

少年陰陽師

Shounen Onmyouji

Book 9

真紅の空を翔けあがれ

Soaring into the Crimson Sky

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English translation based on the official Thai translation by
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Translation Notes

This English translation was prepared from the official Thai translation and precise terminology may have been lost in the process. Honorifics cannot be translated precisely. Furthermore, I'm guessing that 'Mokkun' is referred to as a *mononoke* and went with that assumption (the Thai text translates into 'demonic animal'). However, as Thai is a phonetic language, names are taken from the translation itself. Corrections and comments are welcome.

I have taken some liberties in paragraph structure (notably dialogue positioning), which appears to differ greatly between Japanese and English writing, for greater ease in reading. This is a stylistic preference and may not suit everyone; you may find a more faithful and literal translation at:

<http://shounen-onmyouji.deviantart.com/gallery/23975908>

While this translation is original in its entirety, I have compared my text to that posted on <http://shounen-onmyouji.deviantart.com/gallery/23975908> to ensure that my interpretation of the Thai translation has not drifted too far from the original work.

This translation can be found at <http://penumbrale.livejournal.com/>.

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Prologue

He's so tall... the child thought.

That person stood with his back to the sun, towering over her.

"Miss ... could you help me with something?"

With the sun's glare, she could not see his face nor discern any emotion, only catching the movement of his lips. Her mother had warned her before not to approach strangers, so she knew she ought to hurry away, yet something seemed to pull at her, dragging her into a stilted walk towards him. Before she knew it, she was standing before him.

"Help you with what?" The child tilted her head up to ask, and the person pointed.

"Over there...."

When she turned to look, she saw a small, aging stone shrine with worn wooden doors. The village elders had always admonished them to never go near it.

"Can you open that door for me?"

The young face of the child tensed. Aside from having been warned to absolutely stay away from that shrine, she instinctively felt afraid of it and had never even dared enter the vicinity. Just glancing at it from a distance was enough to send a chill through her, as if something were crawling up from the soles of her feet.

The child shook her head slowly to decline, but her mind somehow felt unfocused. Even though she wanted to go home, her feet seemed rooted to the ground.

That person repeated his request again, with a voice so very gentle.

"Open the door. The thing inside...."

The child's mind felt heavy and dull, as if sinking through warm water into a dream.

The thing inside....

"That's right.... Good girl," the lips murmured before twisting into a sneer.

The child stepped towards the shrine woodenly, her eyes lifeless. The last thing she saw was his eyes, which gleamed with frightening intensity.

Chapter 1

Silence blanketed the entire area.

He held his breath as he opened his eyes. He couldn't remember how he had come to stand in this unknown place, but he knew it was neither the human world, nor the realm of the twelve spirit summons.

He surveyed the area and sighed.

“This is such a vivid dream.”

The man blinked when he heard his own voice. Looking down, he saw that his hands, which should have been so thin and frail, like mere skin covering bone, had become full and firm. Even without feeling his face, he could tell that he had returned to the youthful body of his distant past.

A small smile surfaced at this thought. His youth.... That time he had first met her. This was ... a dream, and dreams were things that reflect the inner wishes of the heart.

“ ... ”

The man frowned. A breeze had begun to blow from the other side of the endless darkness, and a pale white apparition emerged at the far edge of his vision.

That apparition slowly became bigger. A faint light reflected off its shadowy form as it stopped a distance away. When he realized who it was, the man's eyes filled with deep pain. Closing his eyes, he whispered, “Wakana....”

Flames blazed in a pale, white colour. They did not burn, but danced and flared, keeping the two apart.

‘My lord...’

That voice, which should have faded into nothing so long ago, was no different from that imprinted in his memory. He suppressed the urge to run to her – but that flame was a wall, and he was certain that, if he even took one step towards her, she would disappear again.

Wakana's face was sorrowful behind the curtain of fire.

‘I was too weak... I tried with all my strength to send him back, but I was too weak....’
Wakana covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

‘I am so sorry.... I had to trade away that child’s precious thing in order to send him back.’

That something was necessary for the child—something that could not be lost.

In truth, the child should have sacrificed his life to fulfill his tragic wish, but Wakana had used her all strength to send him back to the living world. Still, it could not have happened without exacting a heavy price.

The man looked down and shook his head. “No, you did very well....”

Looking back up, he could see a small form amidst the pale flames. Suddenly, he realised that these flames were not meant to keep them apart, but were enveloping the sleeping child as if burning him.

The man reached a hand over the flames. They were not hot; rather, they were surprisingly cold, like ice, and it was this creeping coldness that threatened to leech the child’s life away.

‘If he dies because I was too weak, I am sorry. So very sorry....’

That trembling voice was no different from what it had been in the past....

...There’s a demon standing in front of the stove. It won’t move....

The woman cried and confessed that she was so scared she didn’t dare go near the stove, and so was unable to prepare dinner. Seimei had wanted his summons to stay with her, but she feared their divine power. She feared both their immense spiritual auras and their inhuman human-like forms.

The twelve spirit summons understood well that Wakana meant no harm, but her fear still weighed heavily on them. It seemed that, for most people, everything nonhuman would be lumped into the category of ‘monster’, and in the eyes of normal humans, they, too, were merely ‘monsters’.

‘I cannot stay long. I begged with everything I had, before he finally relented. And just this once.’

Relented? He sent her a questioning look, to which Wakana finally smiled faintly despite her tear-filled eyes.

‘This is actually forbidden, but he is compassionate and listened to my request.’

“ ‘He’ is....”

‘He is the caretaker of the Underworld, on the other side of the river. He allowed me my request to not cross the river, but await you here on the shore.’

The sentries of the Underworld took the form of terrifying giants and regularly patrolled the river shore for lost souls. Wakana should have crossed the river ever since she died of illness, but she still stood by that dark, deathly silent shore, without light nor company.

...If I cross this river, I would never see him again. I left him ... and if I do not wait for him here, he would be very sad and lonely ... and probably very angry with me too.

She remembered him holding her hands as they slowly turned cold, remembered him watching her face with unblinking eyes and trembling, ashen lips. Despite her clouding vision, she could see the tears trailing down his cheeks. She had decided then and there that, no matter what happened, she would wait for this man. Even if the sentries of Hell chastised her or its terrifying caretaker condemned her, she would not cross the river.

Nevertheless, the sentries tried to force her to cross the river, according to the rules of the Underworld. It was fortunate that the caretaker had dismissed them, and listened to her pleas.

‘Your determination is admirable,’ he had said. ‘I will inform the higher-ups and the sentries. You may wait here as long as you wish.’

He had even taken pity on her solitude, and allowed her to view her family on the water’s surface from time to time.

‘That’s how I knew the child had chosen such a tragic path, and would appear at this shore. I wanted to help him so badly.’

The caretaker had only allowed her to wait at the shore. Even at the end of the year, when souls of the departed could return to visit their loved ones, she could not depart from this place. In a way, it could be seen that being tied down to the shore, to wait indefinitely in this endlessly dark and silent place, was punishment for her defiance of the rules of the dead.

As Seimei’s thoughts traveled down this bleak path, Wakana crinkled her eyes and smiled.

‘Don’t worry about me. I chose this. But, if you would permit me to confess something....’

Despite trying to smile, her beloved’s face twisted into a pained grimace.

‘The sentries that patrol this place are very scary. Standing here all alone in the dark, just their approach is enough to frighten me to tears.’

Wakana understood that the sentries only came by out of concern for her welfare and safety, being all alone by the river's shore. But, enveloped by the stygian blackness with the only sound being the river's flow, their heavy, thunderous footfalls were enough to turn her into a quivering mess.

Yet the youngest son of her little boy, whom she had left behind when he was just an infant, was on his way to the Underworld....

...Please, please return that child to the world of the living. Should he become a denizen of the Underworld, the man I'm waiting for will be in such torment. This young child has only lived for thirteen years. He still has so much to see and learn, and will be able to do so much for the world. It's true he chose this path, but he doesn't really wish for it from the very bottom of his heart. He only did this to protect what is most precious to him...

Seimei closed his eyes as his thoughts flew back to the night he had heard of that decision – the night he had heard his grandson's request. It was a request made with such profound sadness.

That young boy now slept in the middle of freezing flames.

Wakana eyed her youngest grandchild, and her tears began to flow.

'I really wanted him to return without losing anything, but the caretaker said it was not possible....'

...I will return him to the living world, but something must remain in return. Leave that which is second only to his life in importance—I will give it to your keeping. Do not return it to him under any circumstance. Do not waver, or your soul will be condemned to the pits of Hell, and the man you wait for, too, will suffer the consequences of your failure. This is the punishment that awaits those who break the rules.

Seimei shook his head. "Why...."

He could not find the words to speak, but the woman gazed at him tenderly and asked, 'You think it was cruel? It wasn't. He was merciful. Otherwise, there would be no way life could be returned to one who had died.'

Even if Wakana had channelled all her energy to the point where nothing was left to sustain her soul, she alone would not have been able to send her grandson back to the living world. It was unavoidable that he would have had to give up something priceless in return. And yet....

'The child has lost his precious guiding light. He must forge a new path for himself.'

The child continued to sleep in the blazing fire, its flames burning his heart, engulfing it in eternal darkness. Seimei reached over again, gazing between his wife and his youngest grandchild.

“It’s alright. The boy isn’t that weak. And I am still with him. So please ... please ... don’t cry anymore.”

It’s alright. I’ve chased all the demons away and ordered them not to return. Ah, and I’d better lay a spell on the estate as well, so scary things can’t come near. So please ... don’t cry any more.

The memory from the distant past suddenly resurfaced, and faded away. Memories were such bittersweet things, filling her with an aching longing. She laughed, despite the tears in her eyes. Oh, he was such a stubborn man; he wasn’t eloquent and couldn’t express his feelings well ... but he was gentle and more compassionate than anyone she knew. That was why she had waited for him all this time.

Wakana wiped away her tears. ‘You might be angry if I say this, but....’

A small delighted smile appeared on her face, and Seimei blinked in surprise.

‘I was really happy to see my grandson, because there was no other way I would have ever met him. I even got to hug him. I’m sorry, but ... I really am very happy.’

So happy that, even in the dark, it could seem like nothing was wrong. But actually, Wakana yearned to ask Seimei so very many questions. Still, she restrained herself, knowing that she had pushed herself past her limit, unable to even move after having sent the child back. And yet a freezing flame still enveloped the child, slowly but surely burning away the child they both loved so much.

And at that moment, Seimei realized that it wasn’t merely an illusion. It was a vision of the future. The expression on his face told Wakana that he had finally understood. She sighed, relieved. She had begged the caretaker of the underworld to be here, to talk to Seimei and tell him about Masahiro.

‘I must go.’

“Back to that dark, silent place?”

‘Yes, my lord Seimei.’ She whispered her beloved husband’s name longingly and closed her eyes. ‘I chose to wait on my own accord. Even though it is bleak and lonely, I have decided to wait, and so....’

Seimei understood what she was trying to say, and smiled faintly.

“Coming here ahead of me on your own, and deciding to stay here on your own. You haven’t changed a bit.” ...*And I love everything about you...*

Seimei wished that he could at least caress her hair. Yet it was not possible as they stood at the boundary between the living and the dead. To violate this boundary, to reach over to touch the world of the dead, would be a betrayal of the caretaker, who had generously allowed them to meet.

The young child who had once given up his life remained lying in the white flames as they slowed faded. And in turn, a spirit summon who should have ceased to exist was restored.

The flames vanished abruptly, plunging the area into absolute darkness.

Seimei murmured in the sudden quiet, “I’m sorry. It’ll be a while longer before I join you.”

To return to the living, his grandson had lost the second most important thing to him. It was the inevitable price for defying the rules, and yet even with such a loss....

“You still would have wanted to save him...”

Seimei could not help but agree with the sentiment.

Chapter 2

A young woman living in the same village was the one who found the child, sleeping in front of the shrine. She had left her children, ages five and eight, at home to hike up the mountain to gather vegetable shoots, and was actually on her way home.

The shrine stood near a bay, a little ways from the village. To be more precise, it wasn't exactly a bay, but more like a lake connected to the sea. The young woman had been constantly admonished as a young child to never approach or open the doors of the shrine, as it was built for the worship of an evil spirit.

The elder's stories were frightening, certainly, but they also fueled the curiosity of the village children. Once, before she was ten years old, she and some friends had ventured near and touched the doors of the shrine, just for the sake of trying it. In that instant, they heard a sound.

...Open it...

At first, she thought she was just hearing things, but then the voice repeated its words.

...Open!

She and her friends had fled helter-skelter back to the village. After that, she had lain sick for days on end. She could not remember anything from that time, but others told her that her face had been pale, her body as cold as ice and yet she kept crying out that she was hot.

That shrine most definitely was used for the worship of an evil spirit. No ... it would probably be more accurate to say that it sealed something evil within it.

Since then, she always tried to stay away from the shrine. Even so, after that, there would occasionally be children who would ignore the warnings of the village elder. They would approach the shrine, using it as a test of courage, and without fail, all of them would fall ill from some unknown reason. Therefore, the adults would constantly warn the children under no uncertain terms that they were never to venture near the shrine.

“Ah ...”

She placed the few *warabi* and *senmai*¹ she had gathered into the basket slung across her back and headed back towards the village. This path would take her within viewing distance of the shrine, and she did her best to not look at it, still scarred by the terrifying experience of her childhood. She frowned, however, as something white in front of the shrine caught the corner of her eye.

... *What is that?*

The young woman glanced over nervously, only to see a small child collapsed in front of the shrine. That child, a young girl, lived in a house near her own, and was around the same age as her youngest. So, despite her lingering fears, she rushed over to the unmoving little girl, overwhelmed with worry.

“What happened? Are you alright?”

When she picked up the little girl, however, she was shocked speechless.

For the girl’s eyes were open wide, staring blankly at the sky, and her body was as cold as ice. Still, it could be seen that she was still breathing, her chest rising and falling almost imperceptibly.

“How many times have we told you all not to come here!” she exclaimed exasperatedly.

She surmised that the child had given into curiosity like herself when she was younger. In any case, the most pressing thing at the moment was to get the child back to the village. As she raised the unexpectedly heavy child, she heard a loud cracking of wood. Spinning around to look, she heard another crack echo in the silence.

The wooden door of the shrine ... was open.

And she could hear dull thumping sounds.

She saw a white stone slab within. The slab, which was usually shut away by the doors of the shrine, was rocking back and forth, as if being pushed from beneath.

Thump.

She squeaked in fear as she scrambled away from the shrine, the child wrapped tightly in her arms.

A warm, dusty wind gusted up from beneath the tablet.

It’s open! A loud, exultant shout boomed in her ears as the shrine was destroyed by something exploding past its doors. An inky shadow blanketed her vision.

In the fading light, a piercing scream reverberated through the mountain, and died away.

The chilly wind was beginning to carry the scent of spring.

“That’s right. It’s halfway through the third month already. Spring arrives much sooner here than at the capital. We’re lucky, I guess, that the plants are putting up shoots and there’s game to hunt. It’s quite comfortable here. If I had a choice though, I’d much

rather go back to Seimei. I don't really want to stay here." Although she was speaking to herself, her voice was strong and rang out clearly.

"Taiin, where are you?"

It was the voice of one of her fellow spirit summons, a child's voice, yet adult-like and unfeeling. She heard the call, but pretended not to, despite knowing that it had been a long time and she ought to return to the house. The more she thought about it, the more disconsolate she felt. She really didn't mean to worry the young boy still resting within, but in there also was....

"Taiin. There you are." Genbu's voice held a hint of reproach, as if demanding to know why she did not respond when she must have heard him.

Taiin clicked her tongue in annoyance, realizing she should have sought out a more obscure place to hide herself.

"What do you want?" Unwillingly, Taiin glanced downwards to see the pitch-black hair of the small spirit summon standing about eleven meters below her. It was unclear from this distance, but it seemed like he had a cross expression on his face because she could feel his piercing glare.

"Masahiro's worried about you. He's afraid something might have happened to you."

"I am one of the twelve spirit summons, you know. What could possibly happen to me in a peaceful mountain like this?"

"If nothing happened, then why are you dallying around? Did you get anything from the hunt?"

"Yeah, ages ago. It's over there."

From her comfortable seat on a branch near the top of a *katsura* tree², she pointed downwards. As Genbu turned to see what she was pointing at, he spied a wild boar trussed up with its legs bound to a branch.

Genbu turned back to look up at the tree top and frowned. "Then let's go back. You made us worry for no reason. What if Masahiro's condition got worse? Kouchin's watching over him at the moment so he should be fine, but we should hurry back anyway."

Taiin pouted and replied, "... Yeah, I know. But...."

She hesitated before exhaling heavily and floating down to the ground. Tying a large vine around the boar's neck, she pulled the carcass behind her. Genbu's face was anxious, although for a different reason than before.

“I know why you don’t want to go near there, but you won’t be able to protect Masahiro otherwise.”

Their duty was to protect the recovering Masahiro, after all.

“I know. It was Seimei’s orders.”

If not for those orders, she would have fled this place with Touda in it ages ago.

There was once a man who styled himself the head of the Chishiki sect. He tried to remove the seal of the great god Chigaeshi in order to bridge this world and the underworld. Masahiro, the youngest grandson of Abe no Seimei, the great *onmyouji* of the time, thus traveled from the capital of Heian to the remote Izumo in order to thwart his ambitions.

The arduous battle that ensued had greatly weakened Masahiro, leaving him bedridden for almost half a month. Lately, he had been sitting up for half a day at a time, but it was still too early to be certain of his full recovery.

Taiin and Genbu, on the other hand, were two of the twelve spirit summons under Seimei. Both were responsible for protecting Masahiro and reporting to Seimei who was waiting back the capital. Abe no Narichika, another grandson of Seimei, was on his way there, and the group would depart from this place once he arrived.

“Where are the lands of Fujiwara no Michinaga?” Taiin turned around to ask Genbu as she effortlessly dragged along the boar, which must have weighed more than a sturdy man. The other summon, who was carrying his own load of wild vegetables, turned back to look at her.

“The village of Yamashiro, over there.... From here, heading straight west, by the bay. It would take just a day or two on foot, but Masahiro is not well enough yet.”

Taiin nodded, and swept her eyes over the western horizon where the sun was nearly setting.

“It’ll be another half a month before Narichika arrives. He should be nearly recovered by then.”

“If his mental state were normal, his condition should gradually improve. But with the way things are, it’s too early to say anything.”

Easily guessing what Genbu was implying, Taiin lowered her head. “... Yeah....”

The nearest village was the village of Tsukiya. The Amaribe neighbourhood was part of this village, and the Chishiki temple lay in the mountains a little way outside it. Although their locations could be considered close, the actual distance was considerable. The community was settled on the shore of the river Tsukiya, facing the eastern sea and its two bays.

The cabin they were staying in lay in a deep valley near the Tsukiya river, so there were no problems acquiring fresh water. Thus far, no one from the village had ventured to this valley, making it suitable for a restful recovery. Indeed, at this moment, the people were probably too occupied to be interested in wandering into the mountain.

Although Genbu had urged her to hurry, he had made no attempt to quicken the pace. As if struck by a sudden thought, he turned to her and said, "You went to check out the situation in the district the other day, right? Is it still chaotic over there?"

Taiin stopped and frowned briefly. "Yeah, and probably for a while longer too. The focus of their worship just suddenly upped and disappeared, after all, and their temple is in shambles," she replied as she gazed over to the northeastern sky.

The head of the sect had appeared there over ten years ago, and had built a temple that served as the heart of the community, which had worshipped there with fanatical devotion. Yet suddenly, the man had vanished, and the temple servants had collapsed like puppets with their strings cut. Originally, these had been corpses imbued with fake lives in order to do their master's bidding. That these puppets had suddenly disintegrated into ashes overnight only served to heighten the people's panic.

"What is it like, I wonder, to suddenly lose your emotional anchor?"

"We probably won't be able to understand, because we have no such anchor," Genbu replied with a thoughtful expression.

"Yeah. Seimei could be it, I suppose, but we don't really depend on him."

Even though they served Seimei and considered him their master, their actual relationship with him was more like one between equals. That was likely due to Seimei's own personality and the way he treated the twelve spirit summons, whom he always considered 'friends'. And for this very reason, the twelve summons were willing to serve him.

Sighing lightly, Taiin began walking again. They were nearing the cabin now; once past this forest, they would come to a small courtyard where the cabin was built. Even though it was near a river, it was ringed by forest, making it difficult to simply stumble across. Surrounded by trees, this cabin had only one room, a dirt floor, and had a stove pit in the center of the room for cooking.

Genbu started, and held his breath.

“... What did I tell you...” he muttered in a piqued tone of voice.

A young boy with a pale face sat on a tree root near the cabin door. Even though it was midway through the third month, the air would chill rapidly as evening drew near. It was not good for a recovering patient to sit out there.

“Masahiro, why are you here?”

Hearing Genbu’s stern voice, Masahiro’s absent gaze moved away from the sky. His eyes looked past Genbu and Taiin, and darted back and forth, searching.

“Is that you, Genbu? Where are you?”

The pair started, and increased their spiritual aura to the level where normal humans would be able to see them. Seeing the two appear, Masahiro smiled as if relieved.

“Welcome back. It’s been getting late, so I came out to wait for you.”

“Sorry for taking so long.”

Genbu had a guilty expression on his face, and Masahiro hurriedly waved his hand to reassure him. “It’s not that. I was getting bored just lying around in bed. It was nice to do something different. Kouchin approved, too.”

Even though he had gotten Kouchin’s permission, she probably had heaved a heavy defeated sigh before agreeing. She had always hated to impose her will on others.

Masahiro lowered his eyes forlornly. “... I thought it wouldn’t be big deal. I can feel you nearby. But only being able to hear you but not see you can be a bit troublesome, it seems. Still, this is much better than before.”

Having summed things up, Masahiro rose and continued, “The sun’s setting. Let’s go inside ... huh?”

His eyes widened as he saw the boar that Taiin had dragged in.

“Wow, that’s incredible. How did you catch something like that?”

“Easy. I just smashed its nose with my wind spear when it charged me.”

Taiin pantomimed throwing motions with a neutral expression on her face. Masahiro’s smile twitched slightly as he muttered, “... Easy, huh?”

“Yes, really easy. It was knocked out after just one hit. Then you kill it, drain its blood, and disembowel it. Oh, and if you tan the hide, you can use that too. How about it?” She

spoke with an easy, confident air, and her words would lead one to think that she was an expert hunter.

“We probably won’t have any use for animal hides. Also, we won’t be around here for very long. Just having food supplies should be more than enough.”

Taiin nodded mildly, accepting Genbu’s input. “You’re right. Then after we finish carving the meat, I’ll take the carcass back into the mountain. Things from nature must return to nature—it’s a basic truth, after all.”

Masahiro smiled weakly as Taiin’s head bobbed up and down in emphasis. Genbu broke in with his usual grown-up tone, “Are Kouchin and everyone else inside?”

“Yeah, although Rikugou said that he was going to patrol around, just to be on the safe side.... He goes out every day, doesn’t he?”

He probably went out to patrol every day for safety’s sake, but Masahiro felt that this wasn’t the only reason. Rikugou wasn’t acting any different than usual though, but even if that weren’t the case, he wouldn’t have dared to ask anyway.

Masahiro tilted his head towards the sky and squinted. “Rikugou usually shields his presence anyway. I don’t mind, but ... it can really be rather inconvenient.”

The sun was gradually sinking in the west, leaving a reddening sky. In the cusp between day and night, the world was awash with orange, and the light on Masahiro’s face bathed him with a crimson glow. As Masahiro watched the sky, Genbu examined his face with an undecipherable expression.

... *Is Masahiro pretending to be okay?* He probably was, seeing that he had used every ounce of his determination and pushed himself to the very limit. He could not even get up for a long while, and hardly touched any food, making everyone—with one exception—fear that the boy would slowly waste away and die. That one exception had glanced over and told everyone else, “... If he dies, then that’s all he’s worth.”

Those unfeeling words rang out clearly and matter-of-factly in a high-pitched voice, like that of a child. The speaker’s eyes were cool as he spoke, despite the presence of Masahiro lying nearby.

When Masahiro opened his eyes several hours later, he finally ate some porridge even though he previously never managed to stomach any food. He fought hard not to vomit and forced himself to take water, allowing him to finally pull through the most critical stage of his recovery.

A bitter ache radiated in Genbu’s chest as he recalled that time.

Was he really asleep at that time? Surely he was, otherwise he could not have taken it so calmly.

The spirit summon blinked as something came to mind.

“Masahiro.”

“Hmm ...?”

Genbu hesitated briefly, but continued to forge ahead. “I know where Kouchin and Rikugou are ... but what about Touda?”

Taiin, who was next to him, started noticeably at the question.

“I don’t know ... probably somewhere around here. That’s what the others said. But now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him for a while.”

The boy spoke as if referring to some distant acquaintance.

“... Is that so?”

“But I think he’s definitely around here somewhere. I thought I saw a flash of a white tail this morning.”

Masahiro smiled suddenly. “It’s strange. Even though I can’t see Genbu and the spirits around here, why can I still see that white form?”

He remembered that Rikugou was the first to notice.

At that time, Masahiro had only just begun to recover after hovering near death for so long. Not knowing whether he was awake or asleep, he had lain there, staring blankly at the ceiling. Suddenly, he knit his brows and swept his eyes across the room.

“Rikugou ... you are nearby ... aren’t you?”

Rikugou was seated next to Masahiro. He was not shielding his presence, nor suppressing his aura, because there was no need to do so.

“I am right here.... Masahiro?”

Rikugou and Kouchin were the ones with Masahiro then. Genbu had gone out to gather supplies, while Taiin had been patrolling the area since morning before heading over to the district nearby. Kouchin too was not shielding her presence. She sat on the veranda of the cabin a little distance away, so it was understandable that she might not have been

spotted. But Rikugou was seated so close that Masahiro could have reached out and touched him, but even so, the boy's eyes stared past him unseeing.

The boy had a sudden sense of foreboding.

He tried to prop himself up on his arms, but they were too weak to bear any weight and collapsed. Concerned, Rikugou held out his hand, startling Masahiro who had suddenly felt a hand touch him.

"... You're here ... right? It has to be ... I can feel a hand here."

"Masahiro?"

The commotion drew Kouchin's attention, and she edged closer. Masahiro had clutched Rikugou's arm tightly, as if trying to stand, and was mumbling in a hoarse, raspy voice, "... I can't see...."

Icy, dull eyes examined the empty space. He could see his own hands, his clothes ... everything surrounding him.

But he was lacking his *sight*.

He had lost the *sight* that allowed him to see nonhumans, just like when he was a child.

The spirit summons were shocked. Masahiro's *sight*, which he had had since birth, was about as powerful as Abe no Seimei's, even if second to that of Fujiwara no Akiko, who was now living at the Abe estate. But in the Bureau of *Onmyou*, no one could match Masahiro. And yet now, he was saying that he could not see them. He could sense their aura, yes, and he could hear them, but he could no longer see them.

Masahiro was the youngest grandchild of the great *onmyouji* Abe no Seimei, and was being groomed as the heir to Seimei's legacy. The more powerful the *onmyouji*, the more critical it was to have the *sight*, because without it, his very life would be in danger.

Although the summons had paled at the realization, Masahiro himself was calm and composed. He had only been surprised in the beginning. After Kouchin and Rikugou increased their spiritual power to the level where normal humans could see them, he had noted their ashen faces. Scratching his head, he muttered, "This can't be good."

