step she took.

“Let us take you to the hamlet.”

The incline took such a steep turn that Youko looked liable to break a bone in her attempt to climb it—and with only one usable arm to boot.

“We’re merchants on our way to Bakurou. We’re not crooks. We can at least go to the hamlet. Right?”

Youko put her hand on a branch lying on the road.

“My goodness!” the mother exclaimed.

“Why are you being so insistent?” Youko looked back over her shoulder at the woman.

The woman’s eyes widened in bewilderment. Even the child seemed confused. She stood frozen to the spot as she peered at Youko.

“Please leave me alone. Let me guess… Do you have something lying in wait for me at the hamlet?”

“Of course not! It’s almost sundown! Your wounds are—”

“I know.” Youko exhaled. “You ought to hurry back. You have a small child to think of, after all.”

“Wait…”

“I’ve been through this song and dance before. Thanks for the candy.”

The woman gazed at Youko in dismay. Perhaps it was out of simple kindness, or perhaps not. Youko did not know which it was, and she did not care to find out.

As she labored her way up the incline, a voice called out to her from below. She looked to see the child had both her arms outstretched. One hand held the bamboo container of water, and the other an earthenware teapot. The pot was filled to the brim with syrup.

“Take these with you. You’ll starve otherwise.”

Youko looked at the mother. “But—”

“It’s fine. Go on, Gyokuyou.”

At the mother’s urging, the child stretched as far as she could and deposited the items at Youko’s feet. After accomplishing this task, she turned around and ran back to her mother, who was carrying the girl’s basket.

Youko watched vacantly as the girl strapped the basket back over her shoulder. She had no idea how she was supposed to react. Meanwhile, both mother and daughter looked back at her multiple times as they descended the slope.

Once the pair had disappeared from view, Youko picked up the bamboo container and teapot. For some reason, her knees gave out, and she plopped herself down on the spot.

I bet I made the right call.

There was no guarantee that they were good people. They might have changed their tune once they got to the hamlet, and even if they didn't, they would probably have sent her off to the governor once they found out that she was a Kaikyaku. She had to stay vigilant, however much it hurt her heart. She could not allow herself to trust anyone or get her hopes up. It would only lead to more pain down the road.

"They might have helped you out, you know."

She heard a familiar grating voice.

Youko replied without even looking. "It might have been a trap."

"You might never get help again."

"It might have been no help at all."

"Do you think you can survive the night in your state? Look at that hand."

"I'll manage."

"You should have gone with them."

"This was for the best."

"You might have squandered your one and only chance for help."

"Shut up!"

She swung around, attempting to swat the monkey's head away. But she only touched empty air; the cackling laughter soon disappeared into the undergrowth.

In spite of everything, Youko managed to turn her attention back to the road. Amidst the encroaching twilight, small black patches began dotting the path.

Rain fell for the first time that night.

10

THAT NIGHT WAS MORE BRUTAL THAN ANY YOUKO had experienced.

Her stamina was completely depleted. The cold rain robbed her body of warmth. It was an arduous night for humans, and yet the youma seemed to thrive in it.

Her clothes stuck to her skin, hindering her movements. Her body, now drained of all its energy, refused to move on command. Although feeling had somehow returned to her right hand, she had no grip strength whatsoever. Using it to hold the sword would have been a fool's errand—not to mention that the rain made the hilt slippery.

In the pure blackness of her surroundings, she struggled to make out her foes, which was only made worse by how small and numerous they were. She swam in mud and blood, not just from the youma but from her own wounds as well. The rain managed to wash it all away, along with the last of her strength. The sword felt heavy in her hand, and Jyouyuu's presence was faint and weak. The sword dragged lower every time the blade's tip met a foe.

Time passed excruciatingly slowly. Again and again, Youko looked imploringly at the sky, waiting for dawn to arrive. The nights she spent fighting youma were usually short, but there was no end to this one. Over and over, she dropped the sword and picked it up again, which reopened her wounds.

