

少年陰陽師

Shounen Onmyouji

Book 10

光の導を指し示せ

Finding Light's Guidance

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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.

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 translation can be found at <http://penumbrale.livejournal.com/>. Comments and corrections are most welcome.

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Chapter 1

Spring was drawing to an end.

“Urgh ... it’s almost the end of spring, and yet...”

Fujiwara no Toshitsugu glanced sideways briefly as he kneeled at his desk, ink brush hovering above a piece of parchment. Beside him was a pile of documents that simply refused to shrink. He sighed, massaged his stiff shoulders and grumbled uncharacteristically, “With just one clerk missing, how could so much paperwork accumulate?”

Abe no Masahiro had joined the Bureau of *Onmyou* as a general clerk the past summer. In the past, members of the Bureau would share responsibility for this paperwork, or someone would notice it piling up and delegate the work. However, once they had a general clerk, all the paperwork seemed to be directed automatically to him, and Toshitsugu and the rest were able to focus on other matters.

In the autumn of last year, Masahiro had taken a leave of almost one month. During that time, the paperwork had accumulated to the point of being problematic. And now with Toshitsugu’s own expanded responsibilities, the boy’s absence meant that Toshitsugu and the rest had even more work piled on their plate. Still, it went to show that the duties of the general clerk were quite exhaustive.

The young man’s hand paused, and he exhaled heavily.

“This is no good. I’m starting to become lazy. I still need to improve myself.”

Once there was someone around to take responsibility for this work, everyone else would come to think that it was no longer their business. But when unexpected situations arose, such as the absence of that person, everyone would become peeved at the perceived burden, even though it was work they used to do themselves.

Among those who had taken on the burden of part of this paperwork, there were mutterings of discontent towards Abe no Masahiro, who had received official orders to travel to Izumo. Why did they have to do this sort of work? This was all because of the clerk’s absence.

“This wouldn’t do. I can’t let it keep going like this.”

They were blaming the wrong person. It was true that the paperwork was the responsibility of the general clerk, but....

“Appropriateness and the situation have to be taken into account as well,” Toshitsugu muttered to himself. “He’s a bit sickly, but Lord Masahiro has also been diligent in his work. It’s not right to blame him for something that isn’t his fault.”

In the past, Toshitsugu had taken an antagonistic approach towards Masahiro for his frequent absences. However, when the young boy had corrected his behaviour and showed increased diligence in his work, he couldn’t help but admire the boy’s spirit. He could certainly appreciate people who owned up to their mistakes and learned from them.

“And we can’t force him to hurry back either. That would also depend on Lord Narichika’s skill. What should we do...?”

As Toshitsugu crossed his arms in deep thought, Abe no Masachika, an astrologer who worked in a different division, happened to walk past.

“... You seem quite troubled. What are you thinking about?”

Toshitsugu started, his eyes snapping open. Noticing Masachika looking at him curiously, he was at a loss for words.

“Umm ... ahh ... I...” he stuttered awkwardly.

How could he say, ‘Because your younger brother, our general clerk, was sent to Izumo, we’re currently shorthanded and have to do the paperwork ourselves, and some people are quite displeased with the situation’?

“That is ... doing paperwork after not having done it for so long reminds me of when I first entered the Bureau, sir...”

Given the situation, it probably wasn’t best to express his thoughts bluntly. Changing a few words here and there still managed to convey more or less the same concept, so his words couldn’t really be considered a lie.

Toshitsugu was a student of the *onmyou* arts and was an official of the Bureau of *Onmyou*. He knew that words were ‘sacred’, and therefore whenever he spoke, he always endeavoured to avoid deception.

Masachika nodded once and smiled warmly.

“Ahhh, that’s true... Sometimes I also miss those days when I first started working, and would grab some paperwork for old times’ sake.”

“Lord Masachika too...?!” Toshitsugu blurted out in admiration, and Masachika looked at him in astonishment.

“Is it that surprising?” The second son of Abe no Yoshimasa squinted in amusement and tilted his head fondly towards the younger boy.

Abe no Yoshimasa, a master of astrology, was the second son of Abe no Seimei, *onmyouji* in the Imperial Staff, and had three sons of his own.

The eldest son was Narichika, a master of calendar science. The second son was Masachika, the astrologer standing before him, and the youngest son was Masahiro, their Bureau’s general clerk.

Compared to Narichika, the eldest son who was generous, open and honest, Masachika seemed much more somber and responsible. In those moments when he was absorbed in analyzing the movements of the stars, he would show the strongest resemblance to their father Yoshimasa.

With only a few exceptions, members of the Abe family who took up the *onmyou* arts as their profession were unparalleled in their skills.

Toshitsugu thought of one of the ‘few exceptions’ in the Abe family and grimaced.

It seemed that Masahiro had relatively strong *sight* that allowed him to see spirits and demons. He was devoted to his studies and was receiving direct training from Abe no Seimei, but he was still far from matching up to Narichika and Masachika.

His father Yoshimasa, his uncle Yoshihira, and his various siblings and cousins were all talented beyond reckoning. In addition to all that, there was Abe no Seimei, the premier *onmyouji* of the age, whose unsurpassed prowess seemed to be a formidable and insurmountable wall that overshadowed all.