It wasn't like he was blind. In addition, he was actually alive. He should have died, and yet he had survived. There was no question that such a miracle would have required a heavy sacrifice. Compared to before, when he could neither see, nor hear, nor feel spiritual presences, he was pretty well off.

Masahiro had tried to cast a spell, and he felt the air shimmer in response. It seemed like he had not lost his spiritual powers. Even though it had weakened in parallel with his frail

physical state, it would return to full strength once he recovered. At that point, he could reassess his options.

Upon returning to the capital, he would be able to see his grandfather. Seimei would probably be a bit surprised, because he himself was too. This condition would be rather inconvenient though, and Masahiro figured that he'd be lucky if Seimei wasn't too angry.

Taiin tugged at Masahiro's hand as he was lost in thought. The boy was startled out of his musing and turned to look at her, only to see two child summons staring at him anxiously. Worrying the mercurial Taiin was one thing, but to think he had made even the normally unperturbable Genbu look so tense.

'Oh no,' Masahiro thought before hurriedly speaking, "I'm starting to get hungry. But I guess I'm the only one who needs to eat around here."

As the summons were nonhuman, they had no need for food.

As Genbu started to head towards the cabin, he glanced over at the wild vegetables he had gathered. "We can eat when we are in our human forms, but there's no need for that right now."

The term 'human form' actually referred to a 'human-like form' which was similar to his current form, except that his hair and eye colours would darken to shades similar to humans and his ears would lose their characteristic tapering point.

Masahiro furrowed his brows and replied, "Oh, that's so mean. It's so lonely eating by myself."

"You might be lonely, but you can't regain your strength without eating, you know," Taiin declared, pointing a finger at Masahiro while her other hand still dragged the wild boar.

"If you don't hurry and recover in time to travel to the Yamashiro village the moment Narichika arrives, you won't make it back to the capital in time for the firefly season."

Masahiro nodded and turned his head to glance at the roof of the cabin. He wasn't looking for anything particular, but simply felt like looking in that direction.

Sitting on the roof was a white *mononoke*.

Its form was the size of a large cat or small dog, its movements lithe and graceful. Its entire body was covered with pristine white fur. At the end of its four feet were five razor-sharp claws, and red spikes ringed its neck. Its ears were long, trailing behind it and a red flower-like pattern adorned the center of its forehead. Large, round, crimson eyes stared back at Masahiro.

This was the transformed shape of one of the twelve spirit summons, Touda.

The *mononoke* looked at Masahiro for a moment before turning away and departing.

Chapter 3

... A wife left her children and had yet to return.

... A daughter left to play in the afternoon and was not seen again.

A few people had thus claimed, but twilight had set in by the time people had fanned out through the village to search for them.

Men bearing torches formed a group and headed towards the mountain and sea, because the missing girl was only six, and could have fallen into the sea and been swept away. Despite their unease, the women and elderly stayed to support and comfort the ashen-faced mother and fretful children crying for their mother.

It was not long before the men found the missing pair.

Both were lying unconscious next to the forbidden shrine. The men would have preferred not to approach the shrine, but in this case, it was unavoidable. As they drew nearer, they were aghast to see that the shrine had been destroyed.

“H-How...”

The pair lay on the ground, motionless, and the men paled, fearing that they had not survived. However, as they were examined more carefully, it was noted that they were still breathing. It seemed like they were only unconscious after all.

Heaving a collective sigh of relief, one cradled the child in his arms while another carried the woman on his back. Both men had turned to head back towards the village, before they noticed that the last member of their group had yet to move away from the shrine.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

The remaining man glanced around wildly in trepidation. “... The thing that was being worshipped here.... Where did it go?”

When he was a child, he had once broken the rules and approached the shrine, falling mysteriously ill afterwards. But now, the shrine had been reduced to rubble. Scanning the area, his eyes fell upon the wooden doors, its pieces broken and scattered about as if blown out from the inside. And unlike before, when he used to fear this place so terribly, he barely felt anything at all ... perhaps because the shrine was no longer standing?

One of the men looked distinctly unsettled as he urged, “Let’s go. If we don’t hurry, it may be too late!”

“Ah ... okay...” The young man turned away and hastened after the pair who had started making their way back to the village.

Buried beneath the remnants of the destroyed shrine, a white tablet lay broken in two pieces. Once the villagers had departed, a shadowy human form emerged. The wind died suddenly.

A suffocating silence cloaked the entire area.

“... Now that was a bit excessive,” the shadow muttered from the shadows.

“I was fortunate to find such a willing pawn. Now, I just have to wait for the released demon to go wild.”

The ghost of a laugh carried through the darkness.

“And the hidden one will have to emerge at last...”

The deep night shuddered as mocking laughter rang through the mountain.

Masahiro did not like the nights, because he would dream. If only he would forget these dreams upon waking ... but more often than not, he could recall them with perfect clarity.

He did not want to dream, so he faked sleep until morning, so as not to arouse the suspicion and notice of the spirit summons. Occasionally, he would nap briefly during the day, but this was not enough to make up for the lack of rest. His stressed body would succumb to sleep, the dreams would return, and so the cycle continued.

A gentle warmth radiated from the dying embers in the stove pit. Still, these days, the evenings were quite chilly, and Masahiro pulled the large kimono he was using as a blanket up to his shoulders and turned over. This kimono was his own, Taiin having specifically fetched it for him.

Even though his eyes had long adjusted to the dark, it was pitch black inside the cabin and he could not even make out vague forms around him. The cabin was very small, after all, with just one wooden door and a single window-like opening.

At night, the various summons usually shielded their presence, and Masahiro would not be able to detect even their auras. Sometimes, he even wondered if they had returned to their own realm.

When he closed his eyes, his mind would conjure images of vivid landscapes splashed with startling white and the crimson of fire, and the face of the one he met on the shore of darkness.

A light breeze suddenly stirred.

Masahiro opened his eyes immediately, and saw the white *mononoke* a small distance away. He had not felt any aura until then, and surmised that it had just slipped under the door noiselessly.

The *mononoke* felt his eyes, and turned to him with a frigid expression.

“What do you want?” Its voice was harsh and frosty.

... Hmm? What is it?

That same voice, but with such a different intonation, suddenly echoed in Masahiro’s mind. His back of his eyelids suddenly prickled.

Those eyes that filled with unspoken emotion seemed to irritate the *mononoke*, which then snapped coldly, “How annoying.”

Masahiro felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach, and he scrambled to apologize. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to....”

Without waiting to hear him out, the *mononoke* turned its back to him and slipped back outside.

The real form of this *mononoke* was that of Touda, one of the twelve spirit summons. As such, it would hardly be affected the cold of the night. In Masahiro’s mind, an image suddenly popped up. He could practically see the *mononoke* that, even in the deepest, coldest winter nights, would saunter around unaffected by the weather. Sometimes, it would stand on its two hind feet and look up at Masahiro, blinking its bright crimson eyes.

...You’re going to get sick if you let yourself get too cold. You should probably bundle up a bit more...

Masahiro shut his eyes and dived deeper into the kimono cover. Hugging his knees, he curled up in a fetal position and pressed his lips together tightly, his body stiff from trying to hold back the surge of emotion welling up inside.

This was a consequence of his own making.

The white *mononoke* was nearby, even if they hardly ever spoke to each other. It was still alive. Although it was here only because of Seimei’s orders, the young boy had to remind himself nightly that that was good enough. It was enough for him to see that white form, which would only approach him in the middle of the night.

That it would even approach him during this time was probably because the other spirit summons were not nearby. To be precise, the summons were likely simply shielding their

presence, because they could not completely leave Masahiro's side without leaving him vulnerable. When they were at his side, however, the *mononoke* would not approach. Perhaps it felt that the guard was already sufficient.

Lately, the boy had begun to notice that Taiin would become extremely skittish when the *mononoke* was around. She would shrink away, as if cowering, and when it finally retreated or disappeared, she would finally relax.

"... Can't sleep?" A low, even voice suddenly boomed in the silence.

Masahiro jumped and slowly poked his head out from under the kimono.

The door through which the *mononoke* had exited was still ajar, allowing the light of the moon to filter in. It illuminated half of Kouchin's face as she sat cross-legged next to the door. Masahiro wondered if she had been there all along.

The wind blowing in through the open doorway ruffled her black, shoulder-length hair. Calm eyes, filled with serenity like tranquil waters in the twilight, glittered as they gazed steadily at Masahiro.

Masahiro pushed himself up gingerly as he replied, "Yeah ... because of the dreams."

She had deliberately shown herself and greeted him. If it were Rikugou, he would have remained silent and still, while Genbu and Taiin wouldn't have known what to say and in the end would have stayed silent as well.

Previously, Masahiro rarely ever saw Kouchin, but within the past half a month, he had grown familiar with her and her quirks. Kouchin rarely sought to join the group; instead, she would remain slightly apart, watching from the outside. She was a warrior spirit who, in the midst of battle, would wield an overwhelming divine power, but otherwise, she was cool-headed and highly dependable. Rikugou, too, often stepped back and rarely expressed his opinions. However, one major difference between the two was that if Kouchin had an opinion, she would express it clearly. Furthermore, she was a person who had a certain way with words, allowing people to listen to her without feeling defensive.

Was it strange, perhaps, to call a spirit summon a 'person'?

Masahiro rose from his bed, which was really just a straw mat and a kimono covering, and sat down beside Kouchin.

"You'll get sick if you let yourself get cold," Kouchin warned as she pulled over his kimono and draped it over his shoulders, "Cover up."

The boy was reminded of the *mononoke* that used to fret over him, just like this.

His chest ached.

Kouchin and Masahiro sat silently together for a while, the moonlight gleaming on the ground between them.

Masahiro felt like Kouchin was waiting for him to speak, so he began, hesitantly, "... Taiin seems very uneasy."

Kouchin blinked, and narrowed her eyes slightly. "Is that so?"

"Genbu too, although he tries not to show it.... But Rikugou and Kouchin seem to be okay."

"Rikugou's always been like that. He generally doesn't act differently for anyone—it's a trait of his. Although ... there are exceptions, occasionally."

"I see." Masahiro nodded unthinkingly, assuming that she was simply referring to his grandfather, who, as a great *onmyouji* and master of the twelve spirit summons, was probably treated a bit differently.

"As for me ... I guess so. I'm not scared of him."

"Scared?"

Masahiro raised his head questioningly, so she continued, "Yes. Taiin trembles like that because she's scared of Touda. Even in the past, if she were alone, she would never go near Touda."

"Why is that?"

It had never once occurred to Masahiro to be scared of Touda. True, the present Touda's words were cold and scathing, his eyes undecipherable, and he himself remained distant and aloof. But that was all there was to it.

Kouchin seemed to perceive Masahiro's puzzlement and tilted her head closer, crossing her long arms across her chest and smiling faintly.

"Both you and Seimei are strange humans. Normal people fear his spiritual power because it feels savage, harsh and cold. He would never seek friendship or familiarity, or even hold a conversation. Simply put, others feel like they are being constantly snubbed and rejected."

"..."

Masahiro stared at Kouchin, forgetting to even blink.... He never knew ... he had never known that Touda.

The summon's shapely lips continued to move. "That's the Touda we summons know well.... That's why I'm so tired of seeing him like this. I don't like heartless men."

She spoke evenly, but there was an undercurrent of displeasure in her tone. Unfortunately, Masahiro was unable to sense it.

A fire deity so vicious that even his fellows like the twelve spirit summons avoided him. The flames that shrouded him were blazing fires of purgation, a cleansing inferno of hell that could burn all of existence into ashes. Only one human had reached out to Touda, and that was Abe no Seimei who, in his youth, had given him another name. Touda considered that name 'his most priceless treasure'.

"... Does Touda ... want to go back to grandfather's side?" Masahiro's hoarse voice clearly conveyed his distress.

Kouchin glanced at the young boy from the corner of her eye. Masahiro had lowered his head, hands fisted tightly on his lap. In the darkness of the room, the only source of light was a sliver of moonlight, but the whiteness of his knuckles could not have been only because of the pale light.

In the deep silence, a low, even voice replied, "... Probably ..."

Masahiro's heart clenched.

...It was so obvious ...

Masahiro had crept back into bed, but even with his eyes closed, he could not suppress his emotions enough to fall back to sleep.

...that Touda was here out of duty.

He consented to stay here in Izumo, so far from the capital, to act with the other spirit summons and to stay by the side of a boy who didn't even have the *sight*, only because it was Abe no Seimei's orders. This devotion only showed how important Seimei was to him.

If Touda was really the person Kouchin had described, then who was the 'Guren' that he had known?

Did that Guren really exist? Was the Guren he knew gone forever?

The Touda he did not know ... a white *mononoke* with eyes so cold....

Masahiro buried his face into the kimono blanket and turned to his side. Curling up like a small child, he shut his eyes tightly.

“ ... ”

If that were the case, then there was no need to remain in that form. He could return to his real form and simply shield his presence like Rikugou and the rest.

If only he would do that, then Masahiro's heart would not have to keep clinging on to his feeble hopes ... an impossible hope, but one he could not bear to let go.

... What's the matter, Masahiro?

It would tilt its head to look at the face of the seated boy with eyes glowing like the setting sun. A tender smile, a white tail thumping softly against his back....

... Is something bothering you? Why don't you tell me about it...

His nails dug into the kimono.

“... Forget me....” he had said then.

These were things that could not be, because the Touda nearby was a Touda he did not know.

A Touda that did not know Masahiro. A Touda that had completely erased the existence of a boy named Masahiro.

Wasn't that what he himself had wanted? To have Touda forget it all, so that he would not be tormented by grief and guilt after being revived.

Masahiro had wished for this, and so he had chanted the spell of forgetfulness....

Despite being closed, his eyes burned yet he pretended not to notice.

Like the flow of a clear stream, like water slipping from an open hand, like the grains of sand trickling through grasping fingers....

I wish for you to forget. You can forget, because I will remember it all.

In truth, this was probably a selfish plea. Because of this, it was as if part of Guren's heart was ripped out. The agonizing torment he was feeling was a fitting punishment for someone so selfish like himself.

He wanted that kind spirit summon to come back, so much so that he was willing to give his own life in return. But somehow, he himself had ended up alive. Just losing his *sight* could not possibly be sufficient payment for all that had happened.

He would have to live with this pain for the rest of his life.

And yet, in the depth of every night, at the close of every dream, he would probably make the same choice.

Because no matter what, he could not bear that loss.

Morning dawned without a single wink of sleep. Thick clouds hung in the sky, as if reflecting Masahiro's heart.

Taiin opened the door and frowned. "Without the sun, the temperature's really dropped. The air's kind of humid too. I don't like this at all."

Turning back, Taiin scrunched up her face when she saw Masahiro.

"Hey, did you sleep at all? Your face is all pale, like you've been drained of all life or something. If boar meat isn't enough to strengthen you up, I can go hunt some deer or bears if you'd like."

"Bear meat would probably be a bit too much. A rabbit would be enough. Or if you prefer, pheasant or partridge."

Taiin seemed flustered at the suggestion and, noticing Genbu's strange look, squeaked out half-heartedly, "Rabbits and pheasants and partridges are so small. They're too easy to miss."

... No wonder the trees around there had all been completely levelled ...

The perceptive Genbu did not press the issue, and merely told her to go hunt some deer.

Taiin's attacks tended to rely mostly on power, because she simply had no finesse. On the other hand, the hulking Byakkou was adept at all skills in which Taiin was lacking, and the pair complemented each other well.

Genbu thought of Byakko, who looked like Taiin's father when they stood side by side, and nodded knowingly.

Of course, he failed to consider how this reflected back on him, because when he stood next to Byakko, they seemed like a father-son pair as well.

Masahiro listened to their conversation apprehensively.

... Just one boar was already crazy enough. What would he do if she brought back a deer or a bear?

Taiin crossed her arms, not noticing Masahiro's nervous silence. "The last time with Seimei, it was in the middle of winter. It was really tough. We couldn't relocate, there

wasn't a lot of game to hunt, and the snow covered all the plants. In the end, we had to hunt the rabbits that were running around in the snow or shoot down birds."

"Ah ... ha..." Masahiro could only stutter in response.

"If only it were autumn. There'd be fruits all over. And oh, since we're at it, how about some fish? The Tsukiya river seems to be full of them." Taiin clapped her hands, delighted by her brilliant idea, and turned to beg for Genbu's agreement.

"Genbu, you think it's a good idea? Or maybe the sea might be better. Flying there won't take long at all."

"Yeah, sounds good. It would be nice to eat something different for a change," Genbu answered, nodding firmly. Taiin grabbed his arm and spun around to Masahiro.

"We'll be right back. Just wait for us, okay? You're looking really pale, so don't go outside like yesterday."

With her finger pointing fiercely at him, Masahiro could only smile stiffly in response.

"Alright."

With that, Taiin hauled Genbu off the veranda. A few steps away, a lazy whirlwind wrapped around the pair and turned into a twister in the blink of an eye.

Howling winds buffeted the cabin. Masahiro covered his eyes, and when he finally peeked between his fingers, the pair had disappeared.

Masahiro heaved a sigh.

They were noisy and disruptive, but the moment they left, he felt his solitude keenly.

Taiin and Genbu were both worried about him, and were trying to support him the best they could. If not for a situation like this, they probably wouldn't be thinking of hunting deer and bears and the like, nor would they actually do it. Probably....

Masahiro pushed the door open even wider, and settled down on the veranda, his feet resting on the ground below. The sky was pregnant with heavy clouds moving ponderously overhead, and it seemed like it was about to rain.

As he gazed at the sky absently, he heard a swish of clothing behind him. Looking around, he saw the trailing edge of a cloak as Rikugou materialized. His eye caught sight of a flash of red on his chest, underneath the cloak.... *What was that?*

"... Rikugou."

Masahiro twisted around to face him. The spirit summon's golden eyes seemed to acknowledge him, silently. On the far wall, Kouchin leaned back to observe them.

"... That red thing ... on your chest.... What is it?"

"... Someone gave it to my keeping."

His voice was dispassionate, like always, and his facial expression did not change. However, for a fleeting moment, Masahiro felt something shift in the air. Thinking back to Rikugou's words, he settled back into his former position.

"Is that so."

It suddenly struck him that, looking back, he still hadn't heard the whole story about what had transpired after he separated from his grandfather.

... How did grandfather and his summons deal with that man?

Kazane had been critically injured by pursuing demons. They had left Rikugou with her because they could not lose time chasing down the Chishiki sect leader.

Masahiro intended to ask for the full story later, because he needed to know what had happened. And....

"..."

His eyes widened as a heavy realization struck him like a lance piercing his chest.

... I have to apologize to grandfather....

He had begged for such a cruel favour, without stopping to consider what granting it would have cost his grandfather. No, that wasn't it. He knew. He knew very well, but pretended not to, because that desire had burned so strongly.

A white form flashed at the edge of his sight. Swivelling his eyes around, he saw the white *mononoke*, staring at him tensely, its crimson eyes unfeeling. Finally, it looked away.

It was like those eyes were condemning him. His gut twisted painfully.

"Masahiro?"

Kouchin had noticed Masahiro's shoulders quivering, and asked out of concern. Masahiro tried his hardest to act nonchalant.

"... It's ... nothing...."

An aura drew near him. Kouchin stopped beside him and, noticing a flash of white turning the corner, sighed softly.

“... It’s like the moon, isn’t it? You can see it, but you can never get close to it,” she whispered, resignedly. Masahiro looked up at her.

“It’s so irritating when he acts like this.”

The summon’s brows furrowed as she knelt by Masahiro, studying his face. Reaching out to touch his forehead, she gave him a solicitous look.

“No fever, but you’re not looking so good. How about resting a bit?”

“No ... I’m alright ... really.”

Kouchin’s eyes held an unfathomable depth as she examined the forced smile on Masahiro’s face. Masahiro, fearing that she would call him on his bluff, hurriedly changed the topic.

“Oh ... Chigaeshi’s seal ... the holy ground ... what happened in the end?”

Kouchin’s eyes narrowed in mild displeasure, but she did not resist the topic change. She sat down and stared away from the cabin like Masahiro. Rikugou sat unmoving behind them, and in the absence of any aura, it was easy to forget that he was there. Kouchin contemplated the camellia trees that ringed the cabin. The trees were in full bloom, their small scarlet petals striking a vibrant contrast to the deep greens of the forest.

“They’ve returned to normal, or as normal as things could be, given the circumstances. But quite a bit had to be sacrificed even for that.”

“Sacrifice...?” Masahiro repeated softly.

“I was with you, so I only heard about it from Seimei. If you really want to know right away, how about asking Genbu use the water mirror to put you in contact with Seimei when he returns?”

The boy raised his eyebrows. A direct conversation with his grandfather? The thought had never occurred to him.

“We still have to stay here a bit longer. This shouldn’t be much trouble. How about it?”

Masahiro gulped, eyes darting back and forth nervously. The tight knot in his chest and his suppressed emotions clashed together in a turbulent jumble that threatened to overwhelm him.

Hands fisted tightly, he felt a chill down his spine like iced water trickling down his back.

Chapter 4

The young child opened her eyes, but they did not seem to see anything.

“Are you alright? Say something!”

Seeing her daughter so unresponsive, the mother became increasingly distraught and began shaking the child’s shoulders. But the girl’s head only rocked back and forth bonelessly like a doll, and her eyes remained blank and unfocused.

The father clenched his fist as he watched his wife weep hysterically, wailing about how she should never have left her daughter on her own. He had admonished his daughter over and over again not to go near that shrine. In the distant past, in the days of his grandfather’s grandfather, a demon had come with the western winds and wrecked havoc in the area, causing so much destruction and death that almost the entire village had been wiped out.

The villagers were helpless to do anything but await their fate. Then, one night, the demon suddenly vanished and that small shrine had appeared in its place, a little distance away. Afterwards, people began to warn against going near the shrine, saying that it was used in the worship of evil spirits. Indeed, anyone who approached it met with misfortune.

Somewhere else, the young woman who had collapsed near the shrine opened her eyes after one day and one night. She lay on a futon that consisted of a mat and a worn kimono. As she detachedly trailed her eyes across the interior of the house, the two children by her side leaned over to look at their mother’s face in delight and relief.

“Mommy! Thank goodness....”

The eyes of the youngest child brimmed with tears. Yet the young woman stared at him in surprise.

“...Mommy...?”

The elder child stiffened when he heard her. Something was wrong.

“Mommy?”

The woman raised herself up into a sitting position and frowned.

“What are you talking about?”

It was then that the children’s father, or in other words, the woman’s husband, returned from his visit to the village elder’s home. Spying his wife sitting up, he smiled in relief.

“Thank goodness. I wouldn’t have known what to do if you didn’t wake up....”

He knelt next to the mat and reached out with his coarse, worn hands. The woman frantically swatted his hands away.

“What are you talking about? Where am I?” she snapped harshly and scuttled backwards, sweeping a wary eye over the man and two children.

“What are you saying? This is your home.”

The young woman shook her head violently.

“Liar. You’re lying. This isn’t my home. Why did you bring me here? What do you want with me?!” She screamed at the top of her voice and rose to her feet unsteadily.

“Take me back to my parents! They must be so worried. My mother has a weak heart and can’t even work. If I’m not there....”

The two child rushed to cling to their mother as she staggered towards the door to leave without even bothering to find her shoes.

The woman shoved the children away from her forcefully. The older child fell flat on his bottom, his upturned face staring at his mother incredulously. The younger child slammed his knee on the ground as he fell, and howled in misery. The elder was starting to tear up as well. Their father, taking heed of his wife’s bizarre behaviour, approached her cautiously.

Trying his best to return her to her senses, he pleaded, “What are you talking about? Your parents died in that epidemic a long time ago.”

The young woman shook her head slowly, her eyes wide with fear. “You’re lying. My father’s perfectly healthy. How could he have gotten sick? ...You lured me here somehow, didn’t you!”

“Don’t be stupid!” the man yelled and grabbed his wife’s hand. She screamed wordlessly, her face stiff with fright as she squirmed wildly against his hold. Her eyes fell on the children, crying as they inched nearer to her.

“I don’t know them. I don’t know these children! Let me go home...!”

It was what one called instinct.

Almost a year ago, back when he did not have his *sight* and could not sense spiritual auras, he still would have ‘premonitions’. Once his *sight* returned, this sense grew even

stronger. And now, lacking the *sight* again, it seemed like this instinct had honed itself to its keenest point in compensation.

Masahiro started and hopped down the ground, unshod. Walking a few meters, he stopped abruptly and studied his surroundings, ashen faced. A few moments later, Kouchin's and Rikugou's aggressive auras burst into his awareness as they rushed to his side and stepped in front of him, surveying the area. The *mononoke* on the rooftop bent down to observe them.

"... Hmm." It blinked disinterestedly and turned its crimson eyes away.

A demonic aura drifted in on the wind, past the thick foliage enveloping the cabin. It unsettled the *mononoke* as it surrounded them. With an angry expression, it clicked its tongue in distaste.

"... Water demon."

The water demon's frigid, suffocating aura suffused through the air, filled with malice as it settled around them, challengingly.

The *mononoke* spared a glance at Kouchin and the others. Both Rikugou and Kouchin had massive spiritual powers, especially Kouchin, who was second only to itself. Even if it didn't do anything, the pair would be able to handle this threat easily.... Still, the thought of sitting back was somehow galling.

The trees rustled, as if agitated by the approaching aura.

"That way ... from the west?"

"Yes, and a bit north."

The terse words reflected the tension in Masahiro's frame. Rikugou's cloak fluttered unnaturally and his dark brown hair whipped in the wind. Kouchin's shoulder-length hair, too, flowed as her eyes gleamed fiercely.

"... It's really fast."

As if it were carried by the wind.

The silver bracelet on Rikugou's left arm glowed briefly, and transformed into a silver spear in the blink of an eye. The spirit summon moved to cover Masahiro's rear.

"... It's here."

A shadow burst out of the forest, drowning out those muttered words.

Taiin and Genbu gazed into the water near the headwaters of the Tsukiya river.

“... Found one!”

The moment Taiin pointed, Genbu’s spiritual aura surged forward.

Several river trout, which had been sleeping in the nooks and crannies of rocks near the bottom of the river, suddenly floated into the air in balls of water. The balls then dispersed, dropping the fish onto the ground, where they flopped and flailed desperately.

“Wow! So many! You’re really something.” Taiin clapped gleefully as she waxed eloquent about Genbu’s prowess. Genbu, for his part, tuned her out as he picked up one of the fish with a sigh.

“River trout is one of Seimei’s favourite foods.”

... Once we’re ready to return to the capital, it might be a good idea to catch a few more as a gift for Seimei ...

On occasion, Seimei would head to a river with his fishing rod and tackle for a bit of fishing. Still, it seemed like he took those trips mainly to contemplate matters, so he never really caught much. Seimei would glare spitefully at the fish swimming unconcernedly and tauntingly in the water. Rikugou, who would go along as a guard, and Genbu, who would tag along because he had nothing better to do, would end up feeling sorry for him. He probably was hopeless at fishing anyway.

“Masahiro likes them too. He’s Seimei’s grandson after all.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Taiin puffed out her chest. “They live together. Of course they would like the same things!” she declared confidently. Whether such a statement could be proved, however, was another matter entirely.

Genbu muttered under his breath that Yoshihira, Seimei’s eldest son, had lived with Seimei since he was born, and still didn’t like river trout. That fact didn’t fit in with Taiin’s theory. Still, Genbu knew better than to state it out loud, because Taiin would throw a fit and get so angry steam would be coming out of her ears.