When at last she sensed sunbreak, Youko saw the outline of a white tree. She practically hurled her body at it, the hard branches scratching her skin.

No other enemies came to pursue her. Although they stood around the tree at a distance as she fought to catch her breath, they eventually went off in the direction of the rain.

Around the time the monsters disappeared, the sky finally lightened, and Youko began to make out other trees in the thicket.

"Safe…"

Her shoulders heaved as she sighed. Droplets of rain fell into her mouth.

"I…survived…"

Her wounds stung where the mud rubbed against them, but even that was of little concern to her.

She lay down for a while, attempting to steady her breathing. She peered past the white branches toward the sky, which was turning overcast. By the time her breathing was restored, a biting chill came over her. The white branches did nothing to impede the rain. She knew that she needed to get out of here and find shelter from the elements, but her body refused to move.

Her fingers clutched the jewel in desperation, attempting to shore up the mysterious warmth resting within. It took all her strength to roll over onto her side, crawl out from under the branches, and head down a gentle slope. Youko found it fairly easy to crawl thanks to the damp grass and soil.

She had tried her best not to stray too far from the highway, but because of the moonless night and the monsters on her tail, she was now deep in the mountains. Just how far had she wandered? She could not even imagine.

Clinging to the jewel and sword, Youko rose to her feet.

Although she knew she was injured and in terrible agony, she could not tell exactly where the pain was coming from. She barely stopped her knees from crumbling beneath her with every step she took.

Once she finished half crawling down the slope, she came upon a narrow path. She was certain it wasn't the highway—she saw no cart tracks, for starters, and it was not wide enough for a horse and cart to pass through.

This was where her energy ran out. She fell to her knees. Her nails dug into the bark of a tree, but her hands were incapable of hoisting up her body. She could poke her head toward the mud-sloshed road, but that was about it.

However tightly her hand gripped the jewel, the gentle warmth that flowed into her was no consolation. The rain washed away what little comfort it could provide. The jewel's miraculous power had finally run out.

Is this where it ends?

The thought was ever so slightly amusing.

Out of all the girls in her class, *she* was the only one who would die a dog's death. They lived in a different world, with homes to return to at their leisure and family to look out for them. It was not *their* fate to wither in starvation.

Youko had done everything she could, and now she was at the end of her rope. She was far from willing to give up, but no amount of exertion could move even a single finger. Maybe this peaceful death was her reward for pushing herself to the absolute limit.

A smooth, clean sound cut through the rainfall. Youko lifted her eyes to see that the sword right next to her cheek was glowing faintly. Although she could not see the blade clearly from where her head lay on the ground, she could make out a misty image through the rain.

"*Nakajima*," a male voice was saying.

Youko saw her homeroom teacher sitting in some vague, indefinable place.

"Nakajima was a quiet, serious student. In all my experience as a homeroom teacher, I've never had such an easy student."

He was talking to someone. A deep male voice responded, "What do you make of the poor company she kept?"

"I don't know," her teacher replied.

"You don't know?"

The homeroom teacher shrugged. "Nakajima was the definition of an ideal student. I never had reason to worry if she was living life off the beaten track."

"You do know that a strange man busted into the school?"

"I do, although Nakajima didn't seem to know him. I'm not sure if that's really the truth or not—it seems Nakajima had a mysterious side to her."

"What do you mean, a mysterious side?"

The homeroom teacher grimaced. "She was speaking in a different language to the man; I can't quite describe it. Nakajima was a model student, you see, and she got along well with her classmates. She had a

good relationship with her parents as well, from what I understand. But, you know, that should have been impossible."

"Oh?"

"I know I shouldn't be saying this, but teachers push their students to do what *they* want, and friends do the same to their friends. Same thing with parents. Everyone has an image of the perfect student, and they try to mold people into that. Teachers, parents, friends—these three groups' opinions are never going to align. If the parents and teachers had their way, the students wouldn't be able to stand it. If Nakajima was a good girl to everyone, then I suppose she was forcing herself to meet their expectations. And I think that in exchange for getting along with everybody, she was not especially close to anybody. She was just appeasing people, and nothing more."