Even though this matter had nothing to do with him, Toshitsugu couldn’t help but pity Masahiro, who had to bear the enormous pressure of living up to his family’s reputation.

“Oh ... I received news from my brother in Izumo yesterday. He said that they could be back before the fifth month.”

“Really, sir? That is unexpectedly fast....”

Indeed, it was initially expected that they would return at the end of the fifth month, at the earliest.

“Details will have to await their arrival, but they must have been able to resolve the problem quite promptly, if they’ve wrapped up their mission already.” The warmth in Masachika’s expression was very reassuring.

“Is that so, sir? Then we can look forward to Lord Narichika’s and Masahiro’s safe return to the capital.”

A shadow flickered briefly in Masachika’s eyes upon hearing Toshitsugu’s relieved words, but the warm expression on his face returned just as quickly, leaving no sign of anything out of the ordinary.

“That’s right ... a safe return.”

Toshitsugu did not notice the heaviness in his tone. He continued blithely, “If it were only Masahiro, it might be a bit worrisome, but with Lord Narichika along, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about.... So they might be back by the fifth month.... In that case....”

Toshitsugu was considering the need to redistribute the workload. If things kept continuing this way until then, there would certainly be growing complaints about the unfairness of the situation.

“I apologize for imposing on you on so many matters, but when Masahiro returns, please keep an eye out for him.”

“Yes sir. Please be assured, I will watch over him to the best of my ability,” Toshitsugu replied, nodding firmly.

With that, Masachika smiled and turned to walk away.

Masachika walked along the corridor surrounding the building with a troubled look on his face.

“... Safe return, is it?”

The spirit message that Narichika had sent had contained one extremely shocking line. That line had mentioned Masahiro losing his ability to *see* spirits....

“How could something like that have happened...?”

And his younger brother had had the strongest *sight* in the family.

Masahiro had not lost all his spiritual powers and spell-casting abilities; only his *sight* was completely gone. Still, in some ways, this was worse than losing his spiritual power. Possessing such incomplete power would only cause him torment and grief.

His younger brother had grown up under the heavy weight of expectation and the tutelage of their grandfather Seimei. In truth, as members of the Abe bloodline, Narichika and Masachika both had much more powerful spiritual and magical powers than most. However, no matter how they polished their skills, they could not overcome the gift of sheer talent.

Narichika had explained it to him once, when they had sat down for some sake together. “I used to be so afraid of Touda. And actually, I still am. You’re afraid of him too, aren’t you? To be honest, it’s not just Touda but all twelve spirit summons. When I’m before them, there’s a chill in my gut and I feel a fear I can’t seem to overcome, no matter how I force myself to ignore it. It’s an instinctive fear. Grandfather and Masahiro don’t have this reaction though. I think this is what distinguishes true talent from the rest of us.”

At the time, Narichika couldn’t really find the appropriate words to convey his thoughts, so he just stated it straight out. And as for Masachika himself, he had simply accepted his brother’s words and agreed that, yes, maybe that was it.

Perhaps it was a difference in status ... but a clearer distinction could be that they simply *saw* things differently.

But in any case, Masahiro had now lost his *sight*.

“How could this happen?” Masachika muttered, his shoulders drooping wearily. Suddenly, he shook his head, as if doing so could chase away these unwelcome thoughts. Allowing himself to drown in those thoughts would be detrimental to his work. They still had almost a month before his brothers returned. In the meantime, he could still consult his grandfather and father on how to tackle this problem. His own experience and

knowledge were still lacking, but his father and grandfather might know of ways to restore Masahiro's *sight*.

“... Oh ... I had something to report to the master.”

The young man remembered that he was in the middle of an errand, and turned back abruptly. The master he was referring to was the master astrologer, Yoshimasa, his own father. While at work, he would address his father as master and refer to Narichika as master of the calendar sciences, for propriety's sake.

For his younger brother, however, he always called him Masahiro. He had once addressed his brother according to his position; Masahiro didn't mind, but the *mononoke* by his side had glared daggers at him. That *mononoke* was the transformed form of Touda, one of the twelve spirit summons, so a simple glare was intimidating enough. Even though he didn't fear Touda as much as he used to, he still felt the same gut-chilling fear as his older brother.

These days, he was assigned to the night shift and typically stayed at the Bureau, giving him few opportunities to meet Masahiro, who had a day shift. He only knew that his younger brother was being sent to Izumo along with Narichika on the day that they left.

While his older brother was a master of the calendar sciences, he had trained hard in the *onmyou* arts and there was little cause for worry. Masahiro, too, would probably have little to be anxious about when traveling in Narichika's company. He only regretted not being able to see them off. But once they returned, Masachika was hoping to arrange some small festivities just for the three siblings, after not having seen each other for so long.

“It probably isn't the time for festivities though...” Masachika's eyes clouded as he pattered barefoot along the corridor. His younger brother was only fourteen; this should be the time for him to polish his skills until his talent blazed its full brilliance. And yet....

Masachika sighed. “If only we could switch....”

An astrologer like Masachika had little need for *sight*. Of course, it might seem a bit inconvenient at first, but in the past, he rarely found himself in dire situations that necessitated the use of such *sight*. Seimei was capable of switching people's lifespans, so surely a small matter of *sight* would barely tax his abilities. In spite of that, Masachika knew well that his grandfather would adamantly refuse to do such a thing. He might not be as close to his grandfather as Masahiro, but he was still Seimei's grandson who, at

least in this matter, knew enough of his grandfather's personality to predict the outcome of such a request. His father Yoshimasa would probably not permit it either.