The two cut down some vines, washed them in the river, and threaded them through the mouths of the fish they had caught. As they looked at the water, thinking that they were done for the day, a strange aura skimmed across the water’s surface and wrapped around their legs.

At that moment, Taiin was floating in the air while Genbu stood on the sandy river bank. The water’s edge, merely two feet away from Genbu, was quite calm, whereas the water

under Taiin flowed swiftly. They were fishing in a pool just a bit downstream of the Tsukiya river headwaters. Taiin shook her leg, trying to get rid of whatever had latched on to her, while landing on the ground next to Genbu. The bank was rocky and gravelly, making it uncomfortable to stand on.

“... Genbu.”

“Yeah.”

As they threw their catch towards the water's edge, a black shadow shot from the water and snapped up the bundle of fish. The human-like face of the creature was split in two, its red mouth swallowing the bundle in one go. The mouth was filled with razor-sharp teeth, and a few remaining shreds of vines fell out into the water. The entire body of this monster was covered with stiff, black fur, its four feet splayed on the water, and its dull round eyes glared balefully at the two spirit summons. A high-pitched screech like metal grinding against metal was bone-chilling, and Taiin shivered uncontrollably.

“You ...!”

She snapped her right hand smartly, sending a wind spear hurtling towards the monster with a sky-splitting roar. However, the monster easily side-stepped the spear, which instead took out the row of *katsura* trees growing on the bank.

“Taiin!” Genbu yelled reprovably, but Taiin paid him no heed. She began to create a small cyclone.

“How dare you eat Masahiro's food...!”

This time, the cyclone she let loose in fury hit its target dead center. The monster squealed in indescribable agony as it was hurled backwards and smashed into the water with a tremendous splash.

“You're not getting away!” Taiin snarled as she prepared to give chase. Genbu quickly grabbed the collar of her shirt.

“Wait!”

“Hey!” Taiin flipped backwards while Genbu maintained his grip on her. He looked towards the cabin with a grim expression.

“That aura...”

“What?”

Genbu released Taiin and turned to fully face the direction of the cabin. A moment later, Taiin felt the strands of demonic aura woven into the wind, and her eyes glittered with suppressed tension.

“It’s just like a moment ago...!”

The aura of the demon she had just dispatched ... the same type of aura was emanating from the cabin.

Once Genbu and Taiin had departed, air bubbles appeared near the water surface. A black head emerged. The demon turned its face in the direction the pair had left in, and dove back into the water with a loud splash. It did not resurface.

The *mononoke* ground its teeth in irritation.

A black demon had suddenly appeared and, baring its fangs, launched an assault. Rikugou fended it off with his silver spear, while Kouchin’s kick sent it crashing into a camellia tree with a piercing shriek. The demon was back on its feet in a heartbeat, and immediately charged again. A cloak the colour of twilight whipped out, blinding the demon. Kouchin used the opportunity to grab hold of the unmoving young boy, pulling him out of harm’s way as the demon’s claws slashed out, slicing nothing but air.

The *mononoke* clucked in annoyance, its eyes drilling into the pale-faced boy.

... He’s helpless against the demon. He has Seimei’s blood ... and yet ... is this boy completely powerless?

“Masahiro, are you alright?”

Masahiro nodded with a determined expression as Rikugou and Kouchin continued to protect him.

“Ah ... yeah. I’m okay.”

The aura was flitting here and there, never still for a moment. It was making him dizzy. He could hear sounds ... the sound of four feet pounding on the ground past the trees, crushing the grass underfoot. His bare skin could feel the demonic aura so acutely that his hair was standing on end. Suddenly, he felt something hard and cold against his neck. He knew that the demon had closed in on him.

Masahiro bit his lip.

He now understood profoundly what it meant not to have *sight*. Even when he concentrated with everything he had, and was able to pinpoint the location of the demon, he did not have time to act. His eyes would pause, looking at something that wasn’t there.

By the time his hearing and senses honed in on the demon, the aura of the demon had moved on. And so it went, endlessly.

Long ago, when his grandfather had sealed away his powers, Masahiro did not experience anything like this. At that time, he could not see, hear or feel the demons and their auras, and so never felt so uncoordinated and incompetent.

“Masahiro!”

The edge of Rikugou’s silver spear glinted in the corner of his eye. Masahiro ducked, and felt a burning pain searing his back.

... There’s more than one...!

The young boy could hear many sounds clashing. Even with Rikugou and Kouchin working together, they were having a difficult time suppressing the enemy, and that was likely because they were unexpectedly fast.

Kouchin’s eyes glowed.

“Rikugou, take care of Masahiro,” her voice echoed coldly in the air.

She reached for the three-pronged dagger tucked away in the sash wrapped around her waist, and planted herself in front of the other two.

“How annoying. I’m going to take care of it in one blow.”

“Alright, but don’t take the cabin out as well,” Rikugou warned, predicting what would likely happen. There was no reply.

The grinding tremors of an earthquake resounded throughout the mountain. Rikugou’s eyes widened slightly.

“There isn’t more than one...”

“Huh?” Masahiro responded reflexively.

“There’s only one demon, but it is so fast our eyes can’t follow its movements. It’s quite astounding.”

Even though he said that, Rikugou’s expression did not betray any surprise. As for Masahiro, he was stunned speechless.

... Then all those footsteps that I heard

Masahiro massaged his forehead, realizing that he was in serious trouble. Not being able to see was bad enough. What if he ran into an enemy as strong as this one in the future....

He recalled a long-buried memory. In the past, he used to think that he could never become an *onmyouji* because he lacked the *sight*. But now, even though he could sense their auras, he still could not do much at all, because the *onmyouji* he aspired to become required him to have all five senses available to him. He could not lack even one.

As he clenched his fists, a low, frosty voice pierced his ears.

“How absolutely pathetic.”

The white *mononoke* had jumped down to land before them soundlessly. In the blink of an eye, it had changed back into its original form. Touda’s golden eyes gleamed coldly as they drilled into Masahiro, who stood there stunned and speechless.

“So this is Seimei’s grandson.”

Unable to breathe and his heart pounding as if ready to burst, Masahiro felt those words as keenly as sharp blades piercing his chest.

Rikugou turned to look at Masahiro, concern plainly visible on his usually stoic face.

“Touda?” Kouchin questioned, but Touda raised a hand to cut her off and turned to glare at the demon.

“Get lost. What an eyesore.”

He raised his hand high and a crimson flame appeared in his palm, flaring into a blazing conflagration in the blink of an eye. Snapping his hand, the flames spread until it completely surrounded the demon like a cage. A snake of fire wrapped around the demon and tightened as the demon struggled to break free. Its dying screams were accompanied by the odour of burning flesh. The fire flared into an inferno that shot into the sky and, just as abruptly, disappeared, along with the demon.

A gust of wind blew across the smouldering heap, bringing with it a searing heat before eventually cooling down. Masahiro suddenly felt cold.

The young boy stared fixedly at Touda’s back, unable to move.

It had been so long since he had last seen this towering form, both lean and muscular, with its messy, wind-tossed hair and the delicately-patterned silver band encircling his brow....

“Masahiro!”

Taiin and Genbu landed in the midst of a wild whirlwind, but froze as they noticed Touda. Taiin's face stiffened and blanched, and it was clear that it was all she could do not to turn tail and flee.

Touda noticed Taiin's reaction and furrowed his brow testily. That unnerved her even more, but Touda did not realize this.

Genbu surveyed the area with a slightly tense expression.

"... The thing you fought ... was it a black demon with a human-like face?"

"Yeah."

It was Kouchin who replied. Touda had made no move to answer.

... The atmosphere was tense and strained. Was it Touda's mere presence that ladened the very air with such brutal intensity?

Masahiro, who had been frozen stiff all along, felt his lips move on their own accord.

"... Guren...."

Immediately, Touda's eyes gleamed with a savage light. The air around him picked up and whipped around cuttingly, like razor blades. An aggressive aura began to radiate from him threateningly. Touda turned around, slowly and deliberately, to glower at Masahiro with a piercing glare.

"... How do you know that name?"

The low voice was filled with fury.... No, it was rather an inexorable pressure. Masahiro could not respond as the vicious and scorching aura smothered him.

As everyone held their collective breaths, Touda spoke again in a frosty voice, "You have no right to call me by that name."

Masahiro's heart turned into ice. He tried to stop the uncontrollable shaking of his knees and clenched his cold hands tightly in a fist. Yet he looked back unblinkingly with calm eyes and an expressionless, if pale, face.

Touda's golden eyes were so bright.

Finally, Touda looked away as if he had lost interest. Changing back into the form of a white *mononoke*, he turned his back to them and disappeared.

After a moment, a chilly wind started to blow.

“... Masahiro!”

... This high-pitched, emotional voice ... whose is it?

“Are you alright? You look really pale.”

... This grown-up tone and the touch of concern ... who is it?

... Why did his eyes feel like they were burning?

All the strength seemed to drain away from Masahiro's legs. Someone's large hands caught his arm as he fell, but that did not even support him as the boy simply slid lifelessly onto the ground.

... I can't see ... can't see ... But what is it I want to see ... what....

... The sound of something precious shattering to pieces in his heart ... what is it?

... Someone kneeling in front of him with eyes like onyx ... who is it?

He couldn't hear anything; not the sound of the wind, nor the whisper of leaves, nor the rustle of grass. All sounds in the universe had faded away, leaving only words echoing thunderously in his mind.

... A name has meaning. It is not something easily given away....

The world before him seemed to sway unsteadily. Or rather, something else was swaying.

... Hey, pay attention, Seimei's grandson....

The one who told him that name....

The all-important name, the name that was his most precious treasure....

The one who told him that name....

... I give you the right to call me by this name....

The one who told him that name....

Chapter 5

She could not remember at all. Not when she gave birth to her children, when she got married, or when she first met her husband. Her time had rewound, all the way back to when she was a child.

... I don't know these children. I'm not married.

She looked at her adoring children with distant eyes, and loathed her beloved husband as if he were a terrible sinner.

“It’s all because of that shrine...” the young man moaned hopelessly.

What on earth had happened to his wife, when she collapsed in front of that destroyed shrine?

He had heard that the child found with his wife had lost all awareness, ending up like a living doll.

But there was still some hope. He had heard that, at a temple near the Tsukiya village by the eastern bay, there was a man with miraculous powers who could heal all illnesses and even resurrect the dead. If he went there to beg for help, surely his wife could be saved.

He entrusted his children to a neighbour and headed to Tsukiya alone. In the past, he had never been one to believe in miracles. He was born in Izumo and had worshipped the deities of legend ever since he was a child. To him, these new religions like the Chishiki sect was highly suspicious, but at this point, he was willing to depend on this sect, which had been rumoured to have worked many miracles, rather than the deities of old who were invisible and failed to answer any of his prayers.

Yet when he arrived, he learned from the people in the village that the Chishiki leader had not been seen for a good while, that he had suddenly disappeared at the beginning of the second month.

What nonsense is this? Where did the leader go? How could he just disappear when he's the only one who can help my wife?

He roamed all over the village, asking people here and there for any clues to the man's whereabouts. All in vain. In the end, he begged the villagers to inform him if the man ever returned, and headed back for home, dejected.

This happened in the middle of the second month.

He returned home to his children, and reminded them repeatedly, “The head of the Chishiki sect will definitely be able to help your mother return to normal. Right now, she’s very sick and can’t remember you. Be patient for a while longer....”

The children smiled and nodded hopefully.

Then, early in the third month, the devastating news that reached his ears was like a nightmare come true. The Chishiki temple had been destroyed, the sect leader was missing, and he and the temple’s young shrine maiden were unlikely to ever return.

The man felt like he had fallen into a deep pit of utter despair. He eyed his children, who had cried themselves to sleep, and choked back a sob as he caressed their damp cheeks.

Someone, anyone ... he would be willing to do anything for them, if only they could save his wife.

Currently, his wife, whose memory had reverted back to that of a child, was living alone in a small cabin outside the village. She had wept in fear, because she was surrounded by people she did not know, and couldn’t believe that all her childhood friends had grown up.

At the moment, taking care of the family was taking up all of the young man’s energy. He had no time for anything else. Therefore, he had no way of knowing that, in that very village, there were others who had lost their minds like his wife, and many others that had simply gone missing.

On the roof of the cabin, the white *mononoke* watched the eastern horizon. Even though it felt the aura of someone drawing near, it did not turn around to look.

“What do you want?”

Kouchin appeared behind the *mononoke*. She had not come with any ill intent, and simply stood there with her arms crossed and a frown on her face.

“Touda, that was Seimei’s grandson.”

“So I heard.”

“Stop talking like this already.”

“Why should I?” it shot back indifferently. Finally, he grudgingly turned around to face Kouchin.

“Kou, I don’t want to be here. I’m only here because Seimei ordered it. You may say he’s Seimei’s grandson, but there’s no reason for me to pay any particular attention to him.”

Kouchin responded heatedly, with a hint of exasperation, “He’s just a kid. His emotions are fragile and easily hurt. I know you hate kids, but that’s no reason to speak to him so harshly.”

The *mononoke* glowered at Kouchin with stern red eyes, flicking its tail back and forth snappishly. Kouchin stared back, unmoved.

Kouchin’s spiritual power was second only to Touda and she was also a deity of destruction. Therefore, she held no fear of him, unlike Taiin and Genbu. To her, someone she could depend on in tight spots like Touda was precious to her, but this was distinct from the issue with Masahiro. She could not forgive his callousness in trampling all over someone’s heart.

And still, she knew that Touda would never willingly open his heart to anyone nor trust anyone. In their long, long lives, the first person who managed to do that was Abe no Seimei.

Kouchin stared into Touda’s eyes, and thought of one of the other twelve spirit summons, Seiryuu.

Seiryuu absolutely loathed Touda. Still, one could say that these two were very much alike. They both detested one another, probably in the same way people hate those who are most like them. Yet both Seiryuu and Touda obeyed Seimei, whom they placed before everything and anything else—even if they sometimes spoke coldly and irritatingly.

“...You....” The *mononoke* squinted at her, “You really favour that boy terribly, Kou. How unexpected.”

Kouchin blinked, and murmured, “... You’re one to talk.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Just something silly. Forget it.”

Kouchin waved her hand at the *mononoke*, who looked suspiciously at her. She almost sighed, but managed to catch herself. Reprimanding Touda wouldn’t change anything. He really had no idea, and that was something that couldn’t be helped.

Her chest ached again at the agonizing choice that Masahiro had made.

If she said anymore, they would simply end up arguing endlessly over this same topic. Kouchin shrugged and ended the conversation.

The *mononoke* did not seem interested in continuing either, and turned to face the eastern direction as before.

The east. The capital of Heian was there, at the very edge of their vision, and with it, Seimei.

Kouchin knew well that Touda tried to keep his distance from Taiin and the rest. He understood Taiin's fear of him, and so chose to be the one to retreat. He had never liked to intimidate others nor be the cause of their fear. Kouchin knew this well, too. Those around him simply chose to be afraid of him.

Kouchin prepared to leave, but was struck by a sudden thought and looked back at the *mononoke*.

"...Touda."

The white back started slightly.

"If you don't like that form, you can just change back and shield your presence."

No one had ever forbidden him from doing so. Before ... well, for humans, it would have been considered the ancient past, but for her it was just like yesterday ... Touda generally stayed in his original form and shielded his presence like the rest of the twelve spirit summons, materializing only when necessary.

The *mononoke* was silent for a moment, before softly replying, "... That's true."

Masahiro was so deeply affected by Touda's words that his knees shook too badly to stand. Rikugou carried him back into the cabin, and Taiin and Genbu sternly ordered the boy to sleep.

His face was pale and drawn, his body as cold as ice, his eyes dull and lifeless ... in this state, he could only do what he was told.

His mind and his heart still felt frozen, but all his senses seemed to have been honed to their keenest point for he could hear his heart pounding endlessly and the sound of his pulse clamoured in his ear. He could close his eyes, but sleep eluded him.

Masahiro stopped trying to sleep, and flipped over to his side. Bending his knees, he curled up under the kimono blanketing him.

... Can't call him that.

He had known that it was the name his grandfather had given him, that it was something unspeakably precious. He had known that he could not use that name now, and yet he had allowed it to slip off his tongue. Because he had always been there for him whenever he no longer knew what to do.

His fingertips felt so cold, and it felt as if his body had been drained of blood.

Dazedly, he thought that it was quite incomprehensible. His body was drained of blood, but where did the blood all go? He wasn't even bleeding.

Masahiro realised that his thoughts were verging on ridiculous, and suppressed a chuckle.

... So ridiculous.

Immediately, the image of a gentle face flashed in his mind.

“ ... ”

He grasped at his chest, searching for something that was no longer there. Fisting his shirt, he thought of the warmth he had held there and bit his lip.

“ ... I.”

I want to see...

I want to see Akiko so much, he thought fervently.

The sun had almost set, throwing the room into darkness. Akiko lit a lantern in Masahiro's room and raised his *kariginu*³ outfit to the light.

“Hmm ... this should be good enough.”

The girl finished her careful examination and tugged at the cloth gently to straighten it out.

... That's good. No loose threads, no visible stitches.

“Ahhh,” she sighed, feeling a sense of accomplishment at having finished her task.

“Oh, Lady Akiko.”

“Ah!” Akiko jumped, so startled it felt like her heart would have burst out of her chest. Spinning around, she saw Abe no Seimei at the door, poking his head in.

Akiko sighed in relief. “Lord Seimei, please don't surprise me like that,” she protested, her eyes rebuking him mildly. The old man smiled sheepishly.

“Oh, I am very sorry.”

He strolled inside amiably and, stopping next to Akiko, asked for permission before bending down to pick up the outfit.

“Hmm ... your needlework is very fine.”

“Not at all. I still have a long way to go.” The girl shrugged and looked up at the ceiling with a frown.

“My mother is very fast and precise with the needle. She can prepare three of my father’s outfit in one day. Lady Tsuyuki’s work is also extremely delicate. All her pieces are gorgeous. I’d like to be more skilled than this, but I’m still not quite there.”

Akiko sighed and pursed her lips. Seimei sat down beside her and smiled in amusement.

“All the ladies seem to say this. My wife used to say that too. Still, she wasn’t very good at needlework to start off with, so even a single outfit was a major undertaking for her.”

This was the first time Akiko had ever heard about something like this from Seimei, and her eyes widened in astonishment.

“Is that so? If I remember correctly, your wife was Lady Wakana....”

“That is correct.” The old man smiled, his eyes distant as if lost in the past.

“She always gave her best in everything she tried to do. She made up with determination for whatever she lacked in skill. I used to have to scold her every now and then not to push herself too hard.”

He had repeated over and over that there was no need for her to devote so much energy to such things. And yet she would shake her head, declaring that she wouldn’t be satisfied until her dear husband’s outfit was so good no one could find fault with it.

No matter how many times she pricked her finger with the needle, Wakana would continue to sew. Even now, that outfit still lay at the bottom of a chest in Seimei’s room.

Seimei returned the outfit to Akiko and surveyed the room.

Masahiro had been gone for more than ten days, but there was no trace of dust in the room because Akiko had painstakingly cleaned it every day. No matter when he returned, the room would be ready for his use.

Masahiro would probably not return until the end of the fifth month, at the earliest. They would have entered the rainy season by then, and the group would have to trudge through the rain to reach the capital. Actually, they could ride on Taiin’s wind and be back almost at once, but Masahiro’s early return would be very difficult to explain. The Minister of the Left would also find it suspicious. To all outsiders, Masahiro had travelled to Izumo

under the direct orders of the Bureau of *Onmyou*, or, in other words, by order of the Minister of the Left himself.

As well as for a compelling reason that no one in the palace knew.

Seimei pulled out a compendium from the pile of documents nearby. It was a compendium that he himself had copied long ago. The past summer, Masahiro had picked it up, and practically made it his own.

The old man smiled and shrugged resignedly. Next to him, Akiko sat folding the *kariginu* outfit meticulously, brows furrowed.

“... Lord Seimei...”

“Yes?”

Her hands stopped briefly as she mumbled, “Masahiro ... he’s still safely travelling to Izumo, isn’t he?”

“Why do you ask?”

She raised her head, her delicate face filled with anxiety. “I had a dream last night. It was just a dream, I know ... just a dream ... but....”

In that dream, Masahiro looked miserable, his eyes pained as if grieving and suppressing some inner torment.

Something had blocked Akiko’s path, preventing her from running or calling to him.

The girl pressed her hands against the sachet hanging from her neck, on top of her kimono. Masahiro had given this sachet to her the day he set out on his journey. If only she could give it back to him.... Its perfumed scent had the power to repel evil, so at least he wouldn’t have to deal with nightmares as he slept.

She also mused about the *mononoke*. When would it return? Will it bring Masahiro back as well? Where was it now? Since no one had told her anything, Akiko still had no idea about the events that had transpired.

She wanted to see that cheerful face. She wanted to see Masahiro.

They had seen each other every day ever since the eleventh month of the previous year. Without him around now, she felt very lonely.

The Abe estate had Seimei, who was sitting next to her, and Yoshimasa and Tsuyuki. Sometimes, one of the twelve spirit summons would appear, but she felt very keenly the absence of Masahiro and the *mononoke*.

Seimei wanted to console the depressed girl, so he pulled a spell book out of the pile of books close at hand.

“Lady Akiko, I will teach you a certain spell.”

“A spell ... sir?”

“Yes,” Seimei nodded with a smile, “A spell to chase your worries away.”

He had no idea when he finally fell asleep. When he opened his eyes again, he found himself lying in a vast, endless space. He lay there, limbs akimbo, watching the sky pensively. In his heart, he was certain that this had to be a dream.

The violet sky seemed to be infinite, unlike the low ceiling of the cabin. It would be great if there were stars and a moon in the sky too, but there was probably no one who would grant a selfish wish like that.

Abruptly, he pushed himself into a sitting position and sighed heavily.

His chest hurt. There was tight knot in his chest that made each breath difficult. Touda’s cold words still echoed back and forth in his mind.

... You have no right to call me by that name ...

He had prepared himself for this, but in the space of a single heartbeat, that resolve had been ground into dust.

“.. Haha ... even my tears won’t flow.”

Even as he mumbled feebly to himself, he felt someone’s warm hands touch his shoulders. Masahiro jumped and looked up. The air shifted, and a familiar, nostalgic scent wafted by. His eyes widened, his mouth ready to utter the word ‘impossible’ before it died away on his lips.

A swish of cloth, and a clear voice sounded, “Are you holding up alright?”

Masahiro immediately lowered his head.

No ... he couldn’t let her see him like this. He wanted to see her so badly, so very much, but even then.... He couldn’t show her his face when he was in this pathetic state, though he had prayed with all his heart that he could see her, even if only in a dream.

The hands left his shoulders, and Masahiro sighed in relief. Instead, he felt a pressure on his back.

Akiko sat leaning against Masahiro's back, and tilted her head to look up at the empty violet sky. Her head knocked gently against Masahiro's, and he looked over to see hair darker than even the twilight.

Masahiro felt something stick in his throat. He caught his breath, clenching his hands and sat stiff and unmoving, hoping the other would not realize that his breath had quickened.

A delicate laugh suddenly sounded behind him.

"... The spell worked."

The girl relaxed in delight. All of her weight fell back against Masahiro, who had to prop himself up with his arms.

"A spell...?"

"Yes. Lord Seimei taught it to me. It's a spell to let you meet the person you want to see in your dreams."

A spell for meeting someone you cannot see in reality.

His back felt so warm, yet his throat was constricted by words he could not speak. Trying to center himself, he took a deep breath.

"I can't ask you about what's troubling you, can I?"

"..."

Masahiro tightened his lips. Anything he said would make things worse, he was certain.

The minutes flew by with no answer. Akiko sighed in surrender. "It's alright. But it would be nice if I could help you with something."

Masahiro shook his head, his lips still sealed, and stole a glance over his shoulder.

... You help me in so many ways. There are so many things only you can do for me.

... Like staying by my side without the need for words ...

... Like warming my heart with your gentle smiles ...

... I wanted to see you so badly. I wanted this so much, from the very bottom of my heart ...

In truth, Masahiro wanted to pour his heart out to her, to share all the agonizing feelings knotted in his heart, to tell her what had happened, what he thought and what he had done.

Once she heard all that, she would probably be angry, or maybe she would cry. Even so, the boy hoped that she would eventually forgive him. Was it even more selfishness on his part?

Akiko stood, and the weight and warmth against his back disappeared.

“I’m waiting for you.”

Masahiro’s shoulders shuddered slightly, and a warm hand reached over to caress his cheek. Akiko lay her forehead against the back of his head and closed her eyes.

“If you are alright, that’s good enough for me. If you are not in pain, if you are not injured ... if you haven’t forgotten me ... I’m happy.”

... If you ... haven’t forgotten me ...

Masahiro nodded wordlessly.

... I haven’t forgotten. There’s no way I would forget. I would never want to forget.

Masahiro raised a hand to cup the hand on his cheek, and finally managed to speak.

“... I’ll definitely go back.”

That was all he could manage to say. His heart felt like bursting from the leashed emotions and unspoken words, and yet he could say no more.

A pale finger trailed across his cheek and disappeared.

He could feel her aura moving away, and he whispered softly once more, “... I’ll go back ... definitely....”

It was not yet dawn when Akiko opened her eyes and blinked.

“ ... ”

She stretched out her arms from under her kimono blanket and raised it above her head, looking at her pale fingers.

Masahiro’s cheek had been so cold. His tense back had hinted to all the emotions he tried to hold back. She had yearned to hug him.

Even though it was just a dream, she should have done so.

It was all just a dream ... only a dream.

And strangely, the *mononoke* was not there.

“...”

When he woke up, he could smell the scent of the dawning morn. He also briefly caught the scent of herbs which did not belong there. But when he bolted upright, the faint scent had dissipated.

Masahiro's brows knitted as he looked down. It seemed like his fingertips, which had been so cold, were now rosy with warmth.

His messy hair rustled lightly, and he could feel a gentle breeze against his ear. Looking up slowly, he noticed that the door was ajar.

Masahiro stood up and walked to look outside.

“... You're up? You can sleep a bit longer, you know.”

Kouchin was leaning against the door as she sat on the porch. She looked over at Masahiro, squinting, so he closed the door and moved to sit next to her.

“What's the matter?”

The warmth in her clear voice pulled Masahiro out of his reverie. Even in the darkness, he could tell that her black eyes were glowing gently.

“... I've ... always wanted to ask you something.”

“Hmm?” She tilted her head, as if urging him to continue.

“It's about the Touda that everyone hates ... it's a Touda I've never known.... How can he be so different?”

The Touda that Masahiro knew ... was Guren.

Guren never looked at him with frosty eyes, never spoke to him with cruel words, or acted so coldheartedly.

Or perhaps Masahiro just didn't know it.

Was that why Taiin was so scared of Touda? Was that why Seiryuu saw him as an enemy?

Kouchin twitched her foot absently as she sat cross-legged on the floor. Cocking her head thoughtfully, her eyes narrowed as if trying to recall distant memories.

“... For me,” she began evenly with a small smile, “There was a time when I found out that Touda was someone who could be trusted. Before then, I thought that his power was all that he was good for, because he was more contrary than Seiryuu, more stoic than Rikugou, and more stubborn than Tenkou. And he was like that.”

Kouchin felt the aura of something moving around on the roof. She glanced briefly in that direction, but paid it no mind. Masahiro, on the other hand, did not notice it, and continued to sit in rapt attention.