"How about you?"

The homeroom teacher pulled a slightly reluctant face. "To be perfectly frank, as a teacher, I'm more attached to the students who act out somewhat or need my attention. Nakajima was a good girl in my opinion, but I would have forgotten her after she graduated. I don't think I would remember her at a ten-year class reunion."

"I see."

"I can't say whether it's because she deliberately acted in a certain way or that she was *too* well behaved. If she was putting on an act, I can't imagine what she was doing away from prying eyes. If not, I suppose she would feel terrible upon realizing who she was to others. I would not necessarily be surprised if she felt upset and impulsively decided to disappear."

Youko stared at her homeroom teacher in dazed astonishment. His shape then fizzled out, replaced by a girl. It was a student with whom Youko got along relatively well.

"I heard you were good friends with Nakajima?" the voice asked.

The girl looked belligerent. "Not really. I wouldn't say we were close."

"Is that so?"

“I mean, sure, we talked a bit at school. But it’s not like we hung out much outside of class or talked on the phone at home. We did a little, but nothing that would make us more than classmates.”

“I see.”

“So don’t expect anything out of me. We only did small talk.”

“Did you dislike her?”

“She wasn’t a bad person or anything, but I didn’t think she was particularly great either. I always felt like she was just saying whatever to keep the conversation going. I didn’t dislike her, but she wasn’t that interesting to talk to.”

“Oh?”

“I disliked her,” another girl chimed in. “She was a total people pleaser.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, if we bitched about someone, she would just nod along. But if they bitched about us, she would nod along with them too. She just put on a nice face for everyone. So yeah, I disliked her. It’s a total exaggeration to say we were friends. It was just nice to vent to her because she always agreed with everything. That’s it.”

“Interesting.”

“I think that’s why she ran away from home. She was hanging out with some shady people behind the scenes. I wouldn’t be surprised if they egged her on, saying stuff like how her teachers and classmates were idiots. Or that we’re screwing with her or something. That sounds plausible to me. There always was this mysterious side to her.”

“There’s also the possibility that she got involved in something against her will.”

“Then I bet she had some kind of falling out with her secret friends,” the girl responded. “Not that I know anything about it.”

Yet another girl piped up to say that she outright hated Youko. “I mean, she was never honest.”

“You said you were bullied in class, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Did Nakajima-san participate in the bullying?”

“She did. She would go along with everyone and give me the cold shoulder, then still pretend she was a good girl.”

“Oh?”

“People said awful things to me, you know? Nakajima-san wouldn’t actively participate in that. She’d grimace like she didn’t approve. That’s what I find so despicable.”

“I see.”

“She’d make out like she was the only good person and look at me like she felt all sorry for me. But she never lifted a finger to stop the bullying. It pissed me off.”

“I understand what you mean.”

“Whether she ran away from home or she was kidnapped, it doesn’t change who she was to me. She condoned the bullying, and I was the target. I don’t want to lie and pretend I feel sorry for her. You can suspect me of wrongdoing all you want—I don’t care. I hated Nakajima-san, and I’m glad she’s gone. That’s how I really feel.”

Someone spoke up to insist that Youko was not that kind of person. It was Youko’s mother, who sat somewhere with a dejected look on her face.

“She was a good girl. Not the kind who would run away from home or mingle with delinquents.”

“But it would seem that Youko-san had problems at home.”

Her mother’s eyes widened. “Did she? I can’t imagine what.”

“She frequently complained to her classmates. She said that her parents were strict.”

“Well, sometimes we told her off about something or other, but isn’t that what parents are supposed to do? No, I don’t accept that she had problems. She never showed any dissatisfaction at home.”

“Then can you think of any reason why she would run away from home?”

“No. It’s completely out of character.”

“Do you know anything about the man who came to see Youko-san at school?”

“No. She’s not the sort who would hang out with riffraff.”

“Then why do you think she disappeared?”