Ever since he received the spirit message from his older brother, his mind had run in endless circles, lingering on fruitless thoughts like these.

"... What are you thinking about, with such a serious expression on your face?"

Upon hearing the questioning voice, Masachika started and looked up.

"Oh, Father ... I mean, master."

His feet had almost taken him past the astrology division by the time he became aware of his surroundings. Yoshimasa happened to be opening the door to the archive room and had several volumes in his arms as he craned his neck to look at his son.

"I'm just thinking about something, sir."

"I can tell just by looking at you. That's why I asked about what you're so concerned about."

"... I looked that worried, sir?"

Hearing the question asked with genuine surprise, Yoshimasa sighed softly. Masachika, his second son, was rarely conscious of himself, and was therefore sincere in his confusion.

"You may not have realized it, but that's what I saw. So, what's worrying you?"

"Nothing much, sir. Just a small personal matter...."

Yoshimasa couldn't help but wonder why his son would bother to hide things from his own father, but since Masachika had persisted with such an insistent voice, he reluctantly changed the topic. If it were Narichika, he would have thrown work out the window and launched enthusiastically into a detailed monologue. Masachika's and Narichika's ages were not far apart, but their personalities were polar opposites.

"A while ago, astrologer Hatta no Tomoyasu told me that you have something to report to me. That's why I've been looking for you."

On the way, he had visited the archive room briefly to pick out some texts he needed to consult for work.

“Oh, that’s right. Last night while I was on duty, I saw an ill-omen in the stars....”

“What?” Yoshimasa’s face tensed up immediately. “Have the stars strayed from their paths? How so?”

Masachika opened his mouth to explain, but then paused to reconsider.

“...It might be easier to understand if I explain it in front of a star map, sir. We may need to request the assistance of the lord *onmyouji* of the Imperial Staff.”

He was, of course, referring to Abe no Seimei.

“Masachika, what happened?” Yoshimasa demanded.

“To sum it up briefly, one of the stars is dangerously clouded.”

And in particular, it was one of the stars surrounding the Big Dipper. The Big Dipper constellation represented the Ruler of the Heavens—in other words, the Emperor. The stars surrounding it would therefore signify the Emperor’s empress, consorts and offspring.

“I am unable to determine who this star refers to, and so would like to request the expertise of yourself and the lord *onmyouji* of the Imperial Staff.”

Masachika was thoroughly aware of his abilities and his limitations. He therefore did not try to overreach himself, but gladly handed over the problem to people most appropriate for tackling it. The care he took not to overestimate his own abilities was one of his admirable qualities.

Yoshimasa’s face turned ashen when the Big Dipper constellation was mentioned. If the ill-omen involved the Emperor, this presented a problem at the national level.

Yoshimasa nodded grimly, and bade Masachika follow him.

Several days later, the imperial entrance ceremony of the consort from the Fujiwara household, which had been scheduled for the beginning of the fourth month, was abruptly postponed.

Chapter 2

He could feel the distance.

The breeze that rippled the waters of the bay began to lighten with the waning of spring.

“Bye bye!”

Heading home, Shokichi and Yasuke waved merrily to Masahiro, who stood up to see them off. When they were no longer in sight, he turned back to his companions and stated, “Let’s go back too.”

“Yeah,” said Taiin, who was hovering near Masahiro’s shoulder. She leaned down and asked, “Have you told the kids yet that we’ll be leaving for the capital tomorrow or the day after?”

Masahiro nodded. “I told them yesterday. They looked saddened, but when I told them that my family was waiting, they said, ‘Then it can’t be helped’.”

The boy turned to the *mononoke* that was curled up a small distance away. “Mokkun, let’s go back.”

Its ear twitched, and the white form rose up slowly. Blinking once, it responded, “Ah.”

Its form was the size of a large cat or small dog. Its entire body was covered with pristine white fur. Its ears were long, trailing behind it and a fluffy tail waved deftly. Red spikes ringed its neck, a red flower-like pattern adorned the center of its forehead, and round eyes glowed with a crimson light that seemed to beam from the setting sun itself.

The *mononoke* pattered lightly over to Masahiro before turning to look in the direction of the two departing children.

“The village is back to normal, then?”

“Yes, that’s what brother said—uh ... Taiin....”

He had suddenly realised that Taiin, who was just next to him a moment ago, had now floated up about three meters.

“What’s the matter? You just suddenly....”

Taiin was bending over, looking at him. “Oh. Um. Uh....” she stammered shiftily. “I’ll head back first then. Kouchin’s probably waiting along with Rikugou. Ah ... oh ... there aren’t any more demons, so it’s probably alright if we’re not around. And ... oh ... Touda’s here too.”

“Huh? Ah, sure.”

Taiin stuttered as she spoke, and when Masahiro nodded to her, she spun around with seemingly great relief and flew off on the wind.

The silently watching *mononoke* raised its shoulders and exhaled softly. If there were no other spirit summons around, she still hated to be in Touda’s presence.

“Oh well. I guess it can’t be helped,” it mumbled.