“Touda has changed. Otherwise, even in his *mononoke* form and with most of his power sealed away, Taiin would never allow herself to be in his presence.”

A breath of wind suddenly gusted, tugging at Kouchin’s hair, before dying away.

“Even though he became a servant under Seimei’s command, his personality never changed. He’d soften a bit in Seimei’s presence, but at the core, he was no different from before. In the other realm, he was always alone, and everyone thought it was normal.”

... He was a deity of hellfire, but his heart was colder, harder, and more immovable than water frozen for ten thousand years. He had never opened his heart to anyone, as if he rejected everything in existence. The twelve spirit summons had been born to this world an age ago, and Touda had always been that way.

Resting her chin on her hand, she gazed into Masahiro’s determined eyes.

“Masahiro, you said that you don’t know ... don’t know this Touda. I’m not surprised.” She smiled tenderly and continued, “Touda had changed ... not because of the name Seimei gave him. He only changed thirteen years ago, when a little child was born.”

“Thirteen years ago ...?”

Kouchin nodded. Sitting up straight, the hand that had once supported her chin was now pointing at Masahiro. “The one who changed him was you, Masahiro.”

The aura on the rooftop stirred almost imperceptibly, trying its best not to be noticed. Masahiro was one thing, but unfortunately, escaping Kouchin’s notice was another matter entirely.

“Thirteen ... years....” Masahiro repeated as he stared back at her.

He was the child that was born then. What had he done, that the Touda filled with such coldness had become the Guren he knew? He could not possibly fathom the reason for such a change.

But even so....

He looked down at his feet. There was a voice that constantly echoed in his mind....

... Try harder. Don't give up, grandson of Seimei ...

And he had always yelled back, 'Don't call me grandson,' before teasingly calling it 'Mokkun' in return. In turn, the white *mononoke* would shoot back irritably, 'Don't call me Mokkun.'

He had once dreamed the *mononoke* departing for a distant realm, and no matter how much he called and shouted, it never turned back to look at him. As soon as he had woken up, he had latched on to the white form next to him and held on for dear life, not letting go until he had stopped shaking.

His heart ached.

"... Then ... in another thirteen years..." Masahiro whispered, trying hard not to let his voice tremble.

In another thirteen years, would the *mononoke* ... would Touda finally deign to call him by name?

Would it finally turn to him and meet his eyes with a gentle look?

If he prayed for this with all his heart, would it come true one day...?

Even though his head was bowed from unbearable anguish at the thought, he strained to hold back his tears. He knew instinctively that, if even one tear should fall, the final thread of his self-control would snap.

He would not let his resolve fail him. He himself had chosen this path. It was the seed he had sown.

Kouchin ruffled the hair on the boy's bowed head. This action reminded him of the kind spirit summon who would never return. Masahiro sank deeper into abject melancholy.

Chapter 6

My son left for the fields yesterday, and still has not come home....

An ashen-faced old woman came to the villagers, begging for their help in searching for him. Everyone cooperated fully, using their break from working the fields to fan out in a search. However, not a single trace of the missing person could be found.

My husband left this morning, and still hasn't returned....

My older brother has been up in the mountain for two days already....

The number of people vanishing mysteriously was increasing every day. By the end of the second month, the number had shot up to fifteen people. Aside from this, there were people who had lost their memories and turned into completely different people. They forgot their families, the people they had lived with forever, and after tumultuous arguments and quarrels, had moved out to live on their own.

This district was built on the lands of Fujiwara, the Minister of the Left and the most powerful official of the time. When Noshiro Shigeyori, the overseer of this region, had noticed the deteriorating situation, he had notified the minister. This had happened at the end of the second month, and there had yet to be a response from him.

The capital was far away, and their masters probably thought it was just rabble-rousing, rather than anything truly serious. Noshiro couldn't help but think, however, that were the situation to continue unhindered, most of the people in the district would either disappear or lose their minds.

... Perhaps the people who vanished had gone somewhere for a reason.

Some people had opined as such, but several days later, a number of corpses had been found floating bloated in the bay, completely dashing that theory to pieces. The legs of these corpses seemed to have been bound by something, and their faces were twisted in such fear and torment that the hearts of the people who fished them out of the water clenched in sympathy.

Just as one man, suppressing his nausea and creeping fear, took one step into the water to grasp one of the corpses that had washed up near land....

... The sound of a splash.... A fish jumping, perhaps?

At first, no one paid any attention. However, a terrified scream rang out suddenly.

“H-help! There's something ... around my leg ...!”

That man was dragged, thrashing wildly, into the water, along with the corpse. Bubbles began surfacing behind him, and a black, four-legged demon broached the water, its wide mouth closing around the man's head and dragging him under.

The rest of the men were left staring in shock. A massive wave rolled out across the previously tranquil surface, and they could make out several black forms moving near the bottom of the sea. Even deeper in, there was a mass larger than the demon, and two pinpricks of light seemed to glow ominously.

“Aaa ... argh!”

A moan from one of the men broke the rest out of their frozen stupor, and they scrambled wildly in panic as they fled the sea.

A demon surfaced amidst the foaming sea.

... Bring them back ...

With a deafening roar that shook the very waters, five demons propelled themselves out of the water and raced after the fleeing men.

After Kouchin had told Masahiro to get a bit more rest, they heard the creaking sound of a door opening as the boy entered the cabin. Taiin and Genbu, having held their breath the entire time, let it all out in a gusty sigh. They had not intended to eavesdrop, but that was what they had ended up doing.

Even if incomparable to Touda, an angry Kouchin was quite scary. Still, she had a discerning judgement, and rarely lost hold of her temper. In comparison to Seiryuu, who displayed his emotions and irritation for all and sundry, Kouchin would be considered extremely calm and level-headed ... but when she got serious, she was absolutely terrifying to behold.

The eastern horizon was beginning to lighten. Dawn was approaching.

Taiin lay flat on the roof, pulling her hair exasperatedly.

“What's the matter?” Genbu asked curiously. Taiin rolled her eyes at him and shot up into a sitting position.

“Damn it! If we leave things the way they are, Masahiro's going to go crazy!”

Masahiro was trying so hard to keep a leash on his turbulent emotions. Taiin was aware that he had difficulty sleeping, and would wake up at the slightest sound. He pretended to be enjoying his food, when in reality, he was only forcing it down because he knew he had to eat.

“There isn’t anything we can do!”

Neither she nor Genbu could change the way things were. Even Rikugou could only provide support and could not alleviate Masahiro’s pain. Likewise for Kouchin. Perhaps, even if Seimei or Akiko were here, he would still not be able to confess his worries. The self-imposed guilt ran too deep, and had cornered him with nowhere left to turn.

“I’m scared of Touda. I can’t help it. I don’t hate him—I’m just scared of him!”

As her rambling became more and more incoherent, Genbu could no longer understand what she was trying to say. Taking a mental step back, he tried to look at the situation objectively. Frowning, he tried to think of a solution, but he too could not think of anything worthwhile.

The wind began to whirl around them, responding to Taiin’s churning emotions. Her hair whipped in the air, and Genbu had to shut his eyes against the wind’s onslaught.

“But ... but ... I can’t just watch Masahiro wither away without doing anything!”

“I agree.”

Without his *sight*, the most troubled person should be Masahiro himself, and yet he would look so guilty whenever he would say to them, “I’m sorry, but can you please raise your spiritual powers a bit so I can see you...?”

It brought them close to tears whenever he spoke that way.

“The most powerful summons? The greatest *onmyouji* of the age? Does that mean anything when we’re so helpless at a time like this?” Taiin ranted, and then widened her eyes as if suddenly struck by something. The gusting wind died away immediately, and the trees that were swaying dangerously seemed relieved by the calm that had set in.

“... Wait ... there *is* an *onmyouji* around here....”

“Taiin?” Genbu questioned, but she spun around to look at the sky without bothering to answer. The thick clouds hung even lower than the previous day, and appeared to be on the verge of rain.

“I’ll be back in a bit!” Taiin called out as she conjured up a whirlwind. Genbu, caught unprepared by buffeting winds, lost his footing and tumbled off the roof. Fortunately, he was able to right himself midair and land smoothly on the ground. By the time he looked back up at the sky, frowning, it was too late. Taiin had already disappeared.

“Taiin, you Damn it! What am I supposed to do?”

There was nowhere vent his anger. He surveyed the area with a peeved expression, but huffed in irritation when he realised he couldn't simply take it out on the trees. He couldn't remember exactly when the twelve spirit summons had come into existence, but for as long as he could remember, Taiin had always been causing him grief.

If they managed to return to the capital safely, the childlike spirit summon vowed to set Byakko on her case, since he was the only one who could deal with Taiin.

Noon found Masahiro lying back lazily watching the rolling clouds. The wind had died down and the mountain seemed tranquil, showing signs of the imminent spring. He wondered absently about where the morning's unseasonably stormy wind had come from.

His head throbbed like it was being pounded by a hammer. Physical exhaustion and mental strain were wearing his body and mind down to their utmost limits. That meeting in his dream had helped a bit, but even so....

He laid a hand on his chest. Even taking several deep, long breaths could not calm the frantic beating of his heart.

Earlier this morning, when he had nudged open the door to air the cabin, he had come face to face with the *mononoke*, which happened to be walking past one of the camellia trees. It had turned to look at the door, and paused.

Two pairs of eyes met then, but those red eyes held no emotion save for a brief flash of irritation. The *mononoke* looked away and left.

The young boy tensed unconsciously; he could feel something in his chest shatter. Those eyes were so familiar. He had seen them in his dreams so many times. In those dreams, he would have to scream at the top of his lungs and pound away at an invisible barrier until his hands bled before the *mononoke* would finally turn around to look at him. Yet even then, its eyes held no emotion.

As the form of the *mononoke* disappeared beneath the camellia tree, he felt his gut twisting inside him. He wiped the damp sweat that tricked down his forehead and swallowed the bile that had risen up. He then shook his head, trying to chase away those angst-filled thoughts.

It was then that a furious vortex kicked up, ripping the camellia blooms from the trees and scattering their petals all over the courtyard and into the cabin. His kimono and mat were blown across the room, and he had to cling to the door jamb to avoid being thrown off his feet.

“What’s happening...?”

“Woah!” A loud yelp sounded, along with confused mutterings, followed by a thump as something heavy fell onto the open space in front of the cabin. Genbu covered the fire in the pit from the lashing wind and look upwards. At the same time, Kouchin and Rikugou jumped to their feet.

“... What on earth ...?” Masahiro was mumbling as if he couldn’t believe his ears.

He leapt to the ground despite his wobbly knees and ran around the cabin, ducking under a camellia tree, before screeching to a halt.

A man lay collapsed on the grass, face pinched as one hand massaged his rear, which had apparently taken the brunt of the fall.

“Ouch ... why is it that grandfather’s servant” the man grumbled, before catching sight of Masahiro. He stood up, brushing the dirt off his pants, and looked at Masahiro tenderly.

“So how are you doing, little brother of mine? You’re really pale—did I surprise you that badly?”

Abe no Narichika smiled broadly, beckoning Masahiro over. Taiin, on the other hand, hovered aggressively in the air between them and snarked, “Look at his sorry state! Go to him yourself!”

“Aww. Is that so? This is supposed to be a touching reunion between brothers who haven’t seen each other for over ten days! I want to see my littlest brother run to me overflowing with joy,” Narichika responded cheekily. Looking back at Masahiro again, however, he now donned the concerned face of an older brother.

“... Masahiro, what’s wrong?”

Masahiro’s hands, which had been clenched tightly into a fist all along, slowly relaxed. His wide eyes, which had been staring at Narichika, shimmered as tears he had held back for so long began to overflow.

“... B-brother ...!”

Masahiro was still rooted to the spot, so Narichika walked up to him, ruffled his younger brother’s hair fondly and drew him in for a hug.

“Silly boy.... You must be suffering so much.”

As his brother stroked his back gently, the last thread holding his composure together snapped. Masahiro clung desperately to his brother’s robe and wailed. Narichika continued to stroke the boy’s back soothingly, and looked over to the hovering Taiin.

He had been on the road alone, making his way to the Ou district of Izumo. About an hour or so ago, someone had called to him from the sky with a piercing yell.

“Found you...!”

The young man had spun around to look up at the sky, and met the eyes of a fuming Taiin, one of the twelve spirit summons. For a moment, he had felt a powerful urge to turn tail and flee, but he forced himself to calm down and ask her what she wanted with him. Taiin, however, simply grabbed him by the collar and hauled him into the air without giving him a chance to protest. From that point, he had been surrounded by a whirlwind so dizzying that his entire body shuddered from nausea.

But looking now at Masahiro’s face, he could understand why Taiin had been so impatient. He had no idea what was wrong, but he was certain that his fourteen-year-old brother was currently in a very fragile state.

As Taiin landed, Genbu speared her with a smouldering look.

“Taiin, you were in such a hurry this morning for this?”

“Yes.”

“And what was that wind all about? You scattered ashes all over the place. Do you realise what could have happened?”

The ashes could have started a fire. Just imagining what could have happened if the ashes had spread all over the wooden cabin was enough to make Genbu shudder.

“Then you could have put out the fire. You’re a deity of water, after all.”

“That’s not the point!”

Taiin looked crestfallen at Genbu’s rebuke.

“ ... But....”

“What was that?” the livid Genbu barked at her.

“... Touda ... was on the roof. I happened to meet his eyes, and so....” she eked out in a small voice.

Rikugou and Kouchin had been standing back watching the situation unfold, and their eyes widened a fraction as they realized what had happened. Taiin hadn’t really intended to conjure up such a strong wind. Neither Taiin nor Touda had meant to cause trouble. It had all been an accident.

“Umm....” Genbu was speechless. Taiin hung her head guiltily.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful next time.”

“... Alright.”

Genbu, who was only half a head taller than Taiin, looked over to Kouchin and nodded. The older summon patted both their backs.

Rikugou turned to look at Masahiro, who was still clinging tightly to Narichika outside the cabin. The air of sheer anguish that had enveloped the boy of late had dissipated.

Even though they were divine beings, the twelve spirit summons did not have the power to do everything. Even the most powerful of the gods, too, weren’t omnipotent.

They were the twelve spirit summons, yet they were powerless in a situation like this....

“ ... ”

His chest tight with indescribable emotion, Rikugou could only let out a soft sigh.

The *mononoke* observed the young man that had abruptly appeared before them and searched through its memory. That face was familiar. Yes, he was the son of Seimei’s second son, named Narichika. But it was strange—Narichika seemed taller than he remembered. He should have been only a boy who had just undergone his coming-of-age ceremony, but the person standing before him was an adult. He had to be in his late twenties, at the very least.

The *mononoke* frowned and muttered, “What is going on...?”

Past noon, the light drizzle of rain had turned into a torrential downpour.

“Hmm.... I suppose I’m lucky not to be wet. If I had continued travelling, I’d be completely soaked by now.”

Upon hearing these words, Taiin puffed out her chest. “See! You should thank me!”

“But it is also undeniable that I was really roughed up. My hat kept trying to fly off, my luggage is nowhere to be seen, the prayer beads I kept under my robes have been dropped somewhere, and the travel expenses I received from the Minister are also gone.”

Taiin gulped as Narichika succinctly and pointedly listed out his problems. There was nothing she could say to that. Uncharacteristically, Rikugou interjected from the back of the room, “Taiin, go find them.”

“... Okay.”

Taiin walked glumly to the door, but on the way, her arm shot out to snag the unsuspecting Genbu and dragged him along before he knew what was happening. Neither Kouchin nor Rikugou made any comment.

Masahiro watched the scene with a watery smile, his eyes still red and swollen.

All the summons had been at the Chigaeshi holy ground and knew what had happened there. They had seen Masahiro's resolve and decision, and therefore they were all unnecessarily concerned about him. Masahiro felt badly about this, and tried not to worry them. This situation was inevitable, after all. The throbbing ache in his heart was a price he had to pay. Still, the moment that he had seen his brother's face, all the walls he had built to keep his emotions at bay came crumbling down.

Narichika was much older than Masahiro, and wasn't really the closest person to him. Even the time they had spent together was exceedingly brief. Still, despite being married with a family of his own, Narichika was still a very dependable older brother to Masachika, his second older brother, and himself. They lived apart, but he always cared deeply about his younger brothers. He was a warm, sincere and generous person, and no matter what happened, he was always willing to accept things as they were. These characteristics allowed him to open up Masahiro's heart. It was so much like what Guren had always done for Masahiro.

Narichika glanced briefly at Kouchin and Rikugou. Both understood his unspoken message, and shielded their presence. Once he felt that the two had left the area, he looked over to Masahiro with a serious expression on his face.

“Masahiro ... what happened to your ‘eyes’?”

Taken unawares by the unexpectedly blunt question, Masahiro could not find the words to answer him.

Instead, Narichika continued, “I can easily see the spirit summons without even having to try. This is most unusual. I don't even have to concentrate – why can I see them? The answer is because they have raised their spiritual power, isn't it?”

Masahiro could not say anything, because his brother was absolutely correct.

This brother, older than himself by over twelve years, crossed his arms with a grave expression. “I'm not trying to flatter you, but if it were you, even with their presence shielded, you can still feel their aura to a certain degree, can't you? You can probably see them too. We all know this well, which is why grandfather chose you as his successor.”

Masahiro closed his eyes, his shoulders drooping lifelessly. Seeing this Narichika forced a smile and said lightly, “Don’t make it seem like I’m bullying you. Touda’s going to flay me alive, you know.”

He had meant to ease the tension between them, but instead, Masahiro’s shoulders began to tremble.

Narichika narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Come to think of it, he had yet to see Touda. Ever since Masahiro had undertaken his coming-of-age ceremony, Touda had always been by his brother’s side in the form of a white *mononoke*. The young man swept his eyes around the cabin, before they finally landed on a white form sitting on a ceiling beam.

Upon meeting those deep red eyes, Narichika felt like his blood had drained away. He gulped nervously, and the *mononoke* turned away, shielded its presence, and left. Without meaning to, Narichika sighed. The pieces were starting to come together.

Masahiro was so pale and frail that his heart ached to see it. The *mononoke* was acting completely opposite from when they had accidently crossed paths during the New Year.

Narichika shifted into a more formal position and said, “Masahiro. I want you to tell me frankly—what are you doing here?”

At the end of the second month, Narichika and Masahiro had been sent to the district of Ou in Izumo by order of the Bureau of *Onmyou*. The head of the bureau was the one who picked them, certainly, but he had heard that it was actually the idea of Abe no Seimei, the *onmyouji* serving the entire imperial staff.

“Father said that you had a separate, important mission, so we had to pretend to travel together. But even Father had no idea what your mission was, only that it was on grandfather’s orders.”

The young man didn’t really understand what Seimei was thinking, but he agreed because he believed that it couldn’t have been anything terrible. It was a bit lonely on the road alone, but that couldn’t be helped. Narichika had therefore set out for Izumo by himself. If Taiin hadn’t shown up when she did, it would probably have taken him another five days to arrive. If they had waited that long, Masahiro’s condition might have deteriorated to the point of no return.

Masahiro tried to speak several times, but words remained stuck in his throat. To be able to understand everything, he’d have to start all the way back in the past winter.

“... About that”

Finally, Masahiro began to tell his tale. The more he heard, the more grave Narichika’s expression became. It was quite an epic tale, interwoven with the legends of the gods

themselves. But looking into the tortured face of his younger brother, he knew that everything he spoke of was true.

“... And so ... we ended up here....”

“... I see,” the elder sighed.

Masahiro glanced furtively at his brother, observing his stiff, pale face. He wasn't entirely surprised, as the story was quite extraordinarily fantastical.

“... So, Touda....”

It was more a confirmation than a question. Masahiro nodded silently and hung his head, closing his eyes and feeling the tension return to his body. A few moments of absolute silence passed before Narichika's heavy voice rang out.

“... You silly boy....”

It was just a few words, but Masahiro felt like he had been punched in the gut.

“Don't you ever do something like that again.”

“... I'm sorry,” Masahiro replied in a hoarse voice, his head still bent low. Narichika tousled his brother's hair and expelled his breath heavily.

“You scared me half to death.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You're not the only one with precious people, you know.”

“...I know.”

The kind lady he had met at the river shore had told him the same thing.

His brother's hand was gently caressing his head. Feeling that, he closed his eyes and sighed. It wasn't by his own power that he was here.

“... At the river shore....”

“Hmm?”

“... I met grandmother there....”

Narichika's eyes widened briefly, before he gave his brother a tender smile, saying, “Is that so.”

The wind enveloped Taiin and Genbu, protecting them from the torrential rains. Taiin had found Narichika at the border between Hoki and Izumo, where he was travelling along the sea shore to avoid having to cross mountains.

“Hiking across mountains isn’t easy. Narichika’s really smart,” Genbu nodded in admiration. Around him and Taiin, a wind barrier helped repel the rain. Taiin was hovering a small distance in the air, using her wind to help her find Narichika’s belongings. Genbu was on the ground, his senses trying to pick up the feel of Narichika’s aura mingled in the rain. A brow twitched, and with the flick of his hand, a cocoon of water carrying a string of prayer beads zoomed into his hands.

“Great. Now we just have to find Narichika’s money pouch.”

It didn’t take long for Taiin to find it. The items had been scattered rather widely, and it had taken quite a while for them to track them all down. It was fortunate that everything was intact.

The pair sighed in relief.

“Thank goodness. It would have been a real problem if these things were lost.”

“Now that you know it, be more careful next time,” Genbu reminded her.

“Yeah, I know,” Taiin responded with a grimace.

Once Genbu had taken a good hold of Narichika’s belongings, she flicked a finger and a veritable hurricane surrounded them, the fury of her winds undiminished in the slightest.

“... At least, please try...” Genbu groaned. His plaintive cry was drowned out by the howl of the wind and the drumming of the rain.

As they flew through the air, Taiin glanced at the ground below.

“It’s almost farming season. Even if they’re all bewildered and confused by the mess at the Chishiki temple, they can’t survive without working the fields. I wonder if the panic’s died down yet.”

As the summons soared, farms and fields spread out beneath them as far as the eye could see. Even though the rain made it difficult to make out the details, they did not seem too badly neglected.

“Now that you mention it...” Genbu swept his eyes over the scenery as a thought struck him, “I heard that there’s some unrest in Yamashiro too, unrelated to the Chishiki temple case. Taiin, what’s up with that?”

“Huh? How should I know? But that’s true ... I completely forgot...”

With one finger on her lips and a cocked head, Taiin struck a contemplative pose.

“Since we’re here, let’s go check things out.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

As Genbu nodded forcefully, the wind picked up speed and turned into a roaring gale.

Chapter 7

Two young children stood outside a small hut, covered by a straw mat.

“... Brother, let’s go.”

The younger child grasped the sleeve of his older brother, but the elder refused to budge. He was gazing at the hut, which stood forlornly on its own in the pouring rain. Their mother was inside—the mother that had said, ‘I don’t know you children.’

His vision started to blur, and he hurriedly wiped his eyes. He couldn’t cry, or it would distress his younger brother.

“Brother....”

He forced a smile at his younger brother, who was now on the verge of tears.

“Hmm, you’re right. We have to make dinner before daddy gets home.”

He noticed a large rip in his younger brother’s shirt. When he reached out to touch the edge of the tear, the other boy scratched his head guiltily.

“It caught on a branch while I was playing.... Mommy said she would fix it later....” The young boy could only get that far before his face twisted in tears. The older brother drew him close and hugged him before they both set off for home in a dispirited walk.

The number of people forgetting their families was increasing every day. These people had been alone for one reason or another, and had later been found unconscious. Once they awoke, they would have forgotten the people they were close to, retaining only memories of the past. Still, some people said that this was fortunate; too many of these missing people had completely disappeared or turned up as bloated corpses floating in the bay.

The young boy clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white.

It was because of that shrine.

He had heard the village elders say that the shrine sealed something terrible within. In the distant past, a monster had flown in on the wind and wrecked havoc in the area. In the end, it had been sealed by a god in white. This land of Izumo was filled with numerous gods, and one of them probably pitied the suffering humans and tried to help.

However, the young child couldn’t help but wonder why the god couldn’t have simply destroyed the monster entirely. If only it had been destroyed back then, the shrine

wouldn't have been destroyed, his mother wouldn't have changed, and the little girl next door wouldn't have lost her mind.

I don't believe in gods any more. If they exist, why haven't they done anything?

As evening drew near, the rain had faded to a light drizzle. Cloudy days and rain seemed to be typical for this area. Indeed, thinking back, Masahiro realized that they had never once had a clear, sunny day since they arrived.

The air was chilly, so Masahiro and Narichika huddled by the fire of the stove. Balanced on a tripod above the fire, an old pot containing a soup with wild vegetables and boar meat was steaming merrily. Narichika laid down his chopsticks and bowl and pressed his hands together in thanksgiving, before sighing contentedly, "You get to eat such wonderful things. All I've been eating was dried rice."

He stirred the pot to make sure it didn't boil over, and surveyed the cabin once more.

"Even though this place is old, there's a pot and a stand for it, and the walls and ceilings don't leak. That means someone around here maintains it on a regular basis. We're really in that person's debt. We'll have to make sure we clean this place up before we move on."

Masahiro looked at his brother questioningly.

"Didn't you hear it from grandfather? I'm here because I was ordered to go to Yamashiro. That sect business was your mission."

"Yamashiro...." Masahiro repeated as if for confirmation. Narichika reached into his robe and pulled out a piece of parchment.

"Fortunately, I still have my map. Here it is, along the bay to the west."

The fire from the stove illuminated the map of Izumo. Their present location was very close to the western bay, and the trip would take approximately two or three days by foot. For the fleet-footed spirit summons, the trip would take less than two hours. Riding Taiin's wind would cut down travel time to less than half an hour. Masahiro really preferred to avoid this last option, however.

"People are either losing their minds or vanishing. I heard that it's been going on with no sign of stopping. It's been happening on the lands belonging to the Minister, so I've been ordered to stay at the home of the overseer and search for the truth behind these occurrences. And, of course, solve the problem as well."

Narichika blanched right after he finished speaking.

"Oh no...."

“What’s wrong?” Masahiro asked curiously.

Narichika blinked several times and moaned, “There was a letter from the Minister among the belongings that I lost....”

“What?!”

This time, it was Masahiro who shot up in dismay.

“... That’s ... that’s terrible...!”

The boy became flustered and panicky, but somehow, Narichika had in turn become serene in a single instant.

“You really think so, Masahiro?” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, as he declared cheerfully, “Yep, that’s really terrible.”

“...”

Masahiro was completely speechless.

Narichika clutched his chest and moaned theatrically, occasionally murmuring shocking things like, “Should I just run away?” as he contemplated his options.

Seeing his brother act this way, Masahiro reflected that this man was undeniably Seimei’s grandson. The person least like their grandfather was Masachika, his second brother, but then again, he also had his own brand of recklessness, and was without a doubt a true grandson of Seimei.

A stormy wind crashed against the wall – the cabin shuddered and the door creaked ominously in protest. Ignoring her dramatic landing, Taiin rushed inside and yelled, “We’ve got a problem!”

Narichika shot to his feet when he saw Taiin, and Genbu trailing close behind. Seeing Narichika approach, Taiin continued, ashen faced, “Narichika, the Yamashiro village....”

“Hey, listen to me!” Taiin narrowed her eyes exasperatedly as Narichika simply walked past her. The young man paid her no heed, however, as he gathered his belongings from Genbu’s hands and emptied everything out onto the floor in a loud clatter.