“On the way home from school, somebody must have—”

“Unfortunately, there’s no evidence of that. We believe that Youko-san left the staff room with the man, and they went off somewhere together. He did not appear to forcefully drag her into accompanying him. Some teachers testified that they seemed to be on familiar terms.”

Youko’s mother looked dejected.

“Although Youko-san said that they had never met before, we believe there was some kind of connection between them; perhaps they shared a mutual acquaintance. We will continue the search, but…”

“Did Youko really talk about how she was unhappy at home?”

“She did.”

Youko’s mother covered her face.

“She didn’t seem unhappy. I never thought she would be the type to run away from home or secretly keep the company of bad influences. I can’t imagine her getting mixed up in strange business either.”

“You know what children are like. They won’t tell their parents *everything*.”

“People were always telling me that Youko was such a well-behaved child. Looking back, perhaps something was amiss,” her mother said.

“Children never quite turn out how their parents want them to. My kid’s a total brat.”

“You may be right… Perhaps she was putting on an act to appease us. It was our fault for being fooled and believing her.”

You’re wrong, *Mom*…

Youko wanted to cry, but the tears would not form. She could only mouth the words *“You’re wrong.”* No sound even escaped from her lips before the vision disappeared.

Youko lay in a puddle of water, her face planted halfway in mud. She no longer had the energy to stand. Not a single person could possibly have imagined her current predicament. And it was because they were ignorant, she knew, that they made such hurtful assumptions.

This world had cast her aside to meet with starvation, misery, and pain. She was not even capable of standing anymore. She slaved her way through this out of the single-minded desire to return home, yet in truth, there was nothing for her in her former country—only a series of superficial relationships.

What was I even trying to return to?

There was nobody waiting for her. She had nothing to her name, and nobody understood her. They lied and betrayed her. In that regard, her old world was no different from this one.

I always knew that.

And even still, she longed to go home.

It was a strangely funny thought. She wanted to laugh, but the rain had frozen her face. She wanted to cry, but her tears had dried up.

Not like it matters.

Nothing mattered anymore. It would all soon be over, anyway.

To be continued in

THE TWELVE KINGDOMS BOOK 2

Shadow of the Moon, Shadow of the Sea: Part 2

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fuyumi Ono is a renowned Japanese novelist known best for her epic fantasy series, *The Twelve Kingdoms*. Additionally, Ono is known for her work in the horror and mystery genres. In 1988, she attended Otani University in Kyoto, Japan where she honed her craft creating horror and mystery stories as a member of the Mystery Novel Study Group. Her book *Tokyo Ibun* garnered critical acclaim in 1993 after becoming a finalist for the Japan Fantasy Novel Award, attracting the attention of the literary community. In 2013, she received the Shugoro Yamamoto Award for her novel *Zanmei*. Ono continues to craft compelling series alongside her husband Yukito Ayatsuji, the acclaimed author of the popular mystery novel *The Decagon House Murders*.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Akihiro Yamada is an acclaimed illustrator and manga artist with forty years of experience turning imagination into brushstrokes. The moment Yamada dropped out of Osaka University of Economics to pursue his true passion of painting, his career took flight. Having quickly caught the publishing industry's attention, Yamada was invited to illustrate Ryo Mizuno's *Record of Lodoss War* and Fuyumi Ono's *The Twelve Kingdoms*. Thanks to his unique style combining the looks of historical Chinese and European art, he won the Seiun Award in 1996. Yamada continues to paint by hand today in his illustrations for the newest editions of *The Twelve Kingdoms*, the mobile game, *Fire Emblem Heroes*, and his personal art book, *The World of Akihiro Yamada*.

BOOKS OF
THE TWELVE KINGDOMS



THE TWELVE KINGDOMS BOOK 1
Shadow of the Moon, Shadow of the Sea: Part 1

THE TWELVE KINGDOMS BOOK 2
Shadow of the Moon, Shadow of the Sea: Part 2

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Sea of Wind, Shore of the Labyrinth

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