Masahiro looked down at the creature, asking curiously, “What was that?”

“Nothing,” the *mononoke* replied, shaking its head and waving its tail. It then raised its head, looking at the young boy with a slightly troubled expression.

“It just meant that I’m here. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Oooh....” Masahiro blinked and smiled warmly. “Yeah. That’s right. If Mokkun is here, there’s nothing to worry about.”

An unshakeable faith shone from the boy’s very eyes.

The *mononoke* waved its ears and squinted, as if staring at something blindingly bright. An undescribable feeling pierced its chest; if it had to find a word to describe the feeling, the closest would probably be ‘grief’.

Its heart ached as it looked into those clear, unclouded eyes, gazing down with absolute trust, and that carefree smile.

How could he smile so, when he had lost something so precious?

“Brother was working on his report when we left. If we factor in the time it’ll take for us to pack, we’ll probably be leaving the day after tomorrow. So, what do you think we should buy as souvenirs?”

“Well, you should probably choose something that’s easy to carry and can keep for a while. Although that wouldn’t be an issue if we ride Taiin’s wind back.”

The *mononoke* scrunched up its face in thought as it walked, swishing its tail back and forth.

“But if we take half a day to return on a trip that usually takes half a month, everyone will be suspicious.”

“Yeah. Plus when we came here by Taiin’s wind, it gave me a serious headache.”

“Really?”

Masahiro’s breath hitched briefly, but he continued speaking as naturally as possible. “I’ve heard that Byakko’s wind is much more gentle. What is it like?”

He bent down slightly to look at the white form near his feet, waiting for its response. The *mononoke* paused for a moment to think.

“Hmm... Well, if one were to say that Taiin is the whirlwind, Byakko is the summer storm.”

“What’s the difference?” Masahiro replied with a frown.

The *mononoke* looked up at the boy and finally smiled for the first time. “Can’t you figure it out yourself for once?”

Masahiro wore a long-suffering expression as he shrugged and looked up towards the sky. The image of black hair darker than the deepest twilight flashed in his mind.

... That night, I promised that I’d return, and I still haven’t fulfilled that promise. Your heart must be so heavy. I want to hurry back and ease your sadness. I will hurry back....

At the moment, the words spoken in his dream seemed like an age away.

Spring had ended.

Akiko gazed into the flame dancing in the lantern and sighed lightly. She had not expected Masahiro to be able to return before the end of spring, so she wasn't that disappointed. However, the sight of his tormented expression would occasionally pop up in her mind, and she would feel an indescribable weight on her chest. Every night before turning in, she would whisper the spell that she had learned from Seimei, but after that day, she had never again met the boy in her dreams.

Was he still feeling so miserable? Was he still hiding such a heavy burden of pain in his heart, gritting his teeth and forcing himself through all the anguish?

The young girl was frustrated at her uselessness, feeling keenly her complete lack of power.

“ ... ”

Akiko sighed with a heavy heart and her hands paused in their work. The clothes that had formed a daunting pile in front of her had now dwindled down to a few pieces. She was sewing these in secret, not wanting Tsuyuki to know, so her progress was fairly slow. That so few pieces were left meant that quite some time had passed.

The afternoons were very long, now that the third month was over and they were entering the fourth month. Summer had arrived.

Izumo was a long distance away. The young girl knew from the start that a round trip would take at least three months. If they were lucky, they would be back by the fifth month. Otherwise, it could take until the sixth month.

Akiko lowered her eyes forlornly. The deadline was the middle of the sixth month; after that, the firefly season would be over. She had heard that there were occasionally fireflies that would linger after the season ended, but she knew that that was not what he wanted to show her.

The young girl shook her head. It wasn't the fireflies she wanted to see; that was just an excuse. In reality, she just wanted him to hurry back, safe and sound and ... she wanted the *mononoke* to come back as well.

Akiko stared at the flickering flame and sighed again.

“... How is he now...?” she wondered.

Sometimes the wind deity Taiin would send news with the breeze. Byakko would receive these messages and report to Seimei. Afterwards, without fail, Seimei would seek her out and tell her how Masahiro and the rest were faring. And at the end, he would say to her, “Lady Akiko, if there is something you wish to say to Masahiro, you can send it with Byakko’s wind. Do you have a message?”

Every time she heard these words from this old man whose wrinkled eyes crinkled with such tenderness, she would try hard to think of something. Yet in the end, she could never find the right words to speak, and would simply shake her head soundlessly, fearing that if she opened her mouth, the words, ‘Come back. Please hurry back’ would slip off her tongue. In his absence, she felt so lonely and sometimes overwhelmed by worry. Akiko had told him that she was waiting for him, but that anticipation could not erase her loneliness.

“... Sewing clothes with such unhappy feelings is really unfair to the clothes....”

Deciding to continue her work on the next day, Akiko put her needle and thread into a box and folded the clothes away into a storage chest.

Masahiro’s room was full of books and scrolls. In her spare time, Akiko would regularly pull one out to read. There was still some time before she had to turn in, so she picked up a compendium on Masahiro’s desk, moved the lantern closer and opened to the page she had bookmarked.

Most of Masahiro’s books were written using Chinese characters. Sometimes, there were strange characters that were certainly not Japanese *hiragana*. He had explained that they were Sanskrit characters, from India. This particular compendium was written in Sanskrit; Masahiro had once told her that it contained the mantras he commonly used.