Genbu’s eyes followed his actions carefully before asking, “Is anything missing?”

“... Everything’s here. Thank goodness. Good job, the both of you.” While Narichika beamed happily, Taiin slammed into his back in a bid for attention.

“Hey, that hurt.”

“I told you to listen! There’s big trouble in the Yamashiro village!”

“I know,” Narichika replied evenly, one hand digging out a package wrapped in wax paper from the bottom of his bag. Although a lot of his things had been ruined by the water, as long as this item was safe, it was alright. He could easily prepare new paper charms.

The young man placed everything else back into the bag, and looked over at his youngest brother.

“It looks like the situation’s critical. I can’t loiter around here much longer. How should we do this? Do you need to stay here and rest a bit more?”

Masahiro’s eyes widened. His brother was trying to tell him that he would handle the situation on his own, if Masahiro was still not well.

Gathering his thoughts, he declared clearly, “I’m ... I’m alright! I’ve recovered already!” For him, the most serious injury was of an emotional nature. It was the suppressed mental anguish that kept him from sleeping and turned all food into gravel in his mouth.

Seeing a spark of life return to his brother’s eyes, Narichika nodded firmly. “If that’s the case, let’s head towards Yamashiro immediately.”

The young siblings walked gloomily towards their home in one of the neighbourhoods of Yamashiro village. They lived near the bay, in a small thatched hut. The floor of their home was packed dirt and there was only one room, so winters would chill them to the very bone. Still, the family had lived together happily. A short stroll would take them to the bay, where they could see Kashima Island standing alone in the middle of the sea. In the summers, they liked to play in the bay, occasionally delighting their mother with the fish that they caught or *shijimi*⁴ clams that they found.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, suggesting that it would be stopping soon.

One of the young boys stopped suddenly. His younger brother, who was walking beside him, turned to look at him in surprise. The raindrops were gentle now, no longer pelting against the straw mat they were using for cover, and they fell in little splashes against the boys’ legs.

“Brother?”

The older brother stared at the bay, and seemed to come to a decision.

“Yasuke, you go back first.”

“Eh? Why? Let’s go back together.”

“There’s something I have to do. You go back first. If we’re both gone, daddy will worry.”

“I can’t do that!”

But in the end, Yasuke had no choice but to cover himself with the straw mat and hurry home. The other boy stood waiting, staring at his younger brother’s retreating back before racing through the rain towards the bay.

“Will brother be okay?” Yasuke had brought the straw mat back with him. The child thought of his mother who had always been concerned about their health, warning them that they would get a cold if they got wet. It wasn’t too late yet. The child wanted to turn back and run after his older brother, but changed his mind because he didn’t want to be scolded.

His home was at the very edge of the village. Beyond it stood a grand manor where his mother would sometimes go for work. She was skilled at sewing, cooked such delicious meals and was always so kind and cheerful. Kayo, who was the same age as Yasuke, was like that too. She was a very lively person, and they used to run around and play together all the time. It was so unlike the living doll she was now.

Tears brimmed in his eyes at the thought, and he wiped at them with one hand while the other held onto the straw mat.

Suddenly, a strong wind ripped the mat from his hands. Yasuke reached out to grab it, but then saw two shadows plunging towards him.

“Woah!”

“Not again!”

With a loud moan, the two shadows fell straight into a pool of water, sending water flying in a massive splash. Yasuke could only watch in bewilderment.

“Urgh....”

Narichika and Masahiro had been carried here on wind conjured by Taiin, but as they were descending, the wind had suddenly changed directions. They had lost their balance and had fallen headfirst into the pool. On the other hand, the spirit summons had no trouble landing lightly on their feet. Only Genbu seemed to sway a bit on his feet, and that was probably because he had such a slight build.

Observing the mud-stained siblings, the summons turned as one to stare wordlessly at Taiin. She shrank back, mortified.

“W-well....”

Balanced on Kouchin's shoulders, Touda glared at the girl from the corner of his eye. Taiin fell silent immediately.

Touda was still in the form of a *mononoke*, as usual. Kouchin was of the opinion that he should change back if remaining in this form bothered him so much. However, he showed no signs of transforming back, and she did not speak of it.

Touda hopped down from Kouchin's shoulder and shook his tail indifferently. He actually was being careful and considerate in his own way, because he realized that when he was nearby, Taiin would become so jittery that the air around her would become as turbulent as her mental state. In addition, Touda had no desire to get caught in the inevitable mess that would ensue. Therefore, when on the move, he would choose to hide near Kouchin or Rikugou, trying not to meet Taiin's eye and staying out of her line of sight.

They had managed to come this far without getting wet, but now Narichika and Masahiro had ended up completely drenched and covered in mud. All their extra clothes were currently lying waterlogged in the pool as well. It was certainly a rather miserable situation.

The pair sat sprawled in the pool, stunned, for several moments. Eventually, managing to gather their wits together, they rose from the water and started to wring the water from the hems of their *kariniku* outfits. Murky water dripped from their clothes.

"Really now...." Narichika grumbled as he straightened his *eboshi*⁵. He glimpsed a straw mat lying in a pile on the ground and a young boy standing frozen nearby.

"Hmm?"

Yasuke stared at the pair in shock. When he met the eyes of the taller man, he practically yelped out in fright, but no sound came out.

As the tall man approached him, however, Yasuke very nearly did scream. However, before he did so....

"Sorry for startling you. Appearing this way happens to be the current fashion back at the capital."

Yasuke had tensed, ready to flee, but paused upon hearing a word that struck him.

"... Huh ... the capital?"

"Yes, we're from the capital. Do you know where the manor of Lord Noshiro is?"

The mud-splattered young man who had dropped from the sky out of the blue was smiling so warmly and sincerely that the child lost most of his wariness.

“Ah ... umm ... yeah. I do.”

Narichika beamed as a child nodded.

“Really? Then can you lead us there? It’s almost dark too. Or perhaps your parents can take us there instead....”

Masahiro and the rest couldn’t help but be impressed as they listened to the conversation between Narichika and the child. They mentally applauded his exquisite skill in handling the skittish child. He really proved how he could be the father of three children.

“That’s incredible. I’m really impressed,” Taiin commented without any trace of sarcasm. Next to her, Genbu nodded in mutual agreement.

Masahiro stepped out of the pool with a sigh. He was covered from head to toe with mud like his brother. His black outfit, which he had worn the day he departed the capital, was going to need some serious scrubbing.

His eyes accidentally met those of the *mononoke*. Even though it quickly looked away with an air of nonchalance, Masahiro continued to gaze at it. He didn’t understand why Touda remained in that form, even though he had no fondness for it. Even in the case that Seimei himself had ordered it, surely the command would not have been so absolute as to keep him locked in that form constantly.

If he asked, would Touda give him an answer?

The question almost slipped off his tongue, but he suddenly sensed a watery aura distinct from that of the rain.

They were actually standing not far from the bay, where fresh water flowed into the sea, and he had heard that it was an excellent breeding ground for all sorts of aquatic creatures.

The wind was blowing in from that direction. The rain had almost stopped, and the sky was beginning to lighten.

But the aura carried by that wind was stirring up an ominous sense of foreboding in Masahiro.

“...!”

A child’s haunting cry pierced through the air. Masahiro’s hair stood on end from the sense of nagging familiarity. What the wind had carried was the aura and screeching call of a demon.

Masahiro broke into a run. A split second later, Kouchin and Rikugou were close at his heels.

“Oh ... hey, Masahiro?” Narichika yelled out as Masahiro suddenly took off in a dead sprint.

“There’s a demonic aura radiating from the sea,” Genbu informed him.

With that curt response, he sped after Masahiro and the others. Having been left behind, Narichika and Taiin turned to Yasuke, who stood there uncomprehending. “Go home and don’t come outside. Understand?”

Yasuke almost nodded, but then he started, his eyes opening wide. “My brother...!”

This bay was rather shallow, and its waters teemed with several types of fish. The sandy seabed hid an abundance of *shijimi* clams. Shokichi removed his shoes and stepped cautiously into the sea. He moved deeper until the cool water lapped against his knees, and used his toes to dig into the sand, feeling out buried clams.

“... Found them.”

Shokichi carefully folded up his sleeve before plunging an arm into the water, his hand sifting through the sand to fish out clams. Soon, he had gathered a handful.

His mother loved *shijimi* clams. She used to boil the ones that Shokichi had found in a delicious soup for the family to eat. The boy thought that if he brought her some clams, they might trigger her memories.

By now, he had gathered an armful of clams. He sunk a hand into the sand one more time, thinking to grab a few more before he left.

In that instant, something touched his leg. Turning around to look, he saw a black face rising to the surface of the water.

“Ahhhhh!”

Shokichi tossed all the clams he had painstakingly gathered, and they splashed into the water, creating small bubbles and ripples. In his shock, strength drained out of his legs, and he tumbled backwards, falling onto his rear.

The monster floated to the surface of the water. It had four legs and long, black fur all over its body. Slowly and inexorably, the creature moved towards him.

Limbs flailing wildly, Shokichi clambered to shore in mounting panic. Behind him, the hiss of parting water drew ever closer.

That was the one. That was the monster that was sealed in the shrine. The one that did this to his mother and everyone else....

In that instant, burning flames of fury roared in his heart. Unheeding of the tears that had started to flow, Shokichi reached for a nearby rock and hurled it at the monster. Not having expected the child to fight back, the unhindered flight of the rock smacked the monster in the face before dropping into the water with a soft plop. Eerily enough, the face was deformed by the force of the rock, but the monster merely smirked.

The water's surface twirled into the form of a large wave as the previously tranquil bay began to churn ponderously.

Shokichi had managed to scabble his way to shore, but something rough and coarse grabbed his ankle. With a start, he spun around and saw that the tongue from the monster's gigantic mouth had wrapped itself around his leg. The child lost his balance and tumbled into the water as the lower part of his body was dragged back into the sea. No matter how desperately he clawed and squirmed, his efforts were futile in face of the monster's relentless pull.

"H-help...!"

Shokichi thrashed frantically in mindless panic as the water lapped up against his chest. His hands scrambled wildly for purchase on the sandy shore.

"Mommy ... mommy!"

... I just wanted some clams. I just wanted to see mommy's smiling face again....

"No...!"

He was finally pulled under, and just as he was being swallowed up by the sea—

"On-ah-bi-ra-un-kan-sa-ra-ku-tan!"

An unfamiliar and bizarre shout rang through the air. The force dragging at his leg vanished and an unidentifiable impact buffeted against the boy, sending him flying back towards the shore. Someone came running up to him.

"Are you alright?" Shokichi heard as he was overcome by a racking cough. Looking up at his saviour, he saw the mud-stained face of a boy several years older than himself. Behind him, the water spiralled into a whirlpool. He turned just in time to see the black monster lunge at him with bared fangs.

Pushing the terrified Shokichi behind him, the boy chanted, "Na-wa-ma-ku-san-man-da ba-sa-ra-dan-gan!"

The monster was hurled away, arching through the air before plunging into the sea. Water sprayed violently, splashing them where they stood near the shore. Shokichi was trembling uncontrollably, but he refused to tear his eyes away from the water's surface.

The sea seemed to swell and foam sprayed on its surface, and it seemed as if the monster would rise out of the waters again, but nothing appeared.

The wind seemed to shriek in Masahiro's ear. Suddenly, he could feel a demonic aura charging him swiftly.

His eyes widened in realization. No ... it was just that he could no longer see the demon. Likewise, Shokichi's eyes darted back and forth nervously.

Masahiro, on your right! A sharp voice rang out. Masahiro rapidly formed the symbol of a kris with one hand and flung his power forward.

Unfortunately, he missed his target, sending sand spraying across the beach.

Masahiro bit his lips in frustration. Only hearing the demon's movements and sensing its aura meant that he could not react fast enough to aim his attacks.

Rikugou and Kouchin stepped in front of him. Shokichi could not see them; Masahiro himself could only tell from the proximity of their auras. Their spiritual powers flared, whipping the wind around them, and for a moment, Masahiro glimpsed Rikugou's form, his brown hair and twilight-hued cloak flapping in the wind. Kouchin stood to his left, her spiritual power radiating from her like steam and a three-pronged dagger in her right hand, glittering in the fading light.

A stab of silvery white light shot across the sea, the power illuminating the demon briefly. In that moment, Masahiro caught sight of one of the demon's legs being severed. However, in the next moment, Kouchin was tucking her dagger and muttering in a tense voice, "... So it got away."

"Seems like it can move through the water freely. That makes things a bit difficult."

The source of the demonic aura seemed to retreat into the distance. The turbulent sea calmed, and silence descended on the beach.

"Masahiro!"

Masahiro sighed and nodded to Narichika, who had just arrived.

"It managed to get away.... We were so close."

"Don't worry about it. Saving this child is an accomplishment in itself."

Narichika tapped his brother lightly on the head, and proceeded to kneel down next to Shokichi, who had collapsed weak-kneed down onto the sand.

Looking the boy in the eye, he asked gravely, “Are you hurt?”

In that moment, Yasuke arrived at the scene, and with a loud wail, hurled himself at his older brother.

“Brother ... brother...!”

Hearing his brother cry, Shokichi finally let his own tears fall.

So many people in the district had gone missing. Among those, several had only been seen again as corpses, floating in the bay....

Masahiro peeled off his ruined clothes and cleaned himself up, before finally heaving a long, exhausted sigh.

“It seems like the situation is worse than we thought....”

It was only after they had seen the two young siblings home that Narichika and Masahiro finally found themselves knocking at the entrance to the home of Noshiro Shigeyori, the overseer of the district. By that time, dusk had long since come and gone, and twilight had set in.

The servant who answered the door saw their mud-splattered forms and slammed the door shut without a word.

Narichika stared at the door for a long moment before growling out in a low voice, “... Hey, summons.... Destroy this door!”

“Brother!”

Narichika looked at his flabbergasted brother and grinned mischievously.

“Just kidding.”

As Masahiro kneaded his chest in genuine relief, Taiin and the other summons retorted internally, ‘No you weren’t.’

They knocked on the door again, announcing that they had travelled there bearing a letter from the Minister of the Left. The servant’s attitude thawed somewhat, and he accepted the wax paper-wrapped package that Narichika slipped through the crack in the door.

They stood waiting for half an hour.

Taiin, aggravated by the long wait, had nearly taken Narichika's earlier words to heart and smashed the door to splinters, if not for the door swinging open at that very moment to finally allow the two human travellers inside.

The overseer's manor was expansive, with a storage building, a barn and the main living quarters arrayed inside, enclosed by a roofed brick wall. They also noticed what seemed to be stables and a kitchen hall. Although the buildings were not interconnected by covered walkways like manors in the capital, it seemed like the overseer lived quite the comfortable life here.

The two brothers were in such a wretched state that they were initially not given permission to enter the main quarters. They were forced to wait, yet again, in the inner courtyard beneath a sky still pregnant with heavy clouds. A little while later, a sturdy man dressed in finer robes than the servant appeared.

This man was Noshiro Shigeyori, the overseer of the lands in this region. The lady behind him bustled around, ordering servants to prepare the baths and set out fresh clothing.

"I apologize for my servant's disrespect," he said politely, and invited the brothers inside.

Once within, Narichika wasted no time changing into the borrowed clothes behind a silk screen. He then promptly reconvened with Noshiro in another room in order to discuss their mission. Masahiro, meanwhile, was lead to the baths.

"Please make yourself at home," said the servant, gesturing inside.

Despite the invitation, Masahiro declined firmly, insisting that he could not use the baths before his brother did. Instead, he requested a change of clothing and a basin of water. Then, instead of soaking in the bath, he proceeded to rinse the mud off his body before slipping into the clean robes laid out for him.

The maid took away his soiled clothes, presumably to wash them.

From there, drinks and an array of light snacks were placed before him. Masahiro couldn't help but feel that he was imposing on their gracious hospitality. It was then that Narichika reappeared.

Narichika beckoned to his younger brother, who exhaled as the tension left him and went to join his brother by the veranda. Their host had prepared a room for them in one corner of the rectangular building, so they had a veranda facing both the north and the south. The veranda was open, allowing them to step directly into the courtyard. Furthermore, it was separated from the room itself by wooden panels that could be removed in the summers and replaced with blinds.

"What did the overseer say?" Masahiro asked intently.

Narichika rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“The situation’s much worse than we thought. No wonder Taiin was so troubled.”

Although Taiin herself and the other spirit summons were invisible and their auras could not be felt at the moment, they were certainly nearby.

“The mother of the children we met is one of those who have been afflicted by a mysterious illness that seems to rewind time. At the same time, a shrine with some strange stories attached to it has been destroyed. We’ll probably have to start our investigation there.”

Narichika’s face scrunched up in serious thought, before turning to Masahiro.

“Masahiro. You can’t see at all?”

“Huh...? Ah, no, not at all,” the young boy responded, shoulders drooping despondently. Seeing this, his older brother tapped him on the shoulder lightly and smiled at him.

“I’m just making sure, not trying to criticize you or anything.”

Focusing back on the business at hand, Narichika opened his bag and pulled out a vajra⁶ and prayer beads.

“To be honest, it would be hard for me to handle this on my own. I’d be over my head if I didn’t have someone helping me. If it’s just a matter of not being able to *see*, I can use my powers to help you. But I’ll need you to help me as well, so buck up.”

“Yes sir.”

In the Bureau of *Onmyou*, Narichika was a master of calendar science. Even though he had attained his position for a variety of reasons, his skill and dedication made it impossible for anyone to resent him for this. It was his love for calendar science that led him to choose this path, but even though spiritual power was rarely employed in his line of work, his distinguished spiritual power still marked him unmistakably as a member of the Abe bloodline. He could defeat demons with the best of them, despite his relatively meagre *sight* compared to Masahiro and Seimei.

For his older brother to say that even he needed help would mean that this demon had to be truly challenging.

As Masahiro was beginning to sink into his thoughts, a flash of white caught his eye. It was the white *mononoke*, which was descending from the veranda. Feeling eyes upon it, it paused and looked around, only to fix its red eyes steadily on Masahiro. Those expressionless eyes still tormented his every time they bore into him, but if he allowed himself to be incapacitated by grief again, he would simply get in the way of his brother’s work.

Masahiro was the first to look away this time, as he turned back towards Narichika. “So what should I do?”

“Indeed. In any case....” Narichika tilted his head thoughtfully, before continuing, “Let’s bathe and turn in. We’ll need all our strength to tackle this demon.”

As the night deepened, the lights gradually winked out one by one. Throughout the area, a blanket of darkness descended. On the manor’s thatched roof, the white *mononoke* kept a lookout. The air carried a disgusting demonic aura that seemed to settle all around, as if declaring ownership of the area. Usually, there would be minor spirits and small imps popping up here and there, but at the moment, not one could be seen. The whole land of Izumo, in fact, should be brimming with deities, and yet not a trace of divine aura could be felt.

The demon they had encountered that evening was fast and powerful, certainly, but it shouldn’t have spiritual power that could affect the land on such a wide scale.

“... If that’s the case....”

Certainly, the human-faced demon that Touda had incinerated that evening had been powerful and was only one of many. But instinct warned him that there was some other demon biding its time out there.

The *mononoke*’s thoughts drifted to the young boy fast asleep below. He used to think that this child was incredibly useless for a grandchild of Seimei, but the events of the evening had proved him wrong. His aim wasn’t perfect, but his spiritual power was most formidable. In terms of power only, his exceeded Narichika’s by a wide margin. It was a true pity that the boy lacked the ability to *see*.

The *mononoke* suddenly blinked.

As far as Touda could recall, Narichika was much smaller than this, having only passed his coming-of-age ceremony. His face had still been filled with the glow of childhood. Both Narichika and his younger brother Masachika were scared of Touda and never approached him. Touda never enjoyed causing distress in others, so he showed himself only on occasion. Seimei did not summon him often either, and he himself was not in the habit of simply loitering around in the human world, unlike some of the other summons. It was therefore not too strange to have lost track of time – for the twelve spirit summons, ten years could pass by like a blink of an eye, a mere fleeting moment in their long lives.

He had only lost track of a brief speck of time – hardly anything dire. If there was anything he needed to know, Seimei could fill him in once they returned to the capital.

Having arrived at a satisfactory conclusion, Touda turned back to gaze up at the sky. The clouds covered the twilight sky with a haze of grey, turning his mood dark in turn. If he

wanted to see clear skies again, he would have to return to Seimei's side, back in the capital. But they would only embark on their return trip once Narichika completed his mission here. Thus, for his own sake, he would have to lend a hand.

The face of the young boy, who had somehow been born while he wasn't looking, suddenly flashed in his mind's eye. The boy froze every time their eyes met, his unblinking eyes tremulous, and Touda was always the first to turn away.

He hated children. If the boy was so scared of him, why bother paying him any attention? And yet the child had excellent instincts, managing to pinpoint his position unerringly even when he had concealed himself.

He looked at his current form dispassionately. The small white form made him seem like just any other small animal.

Touda didn't really consciously decide to remain in this transformed guise. But since he was in this form, he figured that this small, innocuous form would probably cause less distress and fear compared to his normal form.

Touda hated children, children who looked at him in fear and loathing like some of the other spirit summons, and tried hard to have nothing to do with them. And more than that, he resented his own oppressive divine aura that instilled unreasoning fear in all those around him.

Chapter 8

In the capital, the air was gradually warming as the middle of the third month approached. Seimei had basking in the warm sun on the outer veranda, thumbing absently through a tome, when he felt a divine aura alight behind him. Halting in his perusal of the book, he asked without turning around, “Byakko? What is it?”

The burly form of a summon materialized in the emptiness. This was Byakko, the golden general, one of the twelve spirit summons and like Taiin, master of the winds.

“Taiin sent news on the wind.”

Seimei bade him to continue.

“They had faced a demon the moment they entered the village of Yamashiro in Izumo. This demon appears to be the cause of the problems there. Narichika and Masahiro are planning their strategy as we speak.”

“A fight right off the bat? What an ostentatious way to announce their arrival.” Seimei closed his book with a loud snap, an amusedly impressed glint in his eye.

“She also mentioned that Masahiro lost his *sight*.”

Seimei started, shoulders twitching.

“He pretended to be alright, but when Narichika arrived, it seems like the dam finally broke. Physically, he’s almost fully recovered, but his mental state is still worrisome.”

Upon finishing his report, Seimei asked him to wait as he sank into thought.

... So this is what Wakana had meant. Indeed, for that boy, this was something truly priceless.

Still, even if Masahiro had known what his decision would have cost him, he would still have made the same choice. His grandson was not one to hesitate or waver after having made up his mind.

“... Byakko.”

Seimei, of course, had ways to communicate much more quickly than through letters. Turning to Byakko, who was waiting patiently behind him, he continued, “Send word to Taiin. Seems like we’ll need to send someone to the holy ground.”

It was close to noon when Narichika and Masahiro paid a visit to Shokichi's home. Narichika had placed paper charms in their hut for their peace of mind, so the children had slept peacefully and were well-rested. As the pair drew near, the young children came out to greet them.

"Hey, mister!" Yasuke shouted gleefully. Hearing this, Masahiro couldn't help but be struck by how grown-up his older brother really was.

Narichika himself had three children, so he was no stranger to such childish exuberance. He loved children too, so he merely smiled at the boy and ruffled his hair fondly.

Following his younger brother outside, Shokichi swore softly in surprise when he realized who his guests were. He bowed deeply to the brothers, Masahiro in particular. He remembered well that Masahiro had saved him when he had thought that all was lost, and took extra care to greet them with proper deference.

The young boys told them that their father was out in the fields. This was unfortunate, as they had meant to speak to the father and question him on various topics. It seemed like the interview would have to wait.

"It would probably be inconvenient for him to be interrupted during his work," Narichika decided swiftly and turned to look at Masahiro. "I'm going to visit the village elder. Stay here and watch the kids. I'd just like to borrow one of the summons, if I may."

Having said so, Narichika departed with Genbu, probably because the childlike warrior was the most approachable among the spirit summons present. In truth, Genbu probably was the easiest to get along with.

Masahiro wondered what Taiin and Rikugou thought about that. The pair remained shielded next to him, while Kouchin and Touda remained at Noshiro's manor.

"You're staying at Lord Noshiro's home, aren't you? It's huge, isn't it? What's it like inside?" one of the children piped up curiously. For the young boys, it seemed like Noshiro Shigeyori lived in an entirely different world. They couldn't help but wonder what lay within those brick walls.

"Well, there's the main house, a barn, stables, and what seems to be a weaving hall. It seems like the women in the district go to work there...."

As Masahiro spoke those words, Shokichi's face fell. He looked away, and his shoulders seemed to droop tiredly. Yasuke, who was standing beside his brother, had also tensed up at his words. Masahiro, fretting that he had said something he shouldn't have, asked "Uhh ... did I say something wrong?"

Shokichi started and looked back up, shaking his head vigorously in denial. "No, not at all! It's just that ... our mommy used to go work at the manor all the time...."

The boy's voice faded away, and Masahiro noted the glimmer of pain in the boy's eyes. He suddenly recalled that, as the boy was being dragged into the sea by the demon, he had screamed over and over for his mother.

The boys' home was cramped and had only one room. Peeking through the straw mat that hung at the hut's entrance allowed him to see the entirety of the home's interior, and he saw no sign of anyone else inside.

"Where's your mother?"

The young siblings grimaced at the question, and Yasuke clutched tightly at his older brother. At the same time, Masahiro noticed a wide tear in Yasuke's shirt, and crouched down to finger the tear.

"Your shirt's all torn." Upon close inspection, he saw that the coarse, faded shirt was full of small rips and tears, as well as some areas that had been carefully patched.

"Mommy said she'd fix it...." Having said that, the boy fell silent.

Shokichi explained, "Mommy's living just outside the village.... But she can't remember us."

"Huh...?"

At Masahiro's confusion, Shokichi grabbed his arm and started leading him away.

"You saved me yesterday. You came from the capital, didn't you? Lord Noshiro once said that there's a great official in the capital who can do everything. Are you him?" the boy asked him with a grave expression on his face.

Masahiro hesitated briefly before nodding. "Possibly...." he replied, and the boys' faces lit up animatedly.

"Then can you cure mommy?"

"You can cure Kayo, Taichi, and Suzu too, right?"

Masahiro was half-walking, half-dragged by the two brothers, who had now grasped his hands firmly in theirs and were pulling him steadily towards some unknown destination. Their eyes shone with so much desperate hope that he couldn't bring himself to tell them that he did not know how to cure them. Did the children mean the people who had lost their memories? Or the ones who had become like living dolls?

They finally stopped at the edge of the village, where they could see a hut in the distance. They had not stood there for very long before a thin young woman exited the thatched hut. The two brothers hurriedly tugged Masahiro behind a large tree, and continued to

surreptitiously observe the woman, who had just walked into the forest with a basin in her hand.

“There’s a well in the forest,” Shokichi explained. A little while later, the woman reappeared, cradling the basin in her arms. Yasuke stared at her intently until she disappeared into the hut, and finally murmured, “That’s our mommy. But she can’t remember us....”

“The monster in the shrine did this to mommy,” Shokichi declared with such fierce bitterness that his lips trembled with suppressed emotion.

The words snagged at Masahiro’s thoughts, and he responded questioningly, “The monster ... in the shrine?”

The two boys nodded emphatically.

There was a stone shrine standing outside the village. People were absolutely forbidden to approach the shrine, and yet recently, it had been completely destroyed somehow.