“India is a country on the other side of the ocean ... and much deeper into the continent, I suppose....” Akiko did not have a map on hand, so she had to make do with her own imagination. The unreadable characters swirled like some kind of pattern.

‘You are studying very diligently,’ a gentle voice suddenly echoed in her ears.

Akiko’s hands paused. Sweeping her eyes over the room, she finally saw the shadow of a human form materializing next to her. Long hair flowing like silk reflected golden in the

lantern's glow. The form carried the dignified air of a goddess and a beautiful, delicate face smiled at her.

“Tenitsu.”

When the young girl called out her name, the summon's smile gentled even further.

“I haven't seen you for a while. You haven't shown yourself lately, and I was worried that something had happened to you.”

Indeed, they had not seen each other for quite some time. Ever since Masahiro had returned with life-threatening injuries in the second month, Tenitsu had not appeared at the Abe manor at all. Suzaku, of course, had not been seen during that time as well.

Now that Genbu and Taiin were in Izumo with Masahiro, there were no familiar summons around, making Akiko feel her loneliness even more acutely.

Tenitsu tilted her head slightly and peered at the young girl. “Haven't the others, like Tenkou or Taijou appeared from time to time? Since we haven't been around, they should be here attending to Lord Seimei....”

“I haven't seen them. Maybe they've shielded their presence when they're with Lord Seimei, so I've never noticed.”

If the spirit summons had shielded their presences with great care, even Akiko was not able to detect them easily. Without concentrating on seeking out their auras, she would not be aware of their presence. She had not yet met all of them either, having encountered only about half of their number, although certainly she knew all their names.

“Is that so? Well, I am sure that you will meet them eventually.” Tenitsu knew this for certain, because the young girl would have to spend the rest of her life in the Abe manor. They would definitely meet them all, one day.

Akiko nodded and blinked. “Oh, yes. Tenitsu, do you know how to read Sanskrit?”

Tenitsu shook her head slowly. “I'm afraid I do not. I am sorry.” She lowered her head regretfully, so the young girl hurried to reassure her.

“It's alright. I was just asking. Once Masahiro gets back, I'll ask him”

“But you do not know when he will return. Would it not be better to ask Lord Seimei?” Tenitsu was smiling faintly, but at her words, Akiko’s eyes widened.

Seeing that the young girl had suddenly gone silent, Tenitsu looked at the girl questioningly. “Lady Akiko, is there something wrong? Did I say something to displease you?”

Akiko shook her head, her wide eyes suddenly glistening with unshed tears. Those tears would assuredly fall if she blinked, so she did her best to resist the impulse as two hands rose to cover her mouth.

Not here ... Masahiro wasn’t here. There were only a few spirit summons left, and the *mononoke* had disappeared a long time ago. All these absences rendered the already sprawling Abe estate even more expansive and empty.

Back when she resided in the Tosanjou manor, there were days when Akiko only met her personal lady-in-waiting. Other members of her family lived in different wings of the manor. Because they were not around to be missed, she never felt lonely. However, it wasn’t the case here, because there were always people nearby, and she could sense their warm auras directly.

In the mornings, Akiko would send Masahiro and Yoshimasa off at the door. During the day, she would pass the time assisting Tsuyuki as she slowly picked up information here and there. Sometimes, Seimei would regale her with stories or tell her about various things. Then, she would await Masahiro and Yoshimasa’s return after wrapping up their workday. On occasion, she would sneak out of bed to see Masahiro off when he slipped out of the manor on his nightly patrols. Those times seemed like an age away.

“Lady Akiko must be quite lonely,” Tenitsu mumbled. The young girl almost shook her head to deny it, but instead nodded, her tears finally rolling down and dripping on the floor.

“... Yes.”

She had prayed that they would meet, even if only in a dream.

The sizzle of burning oil seemed to resound in the silence. Akiko hurriedly wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe and smiled in embarrassment. “Please excuse my behaviour,” she mumbled.

Tenitsu smiled. Her aura was gentle and tender, and its inviting warmth was what drew out the feelings hidden in Akiko's heart.

The young girl replaced her bookmark and shut the text she was studying. Rising up, she said to Tenitsu, "I'll be turning in for the night. If I stay up too late, Lord Seimei and the others will be concerned."

Sliding open the door to the corridor, she looked up towards the heavens, only to see a starless, moonless night. She sighed. Grey clouds lay thick and low, making the twilight sky feel oppressively heavy. Just as she turned to slide the door closed....

"Hey, hey ... your ladyship!"

The voice was reassuringly cheerful. Akiko was taken by surprise, however, and for a moment was unable to process what was going on. Soon enough, even more voices piped up.

"Your ladyship, your ladyship!"

"Over here, over here!"

"This waaay!"

Sweeping her eyes over the courtyard, she caught sight of a number of tiny spirits and imps bouncing up and down beyond the estate walls.

Stunned by the sight, Akiko remained rooted to the spot, staring at them. One of them was beaming as it bounced, waving vigorously at her when they made eye contact.

"Hey, your ladyship...."

The voice faded as gravity pulled it to the ground, but in the next moment, it had bounced back up even higher.

"Let me in for a moment. This place...."

The imp disappeared behind the wall again, but this time, a different one bounced up and continued, "This place has Seimei's barrier around it."

Bounce.

“We can’t enter without permission.”

Bounce.

“Please?”

“Please?”

The various merrily-bouncing imps and spirits could not be seen or heard by normal people, so it wasn’t a problem if someone happened to pass by. It was a major problem for Akiko, however, since she wasn’t sure whether she should acquiesce to their request and invite them in or not.

“I ... I need to ask Lord Seimei first.”

“No need to tell Seimei,” a voice suddenly interjected from behind her. “If they look like they’re going to cause trouble, I can burn them to crisp right here.”

Akiko started and looked around, and saw Suzaku looming over her. His golden eyes drilled into the pint-sized creatures before them and blinked once.

“Tenki and I are here ... although Tenki doesn’t need to do anything.” Turning to speak to Tenitsu, who was still seated in Masahiro’s room, he hurried to reassure her, “Oh. Don’t stand. You can just sit there.”

She had seemed on the verge of rising to her feet, but at Suzaku’s words, she smiled softly, nodded, and lowered herself back down. Seeing this, Suzaku turned back to Akiko.

“You can invite them in. We don’t have the right to give such permissions, but your ladyship may do so.”

“What do you mean?” Akiko asked, perplexed. She assumed Suzaku could not give that permission because the twelve summons were servants of Seimei and therefore could only act under his command. However, the person who cast the barrier spell was Abe no Seimei, and therefore she, too, ought to seek his approval before doing anything.

Suzaku crossed his arms.

“In the future, Masahiro will inherit this estate. Because this spot is important in the defence of the capital’s demon’s gate, he will also take over responsibility for this barrier. That’s why you have the right to give permission for entry.”

This disjointed answer confused the young girl even further. If things were as Suzaku explained, then all the more reason for having to obtain permission first from Seimei or Masahiro.

“What about Lord Yoshimasa?”

“If Seimei and Masahiro are not around, then Yoshimasa takes care of the barrier. But we are currently here with you, and your ladyship is free to make her own decision on the matter.”

Akiko still did not understand. Bewildered, she turned to Tenitsu, who simply smiled. The young girl supposed that meant she was in agreement with Suzaku.

The tiny imps and spirits, on the other hand, had listened to their conversation from beyond the wall and were whispering and chattering excitedly.

“Wow, the spirit summons have acknowledged the lady.”

“Of course. She’s his future wife.”

“The wife takes care of household matters.”

“When Wakana was around, she was so scared of us she wouldn’t let any of us inside.”

“If it’s her ladyship, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“She can see us too.”

“She likes us too!”

“She’ll probably invite us in all the time, and give us plenty of sweets.”

The more they talked, the wilder their imaginations ran. They were, however, very, very serious.

Akiko paused to think and, glancing quickly at Suzaku and Tenitsu, finally nodded. “I can’t let you all in, but you,” she said, pointing to a round imp with a single horn, “and you,” she said, pointing to a monkey-like imp with three horns and long hair.

“Yay!” The two imps cheered and leapt inside the barrier. Running lightly along the ground, they raced towards and clambered onto the veranda before plopping down next to her feet. They patted the wooden floor, bidding her to sit with them.

Once Akiko was seated, Tenitsu fetched an outer kimono lying folded in the far corner of the room and draped it across the young girl’s shoulders.

“So you won’t catch a cold,” she explained.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Suzaku and Tenitsu were seated about one foot away from Akiko. Suzaku sat cross-legged, and a gigantic sword as long as he was tall had somehow appeared and was now lying across his lap. His right hand was wrapped around its hilt in a none-too-subtle hint that, should the imps act in any way suspicious, he would be ready to dispatch them at once.

The imps’ eyes kept being drawn back to that naked blade, and they shrank in fear. They had no ill intentions, but such a direct threat was highly unsettling for them.

“So what is going on?” Akiko asked, tilting her head curiously.

The monkey-like imp replied, “Ohh. Yes. Your ladyship, your sister is currently in the big building at Tsuchimikado, right?”

“Uh ... yes.” For a moment, Akiko hesitated, because it concerned a highly secretive matter of state that she should not mention to anyone.

... No one in the palace knew of this. How could these imps know...?

Her bemusement was clearly reflected in her eyes, so the one-horned imp raised a stubby hand and, puffing out its chest, explained, “Of course we know. Because your ladyship is right here.”

“We have companions in the main palace and the Tsuchimikado manor. The Lady Fujiwara who should be able to see spirits cannot see us, but a lady of the same age living in the Seimei estate happens to have powerful *sight*. Anyone who gives it a bit of thought would be able to figure it out.”

“Every spirit all over the capital knows that the first princess of the Fujiwara family has the *sight*.”

“I see. We completely forgot to consider this,” Suzaku muttered in the background. Tenitsu nodded to her beloved, her eyes trailing over the blade on Suzaku’s lap. This sword was capable of transforming into a ‘sword of flame’ capable of destroying the spirit summons themselves. Tenkou had told her all about the events that happened while she was incapacitated.

Suzaku’s eyes followed the path of her own, and he bent his head to stare at the blade. When the ‘sword of flame’ had completed its task, it would automatically return to him. That had happened before the third month; Suzaku remembered it clearly, for shortly after that, Tenitsu had regained consciousness after hovering at the brink of death for so long.