“The village elder used to tell us about how a white god sealed a terrible monster inside. No one is allowed to go near it.”

Kayo and their mother had been found unconscious in front of the destroyed shrine. After that, they had completely changed. At the same time, cases of people losing all trace of recent memories and of people who had become like living dolls began to appear and multiply....

“Daddy travelled all the way to the next district, to ask a great man there for help,” Shokichi muttered softly as they headed back towards the village. “But he wasn’t there. Some people were saying that he had disappeared.”

“They said he was head of the Chishiki sect,” Yasuke added.

At the brothers’ words, Masahiro was too startled to speak. The head of the Chishiki sect was the crazed man they had just dealt with.

To Masahiro and his companions, the head of the Chishiki sect was an evil man. However, to the locals, he was a man they deeply worshipped and respected as a miracle worker. Even if Masahiro had known this, had known of all the people who pinned all their hopes and dreams on the man, the man’s deeds were still unforgiveable, and Masahiro would have had no choice but to eliminate him. Yet it was undeniable that Masahiro and his companions were the ones who ripped away the people’s beacon of hope.

... Things are so complicated, Taiin whispered sadly in Masahiro’s ear as he nodded and sighed softly.

Masahiro had no idea whether there would be a way to help the children's mother and the people of the district. Even though Narichika was here as well, he was not skilled in healing mental illnesses. Had it been possession by a fox or *inugami*⁷, it would be a simple matter of exorcism. However, the current situation seemed to have a different cause at its root.

"If that monster is gone, will mommy return to normal?" Shokichi asked Masahiro eagerly.

Masahiro's smile hid a heavy heart as he replied, "I'll do everything I possibly can."

He could not say for certain that they would be able to find a cure. Even destroying the demon was no guarantee that the afflicted people would return to normal. Still, Masahiro understood painfully well the torment of being forgotten by a loved one, and was determined to give it everything he had.

"If you get rid of the monster, mommy will remember us, won't she?" Yasuke asked insistently.

Beneath Masahiro's weak smile, he was overwhelmed by an urge to cry.

Please remember. Don't forget me. Masahiro wanted cry out these words freely like the two boys beside him. He wanted to call out for that missing warmth like a child bereft of its mother, its tiny grasping hands reaching out for comfort. How much lighter this burden would feel, if only he could do that.

It's okay to forget.... He himself had spoken those words, bidding forgetfulness overtake all those memories that would only cause suffering and torment. He had sincerely wished for it.

And yet, in the deepest, darkest corner of his heart, he had been crying, *Please don't forget me....*

The village elder scrutinized Narichika from head to toe with wary, assessing eyes before curtly allowing him entrance.

"Thank you very much sir," Narichika said as he followed the elder genially past the straw mat that hung at the entrance and plopped onto the dirt floor.

This small home had a few pieces of furniture, including a wooden chest that most likely held items like clothing. Several straw mats were rolled up against a wall; these were probably bedding, as most villagers still lived in homes with dirt floors.

As the elder muttered to himself that the coming winter was going to be a harsh one, he poured some cold water into a mug from a ewer and handed the mug over to Narichika without any ceremony.

“Thank you sir,” Narichika said as he received the mug. The water cooled his throat pleasantly as he drank.

“What do you want to know?” the elder asked. The man was quite old, both his beard and hair having turned white with age. However, surprisingly enough, when Narichika ventured to ask his age, it turned out that he was actually younger than Seimei. Narichika smiled drily when he thought of his very sprightly eighty-eight-year-old grandfather. That unusual robustness was probably due to the fox demon blood he had received from his mother—which meant that Narichika himself would have some of that blood flowing through his own veins. But that was neither here nor there, and Narichika focused back on his task.

“I’ve heard that, recently, there have been a growing number of people who have lost their minds or their memories. Do you have any guesses as to what might be the cause?”

Faced with the straightforward question, the elder grimaced. “I don’t have to guess. Everyone knows the reason why.” He raised a gnarled hand and declared firmly, “It’s because the shrine was destroyed. Even though I’ve forbidden everyone over and over not to go near it...!”

Narichika was hardly expecting such a clear and direct response. Despite his astonishment, however, he continued to ask, “Please tell me everything you know about the shrine. It would help us to understand and handle the situation.”

“Who are you anyway?” the elder shot back.

“I’m an *omyouji* from the capital. I received orders from the owner of this land to resolve the situation here.”

“You’re a monk?”

“An *onmyouji*, sir.”

“Not a Shinto priest?” the elder persisted.

“No, sir. I’m an *omyouji*.”

“Like that Chishiki sect head, or whatever he was?”

“No, sir,” Narichika patiently responded. “We’re completely different. We have absolutely nothing to do with each other.”

At this point, the elder eyed Narichika suspiciously. “Then what on earth does an *onmyouji* do?”

“Hmm ... we divine the future by studying the stars, we make calendars, predict the weather, exorcise evil spirits, pray for relief from illnesses, cast spells for success in work or love, recite incantations to counter ill omens or unlucky days, and deal with a host of other affairs. For this situation, however, it would probably be to defeat demons.”

“... Is that so.” The old man seemed impressed by Narichika’s lengthy recitation, and after he paused for a while in deep thought, he began nodding briskly. “Well, whatever it is you do, if you can do something about this situation, please do so.”

“Yes, sir. That is my intention. If you happen to know how the demon was sealed within the shrine, I would be greatly obliged if you can tell me about it.”

The elder crossed his arms and closed his eyes, as if scouring through his vast memory. Finally, he opened his eyes slowly and rumbled in a strained voice, “I don’t really know the exact details, only that my grandfather used to say that the shrine was sealing away a terrible monster and its underlings, and to never go near it. I’ve never thought about who created the shrine, or defeated the monster in the first place.”

Narichika frowned and probed further. “A monster and its underlings? You mean there isn’t just one?”

“I really don’t know the details. Grandfather only said that, if the monster got loose, it would be catastrophic. And ever since the shrine was destroyed, people have been getting sick or dying. A catastrophe indeed.”

The men who had disappeared had been found as corpses floating in the bay, while the women and children had lost their minds.

The elder huffed bitterly. “It’s unbelievable. To see little children and young mothers ending up like this, instead of old worthless codgers like myself. What are the gods doing? Izumo is the land of the gods. If the gods are real, how could they sit back and do nothing in a situation like this? Or are humans so insignificant that they just can’t be bothered?”

Narichika could only sincerely agree with the old man’s words.

If there were gods, why did they turn a blind eye to so much suffering?

The wind started to pick up. This time, Taiin had nothing to do with it. It was an entirely natural occurrence. The clouds were scuttling across the sky; it seemed like the next day held a good chance of being clear and sunny-skied, something of a rarity in recent days.

Yasuke was walking hand-in-hand with Masahiro. The young boy was tinier than both Genbu and Taiin, while Shokichi looked similar to Taiin in age and so was probably about eight years old.

The eldest child of the Minister of the Left, whom Masahiro had met during the New Year's festivities, was around nine years old. Yet it seemed that Shokichi was much more mature, even though they both had younger siblings. Masahiro was fascinated by the stark difference.

"Probably because their surroundings are different...." Masahiro mumbled to himself.

Shokichi's voice broke through his thoughts. Pointing a finger, the boy told him, "There it is. That's the shrine. It's all broken, but there's still a pile of stones."

Masahiro had asked the boys to lead him to the shrine. Even without his *sight*, he could still feel auras and wisps of spiritual power, and so decided to do what he could. Not being able to see was a bit worrisome, but with Rikugou and Taiin around, they would probably be able to handle anything that came up.

"... Are you going there? Do we have to go with you...?" Yasuke asked fretfully. Masahiro released his hand and ruffled the boy's hair as he shook his head.

"No, just wait here. I'm going to take a look at it by myself."

"But it's dangerous. I don't want you to end up like mommy," Yasuke whimpered, close to tears. Masahiro took the little boy's hand and placed it in Shokichi's.

"It'll be alright. I'm just going to take a very quick look and then come right back. Stay here with your brother, okay?"

Masahiro ordered Rikugou to stay by the siblings and walked to the remnants of the shrine with Taiin at his side. As he drew closer, a strange aura became more and more dense, pricking at his skin. It was extraordinary how dense the demonic aura was, given that the shrine had been destroyed for over a month.

"The demon sealed in here must have had truly monstrous power.... But the one we fought yesterday was hardly at this level."

Taiin drifted over to look at the remains of the shrine. She raised her divine aura just enough to let Masahiro see her, but not to the level where the two young brother would be able to see her as well. Sometimes, Masahiro couldn't help but admire how skilled the twelve spirit summons were with such matters.

Brushing away the stone shards, Masahiro spied a white stone slab, split in half. Beneath it was a hole much smaller than the diameter of the slab. Crouching down, he was unable to even see the bottom of the hole. He dropped a pebble, but he could not hear the sound of it hitting the ground.

"That's really deep...."

Masahiro spread out his hand over the hole and closed his eyes in concentration. Pushing his senses to their keenest point, he probed the spot, trying to discover any remaining trace that could serve as a clue to what had happened.

He could feel power radiating from the stone tablet. The flat, heavy white stone that had split in two was probably the seal. It still had a bit of power left. Suddenly, the tablet's power pulsed and seemed to spike through his palm. Immediately, a brilliant white light burned his closed eyes.

In the midst of the piercingly bright light, he could see the forms of the demon they encountered yesterday and yet another demon moving around.

... Damn you...!

The demon howled in maddened fury, and its demonic powers crashed into Masahiro, pounding crushingly. The demon with the human face leapt around him in circles, before charging at him as if signalled.

“...!”

Something faced off against the demon. The moment he thought he could *see* what it was, something cracked and shot out from the very core of his body. His pulse seemed to race and blood gushed through his body so explosively that he could not breathe.

“Masahiro!”

Taiin grabbed Masahiro's hand as he began to sway and pulled him close to steady him. “What's the matter? Masahiro? Answer me, Masahiro!” she called out uneasily.

Masahiro had sunk into a kneeling position on the stones, reached out to touch the stone tablet and then had gone deathly still. The glimmer in his eyes had dulled and his face had gone slack.

And in a place even deeper than the heart, a place one might rightly call the very pit of a person's soul, a hungry fire was burning rapaciously, its pale flames as cold as ice...

“Masahiro!”

Panic was beginning to lace through Taiin's voice as she called out to him over and over. Masahiro's body was abnormally rigid, and there was no response to being shaken or to her voice. His eyes stared out vacantly, unseeing—his eyes might have been open, but he was no longer aware of his surroundings.

What is this? What happened?!

“Rikugou...!”

Standing a distance away with the young boys, Rikugou heard Taiin's distressed shout and frowned.

"Masahiro's ... acting strange...!"

Masahiro should have heard Taiin's voice, but he did not even stir. He remained kneeling, but did not respond to anything. Sunk in a darkness of pure white, bereft of all five senses, Masahiro could only *see* dreamily.

The light was shining into his eyes, so he could only make out a blurry silhouette of the one who had defeated the demon with ease and sealed it away. And something beyond instinct seemed to welcome the light, as the white flames in his chest blazed to life.

His heart spasmed.

The *mononoke* lay outstretched on the roof of Noshiro's manor. Suddenly, its ear twitched and it raised its head. A terrifying aura had begun to emanate from the east, some distance away from the edge of the village.

Standing up and frowning warily, it muttered, "... What is that...?"

It wasn't a demonic aura exactly, nor was it like the presence of the spirits and imps that lived in the area. And of course, it wasn't the spiritual power of a human being either.

It was a strange power than the *mononoke* had never encountered before. Its wisps of power were faint from this distance, but it pricked his senses quite clearly.

At the same time, the surface of the water in the bay began to churn turbulently.

"...Touda."

Kouchin materialized near the *mononoke*, which glanced at her briefly before looking back towards the sea.

"The demon we fought yesterday had a destination in mind."

Kouchin nodded as she surveyed the land spread out before them, searching for traces of demonic power. Suddenly, her eyes widened.

"... Divine aura ... from Masahiro's direction."

She detected the auras of her fellow summons and disappeared. The *mononoke* paused, huffed in irritation, and hopped off the roof in pursuit. But it could not help but look back towards the sea suspiciously.

Did those demons have the power to manipulate the hearts of men? Then why did that demon allow itself to be caught in Touda's flames, instead of using that power to control them? Touda had heard that Narichika and his younger brother were here to deal with this situation. And since he was here, that meant that he was expected to lend them a hand. Narichika was one thing, but that younger brother of his was not at his full strength. No wonder Seimei had sent the spirit summons along.

The demon's attack from a few days ago returned to mind. The boy was a joke; he stood there frozen in the middle of the battlefield, forcing Kouchin and Rikugou to constantly watch out for him. The boy always looked like he wanted to say something, but whenever their eyes actually met, his mouth would snap shut and his face would stiffen, as if petrified.

If the boy was that frightened of him, then just command him to leave and be done with it.

Kouchin and the rest called the boy by name. Touda himself had heard it many times, but for some strange reason, the name never really imprinted itself into his consciousness. It would just drift past his ear, and in the next moment, he would have already forgotten what the child's name was.

When Abe no Seimei was younger, he had told him that the name was the shortest spell. How could a spell be so weak that it could be forgotten immediately? He supposed that only meant the child's power only went so far.

Even though he could invoke the images of Seimei's and Narichika's faces easily, unless that boy was standing right in front of him, he could not seem to remember what he looked like.

As if a spell had been cast, blocking out that child alone.

It was a pity that Touda never stopped to consider the implications of this thought.

He did not even notice the strangeness of it all.

Taiin was frantic. Masahiro was stiff and unmoving, as if time had stopped for him.

"What ... what should I do? What's going on? Masahiro ... hey ... Masahiro, answer me...!"

She wondered if a hard slap would help snap him out of it, but she hesitated when she recalled the summons' commandments. She wasn't sure how flexible the rules were, but Suzaku had once punched Fujiwara Toshitsugu, an official of the Bureau of *Onmyou*, so perhaps these didn't count as violations of their commandments.

"A little tap should be alright. O..okay, here goes!"

Taiin drew in a deep breath and held it, closed her eyes, and raised her hand.

But her palm froze a hair's width away from Masahiro's cheek as she sensed an incoming demonic aura.

Taiin spun around. The aura was carried on the breeze blowing in from the bay, but was approaching them swiftly.

Standing some distance away with the two children, Rikugou's form had gone stiff with tension. The aura was emanating from not just one but several demons, all racing towards them and their auras twisting together like a whirlpool.

"Taiin, take the children away," Rikugou ordered as a silver spear materialized in his hand. He stared into the direction of the gusting wind, preparing for battle.

Taiin, however, shook her head. "I can't! Masahiro's still not moving."

"Then ... take all three..." Rikugou's voice cut off as he slashed automatically towards a black blur that had suddenly appeared at the corner of his eye.

The demon that had flanked them, intending to attack Shokichi and Yasuke, was thrown back by the force of the silver spear, but another demon rapidly took its place, leaping over the prone body with bared fangs and a high-pitched shriek. Rikugou coolly stabbed it through the face and flicked his spear, sending the demon soaring into the air before slicing through its torso.

The two young children clung together fearfully, not knowing what was happening. All they saw was a monster charging at them with a bone-chilling cry before being flung back by some unseen barrier. But even before they could relax, yet another monster pounced at them. The two boys squeezed their eyes shut, terrified beyond words.

Panic-stricken, Taiin tugged desperately at Masahiro's collar.

"Wake up, Masahiro!"

Locked away deep in his soul, Masahiro heard a monstrous bellow....
...You ... definitely...!

The thunderous roar resounded like a curse.

A figure bathed in light stood before five demons that were sprawled helplessly on the ground, eying them dispassionately. Upon hearing the demon's roar, one end of the figure's lips twitched slightly to form a mild smirk.

Masahiro's heart thumped again, and the white flames turned into a searing conflagration.

The indefinable air blanketing Masahiro was beginning to feel oppressive. Taiin gulped nervously. *What is this? What's happening?*

Masahiro had once lost his life on the holy grounds of Chigaeshi. Could this be related to what had happened then? But if so, why did it have to happen in a situation like this?

Taiin ground her teeth and swept her eyes to survey the scene. There were four attacking demons. Among them was one missing a leg—that had to be the one they fought yesterday.

These demons were extremely fast; it was difficult enough to follow their movements and defend against their attacks, much less try to retaliate. Rikugou alone would not be able to take down all of them, not when he had to protect the two highly vulnerable children trembling behind him. Taiin had to take action; it would be best to follow Rikugou's earlier suggestion and use a whirlwind to carry the boys into the air.

Sharp claws slipped past Rikugou's spear in a vicious arc towards the two young boys. The demon let out an ear-splitting screech of triumph as Rikugou's breath caught in dismay. A blade of vacuum suddenly flew towards the demon but missed, slamming instead into the ground, gouging out a scar into the earth and exploding in a cloud of dust and clod. In that instant, a white *mononoke* shot out from the bushes, past the rain of dirt and snatched the child out of a demon's grasping claws.

A blade tore into the limbs and claws that were now grasping at empty air. Viscous black mucus spurted from the wound, and Rikugou's twilight cloak whirled, covering the remaining child. The boom of the flapping cloak startled Yasuke, who curled up in shock.

A massive divine power crashed into the injured demon, which then completely disintegrated. The power's backlash battered mercilessly against the young children, terrifying them even more.

The *mononoke* and Kouchin had arrived in time to save Shokichi. After lowering the weak-kneed boy onto the ground, the *mononoke* was livid as it barked, "What the hell were you doing?"

Rikugou weathered the frigid tone with a calm expression. He merely glanced over in Masahiro's direction and stated matter-of-factly, "He was acting strange, and then the demons appeared."

"Masahiro?" Kouchin's midnight eyes were curious as they trailed over to the unresponsive boy. Hearing that, the *mononoke*'s expression cleared slightly, as if being introduced to the boy for the first time. *Ahh, so Masahiro's his name.* This mild interest lasted for less than a second, before the name was once again wiped from its memory. Like water slipping through a sieve, that name would never leave any vestige of its passing.

Cacophonous howls reverberated through the forest. The three remaining demons bared their fangs simultaneously, and took advantage of the summons' distraction to charge at Masahiro. However, Taiin was still by the boy's side. Now that the two little boys were no longer a concern, she gathered her own prodigious destructive power and cried out challengingly, "Don't underestimate me!"

A wind spear drilled into the face of one of the charging demons, ripping its mouth apart. As it crumpled to the ground, the two remaining demons appeared to hesitate. The summons, however, were not so kind as to pity them.

"You're not getting away!" Taiin growled as a whirlwind twisted around the demons and sent them tumbling into the air. The demons writhed wildly until they managed to break through the barrier of cutting wind. Despite nearly being shredded to ribbons and on the verge of collapse, the fleet-footed demons were still faster than the summons, and managed to escape towards the sea.

Taiin stomped her foot irately, infuriated that the demons had managed to slip past her grasp. Still, she knew where they had fled to, and there were more important matters at hand than hunting them down.

"Masahiro. Hey, Masahiro." Kouchin tapped Masahiro's cheek lightly. The young boy's stare remained vacant, but finally, he raised his head.

His eyes were still unfocused, as if watching something in the far distance, and his pulse pounded alarmingly.

For a brief moment, Kouchin thought she saw a glimmer of white flame in his eyes. Then his eyes fluttered shut and the boy slumped over like a puppet with its strings cut.

One figure stood by silently, watching the scene.

This figure had watched the fight between the group and the demons, and the summons had no idea that they were being spied upon. The figure also noticed the white flame that had flared up momentarily within in the fallen boy.

Eyes that were hidden behind a curtain of obsidian-black hair widened at the sight.

... *That was....*

Pale lips twitched almost imperceptibly and whispered words so faint they were drowned out by the light breeze.

"... I've found ... something quite unexpected...." The mouth twisted into a sneer as the figure chuckled throatily.

That child was one of the magicians from the capital.

So ... the capital, is it?

The man squinted in sheer amusement and, with a smooth turn, disappeared into thin air.

Chapter 9

He dreamed that he was staring up into sky, painted red by the setting sun.

In the dream, the one he missed so terribly was next to him.

As for the place ... it seemed like one of the rooms in the manor where he had been born and had grown up in. As he sat in a broad, all-encompassing lap, he heard a gentle crooning from above him.

A concerned voice asked him if he was cold. The child responded in the negative with a smile. The wrinkled eyes that gazed at him crinkled tenderly.

It was the ephemeral moment before twilight. The sky seemed to shed its cloak of blue, donning instead a garment of vivid crimson.

The child watched the sky raptly as the red hue suffused across the sky.

... This was a scene from the distant past.

Masahiro opened his eyes dreamily, and saw the beams of a thatched roof. Slowly, the worried faces of two children and one adult came into view. When the boy blinked and swept his eyes over the room, their faces relaxed in seeming relief.

Narichika exhaled as if he had held his breath the whole time. "... Really now. You hadn't actually recovered yet?"

Hearing that, Taiin and Genbu whipped around to face Narichika and snipped reproachfully, "Obviously!"

"He's been through some terrible situations. An older brother like yourself should be more concerned about his younger brother!"

Despite being tag-teamed by a pair of scolding children, Narichika acted the unfazed adult. "Come now. Masahiro insisted he was alright. I simply gave highest priority to my brother's judgement."

"You have to consider the situation!"

"Yes!"

In the ensuing storm of warring words, Masahiro's eyes turned away to scan the room around him. Kouchin and Rikugou were seated motionlessly against a wall. Beyond them, the *mononoke* lay curled up in the corner.

Masahiro sighed, feeling tension leave his body. Just its presence was enough to give him an inexplicable sense of relief.

Gathering all his strength, he managed to raise himself up into a sitting position. As he folded the kimono blanketing him, he turned to look at the arguing trio.

"I'm alright. Please don't bully my brother," he cajoled them soothingly.

"Masahiro, you are really so kind. Remember to never let go of this kind spirit of yours, or you'll end up like grandfather," Narichika effused in dramatic sincerity.

The aged visage of his grandfather floated before Masahiro's mind's eye. He couldn't resist thinking that his brother was actually right. Certainly, his grandfather was a kind and gentle man, but he had a most unfortunate fondness for needling and teasing the vulnerable—like himself. There was no way for Masahiro to argue against his brother's very astute observation.

"I heard the details from the summons. But what actually happened to you?" Narichika continued, going straight to the heart of the matter.

After separating from Masahiro, Narichika had visited the village elder, followed by Kayo, the little girl who had lost her mind. Her condition was just like what had been described to him; no matter how he tried to engage her in conversation, waved his hand back and forth before her eyes, or tapped her lightly on the cheek, she remained unresponsive.

The child's mother looked gaunt and weary, having cried until her tears dried up. She had pinned all her hopes on the head of the Chishiki sect, but he had ended up vanishing without a trace. Driven beyond despair, she had thought that there was no way to restore her little girl to normal, but then an *onmyouji* from the capital had appeared on her doorstep. She had bowed low to him then, to Narichika who provided the last shred of hope, and begged him piteously, "Please sir ... save my little girl...!"

From there, he heard similarly anguished pleas from every household he visited. Even though these pleas weighed heavily on his heart and his steps, and he no longer wished to continue, he forced himself to visit every single affected home. Just as he finished and considered heading back to find Masahiro, Genbu had suddenly become unusually agitated and had lead him to the shrine.

At the sight of Narichika, Shokichi and Yasuke began bawling as if a gag had suddenly been removed. He held them close and comforted them the best he could, while in the distance, a panicky Taiin kept repeating Masahiro's name over and over.

Upon hearing the summons' explanation that Masahiro had suddenly frozen and lost consciousness, the normally calm and unflappable Narichika felt a bone-chilling fear lance through him.

It was not a good idea for the summons to appear before the villagers, so Narichika left Masahiro in their care and escorted the two children home before returning to carry Masahiro back to the Noshiro manor.

His first thought was actually to have the summons help carry Masahiro, but they were not at the Abe estate. If anyone spied Masahiro returning to the Noshiro manor on his own while unconscious, Narichika and his group would immediately be viewed with deep suspicion. Even with the letter from the Minister of the Left, they were seen as mysterious guests who had appeared out of nowhere. It was best not to draw unnecessary attention to themselves.

Masahiro looked over to the uncovered part of the veranda and noticed that the skies had opened up. Without a single cloud in the sky, the great expanse of clear blue was something he had not seen for a long time. The sun had passed the zenith and appeared to be on the descent, suggesting that it was nearing dusk.

Although the view was blocked by a brick wall, this manor was actually situated near the bay. Flowing nearby and into the bay was the Noshiro river, which was probably where the name of the family came from. The bay was so wide that it was not possible to see its far shore, but on clear days, one could see easily view the sun setting over the sea. The Noshiro family home was surrounded by truly magnificent scenery.

Masahiro could hear the sea. The indistinct sigh of surf running on sand felt so tranquil, yet there were moments when it seemed to hide a discordantly disturbing note.

Kouchin raised a hand, drawing Narichika's attention. "The demons live in the sea," she stated. "We should deal with them before there are more victims."

"Is that so...? The villagers were worried about the people who are still missing. They mentioned that they found several corpses floating in the bay. Those missing people are probably...."

A pale white flame shuddered in the depths of Masahiro's soul. His vision suddenly narrowed, as if a thick curtain had descended over his senses and dulled them.

"... The people who were caught ... have fallen prey to the demons...." a flat voice intoned through parched lips, as if from the midst of feverish delirium.

All pairs of eyes swivelled towards Masahiro.

The boy's face was expressionless. Taiin's breath caught; his eyes looked just like they did back at the shrine.

“... There is a spirit commanding these demons ... a spirit that sees human hearts as a plaything ... it loves to sow conflict and discord...”

Someone grabbed the boy's shoulder firmly and yelled into his ear, “Masahiro!”

Masahiro's shoulders jerked and his eyes flew open as if waking from a reverie. He blinked confusedly.

“... Huh...?”

There was a fleeting sense of icy cold, before the shadow that glittered in the depths of his eyes vanished and the boy's normal lively glow returned.

“... What ... did I say...?”

Narichika stared at his younger brother with a strained expression before finally releasing the boy's shoulder wordlessly.

The people who were caught have fallen prey to the demons. The spirit commanding these demons loves to sow conflict and discord.

It was true that corpses of the missing people had been found floating bloated in the bay. However, these accounted for only a small portion of those who went missing. Narichika had heard that rescuers trying to retrieve the corpses from the bay were themselves dragged into the water and were never seen again. Those whose memories were rewound back to the past were the cause of quarrelling and disharmony. Parents whose children had lost awareness had sunk into a pit of despair.

These were certainly signs of things to come.

“Where did you hear that from?” Narichika questioned his brother.

Masahiro kneaded his forehead. “Umm ... it's not like I heard it somewhere...”

... I just know it.

Masahiro felt a thrill of fear the moment he realized this. How could he have known about a spirit sealed away in a land he was visiting for the first time? His mind seemed to be screaming warnings about how such a thing was impossible, and yet he knew this, as if recalling a long-forgotten memory.

Feeling eyes upon him, he turned his ashen face and met the stiff, unblinking eyes of the *mononoke*. Masahiro did not look away, drawn in by those disinterested eyes that were crimson like the setting sun in his dream.

They were the eyes of a Touda that did not know Masahiro, and it was these eyes that would look upon him always.

Those warm eyes that crinkled into a smile and held a hint of pain would never return, and the person who had wished for that was Masahiro himself.

... But at least he wanted to see it again ... if only in his dreams.... He wondered if he was asking for too much. Surely something this insignificant could be allowed?