Suzaku had learned all about the events that had transpired through the sword. Masahiro’s unwavering determination and Touda’s final moments were still etched into his memory. And when the sword had returned to him, not a trace of the flame of Kagutsuji had remained.

... The flame had immediately returned to its owner after fulfilling its appointed task, or had it....

Suzaku raised a hand to his chin thoughtfully. Nearby, the eyes of his beloved watched him quietly while the imps continued to chatter away with Akiko.

“Only humans have no idea,” one of them announced.

“Anyway, your ladyship’s sister seems to be constantly ill.”

“What?” Akiko asked, startled by the unexpected news. Suzaku and Tenitsu, however, must have been aware of this development already, as they did not show any outward sign of surprise.

“Well, she should have been transferred to her temporary quarters in the royal estate around Ichijou at the beginning of the fourth month, right?”

“Do you mean the royal estate or the Ichijou manor?” Suzaku interjected, but the monkey-like imp rocked back and forth as if hesitating.

“The substitute lady should be busy with preparations, but she’s mostly bedridden.”

“Those around the Tsuchimikado told us.”

“She’s your sister, right? We figured we’d be nice and come to tell you.”

“Yes, yes. And if you can give us some sweets, that would make us very happy.”

“The new year’s *mochi* were really delicious.”

“Yes, really delicious,” came a responding echo from the imps and spirits bouncing beyond the estate wall. Their chirping voices rang out loudly in unison, but they would not have been heard by normal people.

Behind the speechless Akiko, Suzaku’s eyebrow twitched. Next to her, Tenitsu’s eyes glanced sideways upon hearing a light patter of footsteps approach. Soon, an old man dressed in a light kimono appeared, a heavier kimono draped over his shoulders and a weary smile on his face.

“So it’s you guys. I was wondering what was causing such a racket.”

The various imps and spirits did not seem cowed by the arrival of the master of the estate. Rather, they began to laugh and chatter cheekily at him.

“Hey, Seimei!”

“You haven’t changed at all!”

“Come visit us some time. One day, you’ll become one of us, so it wouldn’t hurt to deepen our friendship!”

Seimei huffed at the imps that chattered with no care for human courtesies, then kneeled down next to Akiko.

“Lady Akiko, you’re looking rather pale. Did these fellows say something to distress you?”

In the face of Seimei’s piercing glare, the two imps looked away, feigning innocence. When his inquiring gaze turned to Suzaku and Tenitsu, the pair remained silent for a moment. Finally, picking his words carefully, Suzaku replied, “These meddlesome wretches just came to say that the consort of the Fujiwara clan has fallen ill and her entrance to the palace has been delayed.”

Seimei nodded in understanding. So that was why.

After having received a report on the stars’ paths from the astrologer Masachika, Yoshimasa, as master of astrology, had forwarded the report to the director of the Bureau of *Onmyou*, who in turn had requested Seimei divine a new auspicious date for the consort’s entrance into the palace. This had happened in the middle of the third month.

It had been mid-spring then. The light fragrance of plum blossoms blooming in the estate courtyard had been drifting along with the breeze. Had Seimei not needed to receive a messenger at the time, he had intended to lean back, basking in the comfortable warmth, and nap away the afternoon. At this point, almost all of the plum blossoms had fallen, leaving only a straggling few clinging to the tree branches.

One month had passed since that time. Seimei had completely forgotten about it. It might have seemed that an aged *onmyouji* spending most of his time at home like Seimei would have ample time on his hands, but he was actually extremely busy, being occupied with a myriad of matters. He had little time to spare thought for matters that had been wrapped up and satisfactorily concluded.

Akiko, who had been sitting silently the entire time, turned to Seimei with troubled eyes.

“Lord Seimei, could it be....”

“What is it, my Lady?” Seimei prodded her with a kind smile.

“Could it be that the Fujiwara consort has fallen ill because she is grieved by the burden she has to bear in my stead?”

“...”

Seimei's eyes widened in surprise, and the two imps and summons turned to her, startled at her unexpected words.

Akiko clenched her hands tightly on her lap, her slender fingers trembling and paling even further.

"I ... I should have been the one to present myself at the palace. The Fujiwara clan consort ... Lady Shouko didn't need to enter the palace; she should have had the chance to lead a happy, peaceful life."

Seimei remained silent, spurring Akiko to keep speaking. He knew she needed this, the opportunity to release her pent-up emotions.

"Because I avoided the destiny I was born into, Lady Shouko will have to bear the entire burden in my stead, as if in repayment."

Someone else was sacrificed for her own happiness; that person was her very own stepsister from a different mother. They were the same age, but had never met each other nor even seen each other's faces.

Previously, the *mononoke* had told her that, had nothing happened, Shouko would have led a lonely life, surrounded by a few servants but without any one to protect her. Akiko wanted to believe that her father Michinaga would not let that happen, but it was true that he would probably not devote as much energy to her well-being as the children of his principle wife.

The *mononoke* said that Shouko was lucky to have been selected to enter the palace, but could that really be true?

"I think that this evaded destiny will exact its price somehow or some time. It would be all right if it were my lifespan, but if not...."

"Lady Akiko...."