A spell that allows you to meet the person you want to see—he recalled Akiko’s warmth and felt his chest constrict.

Masahiro licked his lips and finally continued, “I didn’t hear about it ... I think ... it’s more like ... a gut feeling.”

“... Is that so.” Masahiro’s answer was vague, but Narichika did not press the issue. He pulled out his vajra and prayer beads from among his belongings and stood up.

“If the demons have been hunting humans, then we’ll need to get rid of them before there are any more victims. Summons, please lend me your power.”

Narichika then bent down to address his younger brother. “You wait for us here....”

“No, I’ll go with you!” Masahiro insisted adamantly, and scrambled onto his feet.

“I’m going too,” he repeated. “I promised Shokichi and Yasuke that I’d get rid of the demon and save their mother and everyone else in the district. I don’t want to break my promise...!”

His voice quivered from the turbulent emotions swirling within. His eyes burned, and he swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat. He had made so many promises ... but he had failed to fulfill so many. He had been warned about these half-broken promises on that eerily dark river bank, and so he had returned to the living world to keep them.

Nevertheless, among all those many promises, there was one he probably would never be able to keep.

He had promised to become the greatest *onmyouji*, but the person he had made that promise to no longer existed. He did not wish to let anyone else down again.

“So many people are suffering at the moment.... I wanted to be an *onmyouji* to help people like them. I promised that I’d become the greatest *onmyouji* ever...!”

Masahiro’s eyes gleamed with determination. Narichika knew those eyes well, and no matter what he said at this point, his younger brother would not change his mind. Masahiro did not realize this, but he was so much like their grandfather in this way.

“... Alright, but don’t push yourself too hard,” Narichika allowed grudgingly with a huff. Masahiro nodded eagerly in response.

The *mononoke* watched them disbelievingly.

... This kid wants to be an onmyouji? How reckless! He can’t even see nonhumans—who on earth did he make this foolish promise to?

The greatest *onmyouji*.... To Touda’s knowledge, this could only be Abe no Seimei. That would mean that the boy would have to surpass Seimei himself.

... Greater than Seimei? How ridiculous....

The *mononoke* shook its head and blinked.

Neither the boy’s face nor his name remained in its memory, but those words resonated peculiarly in its mind.

The spirit hidden at the bottom of the sea glared at the wounded demons that had dragged themselves before it.

“Fools!” it roared out in rage.

A while back, it had felt the aura of its hated nemesis—the one that had sealed it away for so long. During that unending torment, the titanic power of its nemesis had been wrapped around its body, crushing it mercilessly as it clawed futilely in that dark, cramped pit. But finally, the seal had loosened, and it had been able to recuperate, along with the demons under its command.

Beneath the spirit’s feet lay a pile of rotting corpses. The injured demons were feasting ravenously on other corpses nearby. They had used some of these corpses to lure in more prey, but the humans were starting to catch on, and were refusing to enter the water.

But after a long hiatus, a live human had actually entered the water on the previous day. However, the demons that left to hunt the human were unexpectedly thwarted. The spirit had therefore come to the conclusion that it was time to eat the women and children it had originally released for personal amusement. It had thrived long enough on the wails of despair and howls of hatred that ensued.

A pair of eyes was luminous in the inky darkness of the sea floor.

“... Go.”

The demons that were hungrily devouring rotting flesh paused at its command and sped to the surface.

It was so hungry. This land teemed with humans, and they were so easy to hunt. Playtime could wait until after it was sated.

It had ordered the demons to immediately kill anyone that tried to flee. Humans were their food. It was presumptuous of food to do anything other than fulfill the demons' needs. Any human brazen enough to defy them was a fool indeed.

If it grew bored of eating the humans here, and their numbers dropped too low, it could always move to another location. This country had so many humans, after all. In truth, the country it was originally from overflowed with humans as well, but there were so many powerful enemies there that the fighting over territory was endless and brutal. This land was good. There was no one to threaten them.

Yes.

None other than their hated nemesis....

Evening had almost fallen by the time Narichika and Masahiro found themselves standing by the bay once more. Waves lapped placidly against the shore, and the sandy beach would have been filled with playing children had it been summer.

Masahiro's forehead was now adorned with grey patterns drawn using the soot from a burned paper charm. As long as these markings remained, he would be able to see the various nonhumans and spirits.

"Use this instead of your *sight*. It probably won't be any good when it comes down to the line, but it should be more reassuring that not being able to *see* at all."

So Narichika had said, but it was actually very effective. With a little bit of concentration, Masahiro could see the summons ranged around them.

Masahiro stared intently into the water, and caught glimpses of a sinister shadow lurking on the sea bed. His hair stood on end as an icy chill ran up his spine.

A gigantic wave reared above the water, and Masahiro did not miss the shadows that concealed themselves within.

"Demons!"

Hearing Masahiro's shout, Genbu spread out both hands, his spiritual aura expanding to cover the group. The demons that shot out of the water rammed into an invisible barrier on the shore.

Genbu's wall of water shimmered. It would hold the demons here at the shore while the group worked on exterminating them. These demons would terrorize the district people no more.

Masahiro stood on a sand dune, watching the demons as they pawed the water's surface and turned to target him.

The jaws on their flat, human-like face gaped, and an unearthly shriek rang across the water. The two of them charged towards him, their feet churning the water into a furious foam.

He could see. His hearing and sight complemented each other in perfect harmony, and his mind was in complete control of the situation. With this....

He fell into the stance of sealing and intoned in a ringing voice, "No-ma-ku-san-man-da ba-sa-ra-dan-sen-da ma-ga-ra-sha da-so-wa ta-ya-un-ta-ra-ta-gan-man!"

A demon-binding spell lashed out at one of the demons, and an invisible mantra chain wrapped around the entire length of its body. The demon sunk like a stone into the water despite its frenzied thrashing.

The other demon leapt to evade the pulse of spiritual power that Narichika threw at it. For a brief moment, a hole appeared to be gouged into the surface of the water.

Narichika withdrew his hands from the shape of a kris and returned to his original stance, his face strained.

"I'm really no good at this demon extermination business."

...I guess I'm most suited to calendar work after all....

He pursed his lips and huffed cheekily as he glanced at the demon that had finally managed to break out of Masahiro's binding spell and was clambering back to the water's surface.

He swept out a hand folded into the shape of a kris to the side and chanted, "O gusting wind, become a slicing blade!"

The combination of spiritual power and sacred words slammed into the demon, tearing at its flesh. Gobs of black mucus spurted into the air and sank into the water. Taking advantage of its disorientation, Masahiro quickly chanted a mantra.

"No-ma-ku-sa-ra-ba-da-da-gya-ti-ya-ku-sa-ra-ba bo-ke-yi-bya-bu-sa-ra-ba-da-da-ra-sen-da ma-ga-ro-sha-ken-gya-ki-sa-ra-ba-bi-ki-nan-un-da-ra-da-gan-man!"

The noxious aura surrounding the demon vanished the moment Masahiro finished chanting.

“Die!”

Taiin’s vacuum blades sped towards with demon with an inexorable sense of finality. The many blades slashed the demon’s torso and limbs, sending body parts flying until it was no longer recognizable. The water’s surface seemed to shudder as they splashed into the sea.

One down.

“They’re not too bad if we manage to bind them,” Narichika commented.

If the remaining one can be destroyed, surely the spirit hiding at the bottom of the sea will have to appear.

To this point, Narichika still wasn’t sure whether there was a spirit biding its time on the sea bed. Still, it was worth a try. But what bothered him more than that was the sinking feeling that, even if they were able to destroy it, the people in the district may not actually recover.

Souls that had lost time, souls that had completely lost awareness—even if the spirit was the cause, he honestly didn’t think that merely getting rid of it would return the victims to normal.

Narichika might have been an *onmyouji*, but in the end, he was just a normal human being. He couldn’t do everything. And though he wanted to grant the wishes of the young children, he knew only too well that there were limits to what he could do. He could not resurrect the dead, and nor did he have the power to heal minds.

Perhaps if it were his grandfather....

Masahiro, on the hand, was entirely focused on the final demon.

“If we can take this one down...!”

... The spirit will have to appear. It will be so enraged by the loss of its servants that it will surface....

The image of the two young siblings popped up in Masahiro’s mind—the children who yearned for a mother who had forgotten them. In spite of her cold refusals to acknowledge them, they still kept reaching for her with everything they had.

He was seeing himself. He had sacrificed something priceless in return for something he could not bear to lose.

That was why Masahiro had to do everything in his power to help the children. At the very least, even if he could not save himself, he wanted to give back to the children what they had lost.

... Was that presumptuous of him, he wondered.

On the other end of the battlefield, the *mononoke* and Kouchin watched Narichika's and Masahiro's intense fight.

"... Kou, you're not going to help them?"

"It should be okay. A demon like that wouldn't be a challenge for Masahiro if he put his mind to it," Kouchin replied easily as she crossed her arms.

Curious, the *mononoke* tilted its head to look at her and asked, "... Not Narichika?"

"No, I'm talking about Masahiro."

The *mononoke* mumbled to itself under its breath, *Masahiro. I just can't seem to remember his name.*

But just as Kouchin said, with Narichika's spell boosting Masahiro's *sight*, the boy was battling with frightening intensity, his fighting spirit boiling, and was throwing every ounce of power into the effort as if possessed. There was something disquieting about that single-minded intensity though; the way he was so focused on the fighting seemed as if he were trying to run away from something else.

Rikugou suddenly materialized next to Masahiro. In that same instant, a sharp, white projectile shot from the water. Rikugou pushed Masahiro forward while simultaneously using his cloak to deflect the object, which ricocheted into the sand. It was a human bone, cracked so as to expose a sharp point.

The surface of the water churned violently and rose in tall waves. A black shadow lurking within the waves glared balefully at Masahiro .

'... You...!' A thunderous voice bellowed.

The water in the bay gathered itself, spiralling into a colossal pillar steeped in a malevolent demonic aura. The pillar curved and shot towards Masahiro.

Several other water pillars appeared, twisting like dragons as they aimed for Masahiro and Rikugou relentlessly. Genbu's water barrier was shattered by the demonic aura, and the remaining water demon broke through their ranks and dashed for the nearby village. Without a hint of warning, Taiin grabbed Narichika's collar and summoned a gust of wind.

“Hold on tight, or else...!”

“I know!” Narichika shouted back and shrugged her hand off.

Taiin’s whirlwind sped across the sky. Narichika moved to chase after it, but the sight of Kouchin and the *mononoke* caught the corner of his eye.

“... Touda.”

Touda knit his brow questioningly. Narichika’s eyes glittered with suppressed ire.

“I might be afraid of you, but this is something I have to say.”

His youngest brother, bawling his eyes out.

He had wished for forgetfulness, and that wish had indeed come to pass. Yet the deep wound that had been gouged in his heart was still festering. Every time he was glared at with icy eyes, it was like a knife twisting into the unhealed wound, inflaming it further.

“... When we met during the New Year, you were a lot better than this.”

Displeasure flashed in the eyes of the *mononoke*, and its crimson glare was so suffocating that Narichika’s breath hitched. His heart pounded furiously as if to reprimand him for acting without thinking.

Kouchin raised her hand. “Don’t worry. Go.”

“Alright.”

Narichika turned and raced after the water demon. If he were alone, it might be a bit worrisome, but Taiin would be there too. Or *vice versa*, rather.

The *mononoke* grumbled indignantly, “What was that supposed to mean? I don’t understand.”

“Indeed,” Kouchin responded absently as she pulled her three-pronged dagger from her sash.

“Kou?”

“But it probably isn’t a big deal ... for you at the moment, that is.”

Her slender blade reflected a red-tinted light. The sun was nearly setting. Dusk was the realm of nonhumans, and twilight was the world of demons. If they did not finish this before the sun completely set, things were likely to get much more troublesome.

Kouchin left the bemused *mononoke* and charged into the fray. The water pillars were still targeting Masahiro, and Genbu and Rikugou darted around deflecting them. The boy bided his time within the summons' protective circle, waiting for an opening to retaliate.

Their teamwork required no words. Kouchin, who had just joined in, did so silently, as if they had fought together like this before.

It was obvious that Kouchin was angry—the steely glint in her eyes conveyed it clearly even if her voice and expression remained even and unchanged.

Touda felt unsettled. The child had been born without Touda's knowledge, and yet the other summons seemed to be on very familiar terms with him.

A child that claimed to be Seimei's grandson, and Touda did not know of him.

Something was terribly wrong. Something was missing inside him. The name that he had heard countless times still stubbornly refused to imprint itself in his mind. The face that would disappear from his memory the moment it left his sight.

A black lump that had clogged his heart would not disappear.

Searing heat radiated throughout his body. He could feel something unidentifiable latching to his soul.

The *mononoke* ground its teeth.

And it was then that a massive wave reared up and swallowed the child and the other summons.

Chapter 10

They had first met at the end of spring.

A white *mononoke* had fallen out of a gnarled oak tree and snapped at him in annoyance.

...What are you looking at?

Upon being dragged under, all rational thought was swept away with the water.

Salty water rushed into his mouth and turned into a burning torment when it reached his lungs.

Water ... he had been dragged into the water.

Masahiro forced his eyes open and tried to orient himself. Near his feet, he saw the rippling of the water's surface. Ah, he was upside-down.

An orange-hued light reflected off the surface. The sun had almost set, and if they did not defeat the demon before turned dark, there would be no room for error.

Masahiro struggled with all his might, trying to rip off the thing that had wrapped itself around his neck.

Even though some light managed to filter down through the watery depths, the sand and silt that had been kicked up turned the water so murky that it was impossible to make out any detail.

Where were the summons? Genbu, Rikugo and Kouchin—they should have been dragged under as well. Where were they?

‘... You ... you’re not it...!’

The voice seemed to project directly into his senses. Masahiro instinctively turned around to look, but he saw nothing in that direction.

... No ... there was something there.

He could detect a tightly-compressed demonic aura concentrated in a nook on the sea bed. It was there, and the thing around his neck was an extension of its body. But Masahiro could not see it, because the pattern drawn in soot on his forehead had been washed away.

The pressure around his throat tightened, and unwilling, his mouth opened and his breath was forced out in bubbles.

It was suffocating. His lungs felt like they were on fire.

As he continued to squirm, his entire body shaking from the exertion, a light was suddenly kindled inside his mind.

‘In that case ... that flame...!’

As a pale blue light flared in his cleared eyes, Masahiro caught sight of a monstrous form lurking in the water.

‘What...!’

He could see the shocked spirit. It had four bulky legs, and its form resembled that of Kyuuki, one of the demons they had dealt with in the past. Long shaggy grey hair covered its entire body. Its face was extraordinarily human-like, save for jaws that seemed to protrude unnaturally. Masahiro could even make out its sharp fangs.

Deep in his body, his pulse began to throb in an ominous rhythm. The sound of his heartbeat seemed to clamour in his ears. A distant memory flashed in his mind.

He knew this. It was a memory that had been concealed deep in his soul.

Masahiro opened his mouth, ignoring the water that flowed in.

“...Gorou...!”

It was the name of the spirit that destroyed minds and rewound memories in order to torment humans; a monster from a foreign land that loved to stir up conflict and chaos.

The last of Masahiro’s breath bubbled out of his mouth. His eyelids drooped, hiding the flame that flickered in his eyes. Just as Gorou began to draw in the unconscious boy, a white form appeared at the bottom of the sea.

The *mononoke* had seen the group swept away by the water. After a moment of indecision, it plunged into the sea. Rikugou and the rest should be fine—something like this would not be able to defeat any of the summons. The problem was the child.

The boy could not breathe in water. If anything happened to him, Seimei would be inconsolable and Narichika would be truly furious. He didn’t care much about what Narichika thought, but he could not bear to think of Seimei’s grief.

The spirit and the boy were somewhere near the center of the bay. The boy was entangled in the spirit's long fur and had stopped breathing.

... He had to hurry....

An aggressive red aura blazed around the *mononoke*, and Touda emerged from its haze, slashing at Gorou's fur.

‘... Who...!’

Touda ignored the infuriated roar and raised his right hand. Seeing this, Gorou chuckled in amusement.

‘Fire attacks in the middle of the sea? And that silver band too ... how interesting.’

Touda's hand twitched.

... A silver band? That was impossible. Seimei's seal had created a golden band....

Unthinkingly, Touda raised his hand to his forehead, his fingertips brushing against a delicate pattern. This was most unusual; he clearly remembered that the golden band was plain and unadorned.

Gorou took advantage of this momentary hesitation. If its enemy had a heart, it had a way of dealing with him.

Gorou's eyes gleamed eerily in the murky water. Its suppressed demonic power exploded forth and cocooned Touda's body with its oppressive pressure.

Within, Touda could feel the released power sink its tendrils into the very depths of his mind. Unseen hands clawed savagely, its nails slicing into his heart.

“Arghh...!”

A vulgar cackle sounded from the demon as Touda's eyes started to glaze over. The stream of his memories began to rewind, accelerating with the flow of time.

‘So, how far should I rewind time for you? Don't worry, you won't remember anything from this time. What will your new soul be like, I wonder? How will those around you react? Ohhh, I can't wait to see it.’

In that instant, Gorou's power was forced back. The water swirled turbulently as the temperature slowly rose.

Touda's eyes had changed from clear golden to the brilliant crimson of the setting sun.

“ ... ”

... The scenery seemed to be flowing backwards. Everything seemed so dark. Where was he...?

The edge of a blade glinted in the nonexistent light. An agonizing pain lanced through his chest.

The sound of someone calling.

The feeling of impact around his right hand. The warm fluid that dyed his hand was....

Silvery ground, a chilly wind, pure white flowers swaying in the breeze....

And a sound ... like the sound of endlessly drizzling rain....

His heart clenched, and some nameless, immense power slammed into his mind and radiated throughout his body.

A fracture appeared on the silver band encircling Touda's forehead with a loud crack.

Touda grasped his forehead tightly, his eyes snapping wide open.

A voice ... a voice calling his name. That was....

The name of the child that he could never seem to remember. The face of the child that would simply fade from his mind like evanescent soap bubbles. These things would never imprint themselves in his heart, as if a spell had been placed on him....

‘Those nightmares ... such torment....’

Nightmares, disappear without a trace from this body. Let it be like clear spring water, flowing freely and unsullied.

No matter what happens. No matter how much time passes.

A voice ... that must not be forgotten. That cannot be forgotten. That he did not want to forget.

That was....

A fiery fighting spirit shrouded Touda's entire body. A hellish inferno erupted with a roar that pierced the heavens and swallowed up Gorou.

After being swallowed by the waves, Genbu searched desperately for Masahiro. As a water deity, he could move freely in the water; water obeyed his commands, and could even act as his weapon.

“Masahiro, where are you?” he whispered with a sense of mounting urgency.

Kouchin and Rikugou would certainly be alright. Even if they were attacked, the twelve spirit summons were not so weak as to be easily defeated.

The water roiled tumultuously. Genbu spun around, startled by the flaring of an intense fighting spirit.

That was Touda’s divine aura, and near that was a malevolent cloud of demonic power.

That creature devoured humans, so Genbu figured that Masahiro would be in that area as well. Genbu’s small form knifed through the water, and he soon came upon Masahiro, drifting lifelessly with his eyes closed, and Touda, who was facing off with the demon.

“Masahiro!”

Masahiro had completely lost consciousness. He had to hurry and take the boy to the surface. The demon was focused on Touda at the moment, so this was the best opportunity to do so.

Genbu began to pull Masahiro towards him. However, just as he had begun to swim away, something extraordinary happened.

Touda’s divine aura exploded in an unrestrained frenzy with a force and suddenness that nearly blew Genbu away. After carefully examining the boiling fury in that divine aura, the summon’s face turned ashen.

He remembered this aura well. He had felt this explosive rage twice in the past, once after Touda had almost killed Seimei and a second time after Masahiro had been stabbed at Kifune.

“Oh no...!”

Genbu raced to the water’s surface, flaring his own spiritual power as he supported Masahiro’s weight.

Spiritual energy formed into a column-shaped barrier in the middle of the bay – and not a moment too soon, for in that very instant, a vicious conflagration erupted, turning the entire evening sky into a blazing crimson.

Even with a barrier surrounding it, Genbu could feel the intense heat from the raging inferno sear his skin. The flames had turned into a dragon of fire that seemed to burn the very heavens. Unless something happened, his barrier was not going to hold.

Genbu bit his lip and began to swim to shore. His first priority was to see to Masahiro's safety. When he had initially reached the surface, Masahiro had coughed out most of the water in his lungs. While that was promising, his face was still very pale and drawn.

A shadow suddenly emerged from the water's surface.

“Rikugou!”

Rikugou impatiently brushed away the long strands of wet hair that clung to his face and then turned to look at the raging fire. In face of this unbridled fury, something akin to a thrill of fear raced down his spine. Without Genbu's barrier, all of them would be in serious danger.

Touda's seal had been dissolved, and what they were witnessing was pure, unrestrained divine power, one that was unmatched among the twelve summons for both its sheer magnitude and its savagery. It was a power that even a deity of destruction like Kouchin could not hope to compare with.

They were flames of hell that burned indiscriminately. They were the sum of all human fantasies and nightmares of power and destruction made real.

Rikugou took Masahiro from Genbu and headed towards the shore. There, Taiin and Narichika stood motionless, stunned by the sight before them.

“Taiin, did you get rid of the demon?”

Flustered, Taiin nodded and stuttered a response to Genbu, who had also reached the shore. “Y-yeah ... it's done. But ... that's....”

“Is that ... Touda...!” Narichika choked out in alarm. Rikugou and Genbu nodded to him grimly.

The sun had sunk beneath the bay's waters. Yet the sky was awash with a crimson flame more brilliant than the red of the setting sun.

‘What is this...!’

Gorou was frantic and bewildered. The long fur covering its body had been completely burned off the instant it was cloaked in those flames. Its seared flesh bubbled and boiled, like it was being burned alive in the deepest pit of hell.

‘Impossible...!’

How could this have happened? It had only partially rewound its enemy’s memories and destroyed only part of his heart. That missing part of his heart should have given birth to confusion that would in turn lead to new conflict and discord. Somehow, it had miscalculated, and now it was going to perish in the hellish flames of the person in front of him.

‘... Damn ... in that case....’

Its groans were smothered by the stifling hot winds.

The flames continued their maddened rampage, tongues of fire drilling through Gorou’s limbs, consuming its insides, and grinding its bones to ash. Water boiled in face of that unrelenting heat, its vapours visiting even more torment upon the defenceless form. Ultimately, the demon was devoured by the hungry flames, leaving behind not a single trace of its existence.

Kouchin could see Touda’s form shimmering in the sea. Her body trembled in terrified awe of that immense power, of those flames that could not be barred away even with a divine aura. A god commanding the very flames of hell, Touda was the most savage of the twelve spirit summons, and in this unsealed state, his power easily dwarfed hers several times over.

Within the barrier, the demon was no more. Yet its annihilation did not appear to appease Touda’s flames, which continued to run amok with increased fervour.

‘Touda...!’

In the past, when Touda had been used for Seimei’s assassination, he had begged her, with a voice so strained it seemed like he was choking on his life’s blood....

... If ... if something like this should happen again ... please stop me. Kill me if you must....

Unfortunately, she had not the power to kill deities such as the spirit summons, unlike Suzaku, but at the very least, she might have enough to do something about this.

A furious fighting spirit burrowed through Genbu’s barrier and assaulted her. Its edge was as keen as a sharpened knife, and it bit into her limbs, tearing at her arms and face and shoulders. Blood dripped from her forehead into her eyes.

“How dare you wound a lady’s face, Touda. You’re going to pay a hefty price for this.” Smiling drily, she placed a hand against Genbu’s barrier. It was scalding to the touch; she could almost hear a sizzle as it seared her skin.

Touda's desperate plea sounded once more in her mind. Kouchin's eyes drew in painfully, as if trying to hold something back.

Touda had said to kill him if he couldn't be stopped.

"... Yet even so...."

Seimei had given an absolute order, forbidding them from killing Touda.

And Masahiro had prayed for Touda to never remember the cruel and painful past.

"Even with the suffering, or so much pain that it practically tears your heart apart, you still have something you mustn't forget, don't you...?"

That accidental meeting thirteen years ago helped to change you. But because you have forgotten it, your heart has become frozen and numb.

That child too ... his heart was grievously wounded, screaming out in soundless torment, and yet he tried to hide it from everyone.

If Seimei saw you now, would there be words to describe his anguish?

"If at all possible, I really don't want to fight you...."

A sound ... that child was shouting.

The child's heart was crying. Where? Where was he?

I had decided to stay by your side.

I had sworn to do anything and everything, should you only desire it.

Where was that child?

That child....

No. I know his name. I know that child's name.

I know those determined, unyielding eyes; I know that radiantly smiling face that brings joy to everyone who beholds it; I know that small form, running here and there with so much carefree happiness.

And those eyes that look at me ... the voice that calls out to me....

... Mekkun....

That's right.

“...”

A serene light glowed in Touda's eyes.

That child's name is....

“... Masahiro....”

Kouchin's eyes widened. The scorching fighting spirit that had enveloped Touda's body had calmed down in an instant.

“It stopped....”

The vapour in the molten air turned back into water from the coolness of Genbu's barrier, but the air currents remained turbulent in the suffocating heat.

The column of fire disappeared. The pressurized water within the barrier engulfed Touda's form before the barrier walls finally dissolved, being no longer needed.

The clash of cool and boiling water generated a huge wave.

Kouchin dived into the churning waters and saw Touda being swept away.

The water currents were vicious, battering against her body and preventing her from reaching Touda. Using her divine power to momentarily halt the water's flow, she took advantage of the brief stillness to swim forward.

“Now's the chance....”

She slipped through the becalmed current and grasped Touda's arm.

He loved staring at the vivid red sky. Still, he couldn't help but wonder why the sky turned red, and so he tried asking his grandfather.

“Grandpa, why does the sky turn red like that?”

On days with good weather, the afternoon sky was a clear, cerulean blue while the twilight sky was a deep, deep indigo that seemed to weigh down upon the earth, as if to cloak everything. Surely the colour lying in between blue and indigo should be something colder?

The old man's eyes widened as he listened to the child's reasoning, and then nodded in amusement.

"Is that so? Is that what you think? Hahah ... I see ... hmm ... indeed...."

The grandfather placed his tiny grandson on his lap, smiling tenderly as he sank into thought. Finally, caressing the child's head affectionately, he responded, "... That is because the sun is very compassionate and loves humans very much."

Masahiro raised his head dazedly and saw a sky blazing in crimson. His body seemed to be wrapped in a strange feeling, like he was floating in the air.

He had dreamed of a scene from his childhood, and this was probably a continuation of that dream.

A crimson sky....

Masahiro knew of eyes with that exact colour.

He used to think ... *Wow, it's the same colour as the sky at dusk.*

Therefore, the heart within had to be as gentle as the setting sun.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a white form.

In the midst of his blurred, distorted vision, he could make out a pair of crimson eyes gazing at him in concern.

'Hey, are you alright?'

Masahiro squinted.

He had dreamed this dream many times, but the *mononoke* had never spoken to him before.

Every other time, it had merely turned red, apathetic eyes towards him.

'... Finally, Mekkun is willing to talk to me.'

'What are you talking about? How could I not, when I'm the guide to someone hopeless like you.' The *mononoke* puffed out its chest proudly and smirked.

'Even if you don't like it, I'll talk so much I'll sound like a nosy in-law.'

Those crimson eyes crinkled with suppressed mirth.

Masahiro was so delighted to see those warm eyes that he retorted automatically, “Hey, that would be really annoying.”

If only this dream could go on forever....

Masahiro lay on the beach, showing no signs of regaining consciousness.

“What should we do? Is there a doctor around here?!” Taiin yelled frantically, but no one was able to answer her.

“Masahiro, Masahiro. Are you alright? Hold on....” Despite his calm demeanour, Narichika’s face was ashen as he feared the worst.

“...Flame...?”

The wind suddenly changed directions. Genbu and Rikugou noticed and turned towards the bay. The flames of hell that had raged furiously within Genbu’s barrier had calmed down and disappeared.

Once the flames had completely died away, the barrier dissolved, and the water cooled down and settled back to its usual placid state.

Genbu scanned the water’s surface with a stiff expression. “... What happened to ... Touda and Kouchin....”

He wasn’t too worried about Touda, but with flames of such ferocity, even Kouchin was unlikely to escape unscathed.

... Or....

Taiin and Genbu paled. Rikogou stared at the water with an intense concentration, and noticed the water’s surface swelling strangely. In the warm light of the setting sun, the water gleamed golden, and suddenly rose. The curtain of water fell away, leaving Kouchin standing there with Touda’s arm flung across her shoulders.

“... I thought I wouldn’t make it this time.”

Kouchin exhaled heavily and had Rikugou help heave Touda’s body up to the shore before accepting his assistance.

Touda was in a stupor as he tried to push himself off the ground. His breathing was erratic, the silver band around his forehead had disappeared, and his golden eyes swivelled back and forth as if searching for something.

Suddenly, Touda’s eyes fixed on a single spot.

Before him, Taiin and Genbu stood frozen, unable to utter a single word. Narichika was kneeling to the side, and a child lay in front of them.

That's right. That child. The owner of the name he must never forget.

Touda tried to move his frozen lips.

"... Ma...."

He rose to his feet, swaying unsteadily. A few feeble steps took him to the boy's side, and he knelt down.

"... Masahiro...!"

The seated *mononoke* suddenly twitched its ear.

'Hey. Someone's calling you.'

'Huh?'

Masahiro cocked his ear, but couldn't hear anything.

'Calling me? Who?'

The *mononoke* grinned and winked.

'Oh, I don't know. Who could it possibly be? Oh look ... he's calling with all his might. You'd better hurry.'

'But ... if I go, I won't see Mekkun again.'

The *mononoke* wagged its tail merrily.

'Of course you will. How can you not see me again? But that's true ... it might be as you say ... I can't say your name, after all.'

'... What do you mean?'

'Just go.'

The *mononoke* smiled tenderly and stood up.

'The path you need to take is that way,' the *mononoke* pointed with one leg. 'See, the sky there is so red. If you go that way, you'll definitely meet.' Then, it ran off in the opposite direction. Masahiro called to it, but it would not stop.

‘... Someone’s calling me....’

... Who could it be?

Masahiro opened his eyes slowly.

The sky was crimson as far as the eye could see.

Bent over him was a chiselled face, messy hair darker than the deepest skies.

Ah... Masahiro breathed.

... I’m still dreaming...?

Trembling lips were trying to force out words.

Masahiro blinked slowly.

Why did his eyes suddenly feel like they were burning? Even though he wanted to see this so clearly, the image before him was becoming blurred and misty.

... This is a dream.

Because there was no way that voice would ever be calling out his name again.

Masahiro struggled to raise his arm. The shaking fingertips before him had such sharp nails. He had always wondered if he ever accidentally scratched himself.

The boy finally clasped those fingertips. Feeling that warmth, he smiled weakly. How strange. There was a cold drop of water running down from the corner of his eye.

... So warm....

Masahiro squeezed his eyes shut.

... Ahh ... it’s....

... It’s such a wonderful dream....

The icy hand that held his fingertips fell lifelessly.

“Masahiro...!”

But no matter how Touda shouted his name, Masahiro did not move again.

“No, this can’t be true! Masahiro ... Hey...!” As Touda cried out, on the verge of hysteria, Kouchin’s palm smacked into his cheek with a resounding crack.

Taiin and Genbu paled and scuttled backwards hastily. Nevertheless, things didn’t pan out the way they expected. The shock from the slap restored Touda to his senses. He looked up to Kouchin with a perplexed expression and saw her strained face covered with cuts. Looking back slowly over to Masahiro and took a close look at the boy’s face.

He seemed like he was sleeping, the remnant of a faint smile still lingering on his face sinking like hooks into his heart.

“... I....”

Images flashed through his mind—images from the events that occurred when he was under that spell’s control. Revolted, he covered his mouth with his hand. “...I...!”

“You’re truly an idiot.... Don’t make me keep saying this over and over,” Kouchin told the overwhelmed Touda gravely.

After repeating the words she had spoken fifty years ago, she patted Touda’s shoulder. Touda’s eyes were downcast, his face hidden. It was strange how such a burly form could seem so small and vulnerable.

“... In any case, let’s take Masahiro back. He needs rest....”

Rikugou helped place Masahiro upon Narichika’s back. Along with Taiin and Genbu, he shielded his presence and following Narichika away from the shore.

Kouchin peered at Touda for a moment, before deciding that it was better for her to leave. She turned her back to Touda, before speaking up once more.

“Once you’ve composed yourself, follow us back to the manor.... If he wakes up and doesn’t see you, he’ll probably think it was a dream.”

Touda’s shoulder clenched. Kouchin looked at him for a moment longer, before shielding herself and departing.

The crimson sky was gradually being dyed by the indigo of twilight.

... When his name was called, he turned around.

The toddler reached out for the outstretched hand.

He gazed at one of the twelve terrifying spirit summons and smiled without a care in the world.

He hadn't changed at all ... from thirteen years ago....

Clasping the hand that reached to him.

The child had looked upon Touda and smiled.

... Even though he knows full well what I've done.

... Even so, he still....

The child that helped end the endless twilight of Touda's existence.

Even though he knew that these fingers were blood-stained, he still grabbed on to them without hesitation.

“... I...!”

Touda buried his face in his hands and wept.

Chapter 11

Even though the flames had practically devoured its body and its life, Gorou had somehow managed to break free of its clutches. Reaching the beach, it hauled itself from the water and heaved a sigh of relief. Given time and ample prey, this burnt body would regenerate itself.

‘I’ll hide away for a bit and wait for these injuries to heal....’

“I don’t think so.”

At the sound, Gorou froze as if bound by icy chains.

With a sense of trepidation, it turned around.

Upon the rock-strewn shore, the sun was shining behind the speaker. The glare prevented it from making out this person’s face, but Gorou knew who it was with dreadful certainty.

“Y-you ... Shouka!”

Its nemesis, and the one who sealed it away an age ago, sat smiling coldly atop a large rock.

“I don’t know who released you from the seal, but if you had fled to the west back to your former country, you would have gotten away.”

Shouka’s silvery white hair was dyed golden in the light of the dying sun. The eyes that watched the demon’s movements shone a greyish blue, luminous like the moon’s rays.

Shouka slowly rose.

“Gorou, right now, I’m regretting my laziness back then. If only I had destroyed you right away.”

‘Don’t be ridiculous! How can the likes of you defeat someone like me!’

Ignoring the demon’s bluster, the deity continued, “I managed to conceal myself for so long, but because of you, I had to reappear in this world. Don’t think you won’t pay for this.”

The shadowed face smiled cold-bloodedly.

A smooth, white hand reached out, the palm placed directly over Gorou, and tensed slightly with mild exertion. However, the aura that flared out was so formidable as to crush the demon down into the sand.

‘...What ... is this...!’

Gorou’s massive form was slowly crushed by the pressure, flesh being rended from bone, bone being snapped to pieces. As its body deformed and cracked, Gorou’s agonized howl rang through the air.

Even before its cry died away, Gorou’s body disintegrated into dust and sank into the sea.

The spirit that had dispatched Gorou so easily flicked its right hand gently and gazed upon the opposite shore.

Several hundred years ago, this spirit had sealed Gorou and created the shrine to protect the seal. At that time, Gorou had been the aggressor and Shouka had accepted its challenge. Killing it was deemed to be too much of a bother, and so Gorou had only been sealed away. Shouka had only wanted to be left alone in peace. Had Shouka known that things would turn out this way, Gorou would have been destroyed then and there.

Those people whose hearts had been destroyed by Gorou would never be the same again. Yet this spirit, whom in the olden days people called a god, paused to think.

... Humans might not have the power, but surely a god can manage.

Actually, no matter who it was that freed Gorou, it was in Shouka’s best interest to leave immediately and not look back.

“... But doing so would really be the epitome of irresponsibility.”

The spirit felt a twinge of guilt if things were left the way they were. After all, the tragedy that had occurred was a direct result of Shouka’s apathy in the past.

“... Even so....”

Shouka exhaled heavily.

“Oh dear. Seems like things really got out of hand.”

Narichika had returned to the manor. Even after relating the events to Noshiro Shigeyori and returning to his room, Masahiro still had not opened his eyes. Nevertheless, the boy’s breathing was even and easy, suggesting that his condition was not too serious. His body temperature, too, had returned to normal, and it seemed that they simply had to wait for him to wake up.

“Well, there’s probably no need for worry,” Narichika whispered an assurance to himself as he sat down next to his younger brother. Suddenly, he felt an aura nearby and turned to look behind.

A white *mononoke* stood motionless near the veranda, its head hung forlornly and looking as if it would flee at any moment.

Narichika blinked, the expression on his face flickering as conflicted emotions warred against each other. There were many things he wanted to say, and yet a sense of pity stayed his tongue and prevented him from compounding the creature’s suffering.

Thus, he said instead, “... Don’t just stand there. Come closer.”

The *mononoke*’s back flinched noticeably, but its four legs reluctantly began to move. It eventually stopped, standing just behind Narichika as if hiding.

The young man cast his thoughts back to the times when Masahiro would point to this white form and teasingly call it ‘Mokkun’. If Narichika called it the same way, Touda would likely ignore him or glare at him askance. Narichika had always feared Touda, and felt the same way even now, but some other feeling seemed to be welling up within as well.

Somehow, he reflected, the Touda that they knew and the Touda that Masahiro knew were so different as to be completely different people, despite sharing the same body.

Masahiro began to stir. Noticing this, Narichika turned his attention back to his brother, and saw pale eyelids flutter open.

Masahiro simply lay there, staring at the rafters for a long moment. Eventually, he blinked and shifted his gaze to the side, where Narichika sat patiently.

“... Brother....”

“How are you feeling?”

Masahiro smiled weakly. “I’m alright.... I had a dream.”

Masahiro spoke like a little child, so Narichika smiled encouragingly and nodded.

“Is that so.... Was it a good dream?”

Upon asking that question, his younger brother smiled radiantly.

“It was a very good dream.... Because I got to meet him at long last. No matter that it was just in a dream.”

“That’s good,” Narichika replied, stroking Masahiro’s cheek fondly. The boy squinted as if the touch tickled, and nodded.

It was a very good dream indeed.... He was so happy he could cry tears of joy ... he could practically believe that this was good enough for him.

“Masahiro, I’m going to check out the situation in the village. Rest up a bit more, alright?”

The boy agreed with a nod and exhaled slowly. His body felt as heavy as lead.

Upon Narichika’s departure, silence descended upon the room.

What time was it, he wondered, and how long had he been unconscious?

Masahiro tried to move his throbbing head to look at the expanse of sky beyond the open veranda. Instantly, he started and his breath caught in his throat.

The *mononoke* stood there unmoving, its head drooped in a somewhat despondent manner.

How long had it been standing there? Masahiro had not felt its aura at all.

The name ‘Mokkun’ almost slipped from his tongue, but he managed to swallow the word just in time. Composing himself, he called out softly, “Touda ... what’s the matter?”

The *mononoke* flinched. Without raising its head, it whispered in a faint, cold voice, “... It’s....”

“Huh...?” Masahiro could barely make out its words.

The *mononoke* repeated its words again, its voice slowly gaining in strength. “... It’s ... Guren.”

Masahiro’s heart spasmed.

“I’ve said before that you have my permission to use that name....”

The *mononoke*’s head remained bowed, its voice strained as if trying to force out the sound. It could speak no more, however. Small form quivering, it waited with a sense of trepidation for Masahiro’s response.

“...”

... I’m still dreaming?

That had been a truly happy dream—so happy that he had practically wished from the bottom of his heart that he would never wake from that dream.

In the room, a silence descended, so thick that it seemed to suffocate the *mononoke*'s heart. Unable to bear it any longer, it blurted out in a trembling voice, "... I...."

Yet no other words followed, despite all the things it wanted to say and all the things it wanted to tell the boy.

But by Touda's own hand, the summon had done something irredeemable, even though he had sworn that he would never make the same mistake again.

Before meeting Masahiro, before that fleeting dawn, Touda had lived in the darkness. This child helped to end that eternal twilight; he was the sun's rays that chased away the night. The rays of light that he never thought he would be graced with had first shone upon him then.

In the thirteen years since the child had been born, he had helped fill that endless dark with his radiance. But now....

A frail voice shattered the silence.

"...I...."

The *mononoke* cringed and held its breath. No matter how bitter the condemnation, it would accept it without complaint, because it had acted unforgivably and would deserve every harsh word.

"... can't see demons and spirits anymore...."

The *mononoke*'s head shot up, horrified, only to see Masahiro's unwavering gaze upon it.

"You can't see...!"

Masahiro nodded to the stunned *mononoke* and continued quietly, "Rikugou and Taiin and the rest have been increasing the strength of their auras to help me see them. Not being able to see demons is quite troublesome though, since I'm going to be an *onmyouji*."

Masahiro then smiled faintly. "But strangely enough ... I've always been able to see Mekkun. It's always been this way, hasn't it?"

His grandfather Seimei had sealed his *sight* until the spring he turned thirteen. When the *mononoke* had come tumbling down the oak tree, Masahiro should not have been able to see it. Yet somehow, he had seen an irritated *mononoke* frowning at him.

“Even though you didn’t remember, you remained in this form ... and you were the only one I could see all the time.”

The more he spoke, the more unsteady his voice became.

The *mononoke*’s eyes, which were the crimson of the setting sun – those red eyes were as compassionate and nurturing as the sky at dusk. He wanted to gaze into those eyes, and yet his vision seemed to blur.

“I’m ... going to be an *onmyouji*. It might be a bit of a struggle without the *sight*, but I’ll definitely become one.... I promised Guren, after all, that I would do my best.”

Masahiro squeezed his eyes shut, a tear rolling down his cheek. “So ... Mokkun, please become my eyes....”

“ ... ”

The voice it had missed so much echoed in the chamber of its mind.

... Please become my eyes....

Masahiro had said those words at the end of spring last year. And now, this year’s spring was on the verge of ending. So much had happened. Masahiro himself had learned to feel so many emotions. Pain. Torment. Sorrow. And burning anger.

But Masahiro overcame those feelings and continued, “Let’s go home together ... Akiko’s waiting for us. She was asking about when Mokkun would return. She would get angry if I didn’t bring you back with me.”

Masahiro repeated his words over and over to the *mononoke*, its eyes shut tightly against its overflowing emotions.

“Let’s go back. I don’t know what I’d do without Mokkun....”

The *mononoke*’s eyes were luminous in the dark. Gazing upon Masahiro as the boy slept, exhausted, his face became superimposed with the visage of a tiny toddler.

The *mononoke* blinked.

... Mokkun, why do you stay in that form?

It was a question from long ago.

The reason why Guren remained in the form of a *mononoke*....

Its form was like that of a large cat or small dog. White fur covered its entire body. The ends of each of its four feet had five claws. Red spikes ringed its neck like a rosary. On its head, long ears flowed behind it and a floral pattern adorned its forehead.

And the round eyes were red....

No matter what happened, even if Touda lost himself, this form at least would always be reflected in Masahiro's eyes.

Because....

“... It would be meaningless if you can't see it....”

It was white, because it wanted to submerge itself in the child's pure heart.

It was small, so as not to alarm the child.

He had sealed away his powerful, savage divine aura into this nonhuman form until it had become chains that bound him.

All for this child.

Except....

The red eyes ... it was the colour of Touda's grievous mistake, the blood that had been spilled and evidence of an unpardonable sin.

But despite that, the child had said,

... Mekkun's eyes are the colour of the setting sun, aren't they....

The *mononoke* had been perplexed. The boy had smiled and continued to speak.

... Really. It's like you've put a piece of the evening sun inside your eyes....

Masahiro had said that the setting sun was red and dyed the sky a warm crimson because the sun was very kind.

The sun shone its light generously for people the whole day. Soon, it would slip into the shadows for some rest. Tired and preparing to go to its rest, the sun's rays would soften at the end of the day.

That was why the evening sun was red.

This child had said it was a gentle colour, the same colour as the evening sun.

He had said that the evening sun was kind, therefore his eyes held a very gentle colour, and had smiled with such carefree joy.

For a moment, Touda had almost believed that his irredeemable sin had been forgiven.

... Please become my eyes....

This body was drenched in sin. The burden of it bore down on his heart relentlessly. It was a festering wound that would never heal. Even the blood that flowed through his own veins tormented him. In truth, he should not be permitted to stay by the side of any human being, because his was an existence tainted beyond redemption. ... But....

... Should you wish it, I will remain by your side.

If by doing so, he could atone for his sins by even a single iota....

Even though I repeated my mistake a second time, your heart is still the light that pierces my darkness.

So I believe ... and hope.

Narichika took a torch and headed towards the village.

The demon that had been the cause of their problems had been eliminated by Touda, but it didn't mean that the victims would return to normal. What was done was done, after all.

Narichika didn't know what to say to Shokichi and Yasuke. No matter the words he might manage to dredge up, he could only imagine them breaking down in tears.

The young man wanted to rail at his powerlessness. No matter how he trained himself, the number of things he couldn't do still outweighed all the things he could.

"This is why I chose the simple path of calendar science...." he grumbled and sighed.

When he finally reached the house, he noticed that the once-desolate home was somehow brimming with sounds of gaiety and joy.

Narichika was stunned.

"What happened here...."

Noticing the torch light, the children poked their head outside. When they caught sight of Narichika, their eyes lit up delightedly.

"Hey, mister!"

“How’s the tall boy? Is he okay?”

Completely bemused, Narichika could not find the words to answer, and nodded dumbly in reply.

A young lady appeared behind the children.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Mommy, this mister here is a great man from the capital.”

“He and another boy helped get rid of the evil monster. That’s why you’re back to normal!”

The children crowded around their mother with uncontained joy.

“Oh. Really? Then, thank you so much, sir.”

“It’s ... it’s alright.”

The sheer unexpectedness of the situation had robbed Narichika of his faculty of speech.

Despite their humble home, they eagerly invited him to join them inside. Narichika politely declined, however, and continued to visit each and every affected household. Everyone had been restored to normal, as if nothing had ever happened. At this point, everyone knew that Narichika was an *onmyouji* from the capital, and upon seeing him, showered him with expressions of deepest and most sincere gratitude. Narichika was beginning to feel a bit awkward from it all.

The last home he visited was that of Kayo, the child who had removed the seal in the shrine.

Even though Kayo was still bedridden, she managed to give him a bright smile. Her face flitted from one expression to the next the entire time; this adorable liveliness was in stark contrast to her previous puppet-like state.

“This is a secret,” Kayo whispered surreptitiously into Narichika’s ear to prevent her parents from hearing her. “But a god visited me.”

“The god said not to tell anyone, but you saved me, so the god said it was okay to tell you.”

The child narrated how, when she had regained consciousness, she had seen a white god standing before her, stroking her head softly and smiling sadly.

... *I’m sorry...*

“The god was the one who helped me after all. Why say sorry?” Having declared as much, the child giggled.

Narichika clutched his head in pure befuddlement. As he headed out of the village and back towards the Noshiro manor, he wondered, “What is going on?”

The various summons were waiting on the roof of the manor’s main building. They didn’t want to intrude upon Masahiro and Touda at the moment, if only because they suspected that Touda would broil them alive.

“This Touda isn’t too scary,” Taiin blurted out suddenly.

Genbu nodded solemnly. “I agree.”

“But what’s the difference?” Taiin cocked her head contemplatively. Kouchin, seated cross-legged a small distance away, smiled faintly. The injuries she sustained to her face and body were not yet healed. Indeed, it would probably take quite a long time for them to heal completely. Still, considering that she had faced down Touda’s flames, it was quite fortunate that these were the full extent of the damage. In the worst case scenario, she could have been seriously burned or even consumed by the raging fire.

Rikugou was silent, as always. A red, comma-shaped pendant lay on his chest. Upon spying it, Kouchin’s eyes lit up inquisitively. If she weren’t mistaken, she hadn’t seen it during the fight against the demon.

“I guess he kept it under his shirt,” she mumbled to herself. Rikugou, feeling her eyes on him, cast her a brief glance, but remained silent.

Taiin was deep in her conversation with Genbu, when she suddenly shut her mouth with a snap.

“Taiin?” Genbu asked curiously, but she made a hushing gesture and pricked her ears up as if listening.

A while later, Taiin nodded and turned to Rikugou. “Rikugou, there’s a message from Seimei for you.”

Eyes of yellow gold shifted slightly in acknowledgement.

“He wants you to convey a message to the Chigaeshi holy ground. He’ll tell you the details via Genbu’s water mirror.”

Rikugou and Genbu both rose to their feet and left for a more suitable location.

With only two of them left, Taiin plopped down next to Kouchin. She felt like it was the first time she had sat down and simply gazed at the stars since their arrival in Izumo.

As Taiin stared at the sky, Kouchin whispered softly, “Do you want to know why the current Touda isn’t scary?”

Taiin’s eyes snapped wide as she spun around to face Kouchin.

“You know?!”

“It’s just a guess.”

“A guess is fine!”

Kouchin nodded and concentrated as if dredging up an old memory.

“... I’m not entirely certain if this is the reason or not,” she began with a dubious undertone in her voice.

Masahiro was just learning to walk, and he tumbled forwards, grabbing Seimei’s arm and giggling.

The old man stroked the child’s head and spoke to him gravely, “Masahiro, listen well. I’m your grandpa. Try saying it now ... graaan-paaa.”

“... It’s probably too soon.”

Touda materialized next to Seimei, his first appearance after a long absence. His face held a long-suffering expression.

Kouchin was actually around as well, but as she had no particular business, she remained concealed. More importantly, the divine aura of destruction-based deities naturally leaked out when they materialized, even when they suppressed their power. And because there was a young child around, Kouchin took the precaution of shielding her presence.

Kouchin did not comment about Touda materializing there without a thought. Seimei himself made no mention of it either, so he might not have minded.

They probably simply have different ways of seeing things.

Seimei turned to glance at Touda.

“Guren,” he retorted mildly, “The earlier the better. And look. He’s trying his best too.”

Masahiro, who was standing on wobbly knees, was babbling as he tried to form the words.

“Yes, yes. Graaan-paaa.”

“Aaaaaa ... ahhhh....”

“It’s grandpa. Graaan-paaa.”

“Waan ... ahh?”

Masahiro cocked his tiny head, and Seimei beamed, nodding vigorously.

“Did you hear that? Masahiro is so smart. Very good. You’re learning to speak faster than both Narichika and Masachika. This child is really bright.”

Seimei’s smile was so wide that his eyes crinkled. He continued to coo encouragingly at the child.

Touda, on the other hand, groused behind Seimei’s back. “... Obsessed grandfather, that’s what he is....”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Touda replied, feigning ignorance.

Seimei glared at him for a long moment, before turning to whisper in Masahiro’s ear.

“Listen, Masahiro. That is Guren. Guuu-ren.”

“Oy, didn’t I just say it’s too early for him?”

“Oh hush. It’s Guuuu-ren, Masahiro.”

Masahiro’s head swung back and forth between Seimei and Touda. Finally, he toddled his way towards the spirit summon.

Kouchin was leaning against a post and keeping a watchful eye on the child. His steps were so unsteady he could fall over at any time, but he took slow, deliberate steps while reaching a hand out to Touda.

“... Uuuuuu ... aaaa”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Touda grumbled and reached out his own hand with a forced smile. Masahiro look straight at him with clear eyes and giggled again.

“Ren...” the boy declared.

Seimei’s eyes widened.

“Ho ... see? Soooo smart.” Seimei puffed out his chest in pride, as if it were his own achievement. Touda, on the hand, was stunned speechless.

... How extraordinary. This was the first time she had seen Touda look like that. Even he could wear a slack-jawed expression, it seemed.

Kouchin was duly impressed.

Touda had an indescribable expression on his face as he narrowed his eyes at the child.

“... What do you want, Masahiro?”

The child had finally reached him and stood there wobbling back and forth. Touda finally picked him up and smiled.

This time, it was Kouchin’s turned to be so shocked that she forgot to breathe.

Because Touda was smiling so tenderly. It was absolutely unlike his cold, ruthless smirk when facing down enemies.

Masahiro was delighted and playfully reached out for the band around Touda’s head. Flustered, Touda tried to hold the child out at arm’s length, taking care not to exert too much power, and yet the tiny child had a surprisingly strong grip, refusing to let go of that golden band.

Touda had a smile on his face the entire time....

Taiin gaped.

Kouchin had expected that exact reaction.

“Before then, he might have smiled now and then, but that was the first time I had seen him smile with such contentment.”

The child that was still babbling nonsense had called out Touda’s name for the first time. Yet he had called not for ‘Touda’, but for ‘Guren’, the name given by Seimei.

Masahiro had called Touda ‘Guren’ from the very beginning.

“Seimei always says that a name is the shortest spell. That name held Seimei’s hopes for Touda, and Masahiro made them come true. That’s what I think.”

... That's how Touda changed so drastically.

Taiin's expression was glum as she hugged her knees and buried her head. She paused, as if considering something.

"... I'm scared of Touda. Ever since that time at Chigaeshi until now, I've always been scared of Touda."

Taiin looked up at Kouchin with a face so miserable it seemed to be on the verge of tears.

"Seimei ... didn't give us names. And I know that it's better not to have one.... But, Kouchin, what's it like being given a name by Seimei?"

Upon hearing the question, Kouchin's lustrous black eyes were tremulous as a wave of emotion seemed to churn within before fading away.

"... Indeed. If I had to compare it to something ... it would be like a seal made of the softest silk ... perhaps."

Soundless and painless, like formless fetters that bound them so gently. Fetters so comfortable and reassuring that one would willingly drown in them.

The words were mere abstractions, but their meaning came across loud and clear. Taiin nodded and hugged her knees once more.

"... I'm ... really scared of Touda. But ... but...."

... Every time Seimei or Masahiro said Guren's name....

"I feel that ... even if it may take some time, the fear is starting to fade away, little by little."

Her hushed words drifted away on the wind.

Kouchin simply closed her eyes and tousled Taiin's hair.

In the distant past, a stiff, frozen heart received a certain name.

The name was like a grief-laced prayer.

And the voice that called out that name was like the warmth of the sun's rays shining upon the frozen earth.

Footnotes

¹ Edible ferns.

² A type of scented tree, often used for building furniture.

³ Literally, ‘hunting clothes’. A garment typically worn by the aristocracy of Heian.

⁴ A type of bivalve mollusc; small and eaten as food.

⁵ Ceremonial black hat.

⁶ A metal weapon used by Indra, which symbolizes thunder. Used as a ritual object as a representation of spiritual power.

⁷ Animal spirits that possess humans in order to harm them were considered dog spirits in general.