When she was interrupted with an unexpectedly fierce voice, Akiko started and turned to face Seimei. Even though he was now over 80 years old, the aged man's eyes brimmed with youthful vigour.

Seimei spoke gravely, "Please do not say such things, even in jest. Otherwise, all the risks my grandson has undergone to save you would be meaningless."

“Ahhh....”

Masahiro’s smiling face flashed through her mind briefly. The days when they had to meet with blinds between them seem so long ago, as if it were the distant past.

She no longer lived for herself alone.

“... But... but....” The young girl was unable to speak any further, and raised both her hands to cover her face.

Did Shouko, her substitute and a sister she never met, feel bitter towards her?

Akiko felt her eyes burning and gritted her teeth to hold back the tears. She would only be trying to run away from the truth if she cried here.

“Please compose yourself and listen to me. Lady Shouko’s illness has nothing to do with you, Lady Akiko. Furthermore, no trace of your former destiny remains.”

“... What do you mean?”

“The stars have shifted, meaning that the star charts have completely changed. The path of the stars that once laid out your destiny has been completely overwritten by something else. At this point, I cannot define what your futures hold.”

Seimei had been the one to determine that Akiko was no longer suited for presentation at the palace, and he had resolutely declared that the one under stars most similar to Akiko should present herself to the palace in Akiko’s stead.

A daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga had to present herself at the palace to become a consort of the emperor. Actually, this was no different from before, except that that lady could not be Akiko. The one who would enter the palace would be a daughter born under a similar destiny as her. Certainly, Seimei did not know who that young girl was until Michinaga mentioned Shouko’s name. He had simply read the paths of the stars from the divination board.

“The paths of the stars have begun to revolve around Shouko. Lady Akiko’s star, however, is no longer near the Big Dipper. From this moment on, your fate will not intertwine with Lady Shouko’s.

Seimei smiled as he carefully clarified each point for her.

“Are you saddened by this, my Lady?” he asked. To have become merely a normal girl named Akiko.

Akiko gazed steadily at the aged man and asked as if in confirmation, “So ... it is my destiny to remain here?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“To hide my Fujiwara name and to live on without having anything to do with my kin.”

“That’s right.”

Akiko released the tension in her body. That her stepsister would have to present herself to the palace in her stead was a debt that would linger with her for the rest of her life. She used to believe that everything that should happen to her was her fated burden to bear.

“If so, then....”

“That’s right, my Lady. Lady Shouko’s destiny henceforth is her own. Her future path will likely be different from the one you would have tread. Therefore, please do not look so aggrieved.”

Shouko’s illness was not the result of her having taken Akiko’s place.

Seimei had first met Shouko in the middle of winter in the previous year, on the eve of Akiko’s presentation. The two young girls were so similar as to seem like twins—even Seimei, who had known Akiko since she was little, had almost mistaken them for the other.

It was probably because of their differences in surroundings and upbringing, however, that their personalities were quite different. Shouko was quieter than Akiko, and very rarely voiced her own opinions. However, it wasn’t that she blindly followed the path laid out for her, nor struggled stoically to bear her painful burdens; she merely accepted her duties and carried them out.

Akiko had not known of Shouko, but Shouko had naturally known of her as Akiko was the daughter of the principle wife who was born and carefully nurtured to become the consort to the Emperor himself.

Even now, Seimei could still clearly recall the serene, cool eyes of the girl who had been commanded by her father to present herself to the palace. She had simply quietly obeyed, as if having known her fate beforehand.

Seimei studied the young girl seated before him. The countenances of both girls were the same in every way, but Akiko possessed a strength and vivacity that the other lacked. Perhaps Shouko's was a life that destiny had prepared in advance, in case anything happened to Akiko. And if nothing had happened, she would have lived out her life in a quiet manner. Perhaps Masahiro's birth had been the impetus to shift the paths of the stars.

Possessing divine blessings that drew in even the gods and managed to affect the stars themselves—all in a single boy child bearing his bloodline.

Akiko sighed and lowered her head as her turbulent emotions settled down. Some of the weight had been lifted from her heart, yet she could not help but feel that she had accepted this explanation as an excuse to escape from the wrong that lingered in her heart.

Seimei saw clearly through Akiko's thoughts and smiled reassuringly. "Please do not worry. Just a while ago, the minister ordered me to pray for the Fujiwara consort's recovery. I assure you that I will pour my whole soul and spirit into the prayer."

"Is ... that so, my Lord. In that case, I am sure she will get well soon."

Akiko knew better than anyone how powerful Abe no Seimei's spiritual power was, as this very power had already saved her many times.

"Definitely." Seimei nodded firmly and glanced over at Tenitsu. The summon rose silently in understanding and beckoned to Akiko.

"Let us go, my lady. You may fall ill if you stay up too late. Please take your rest."

Akiko nodded obediently and stood up. She hesitated briefly, wondering what she should do with the kimono covering her shoulders. In the end, she inserted her arms into the kimono and simply wore it.

"Goodnight my lord. And to all of you as well." Akiko bowed to Seimei and then turned to speak to the crowd of tiny spirits and imps.

“Rest well.”

“Oh! Sleep deeply!”

“Don’t say something so ominous!” Seimei berated the monkey-like imp with a quick whack on the head before bowing his head to Akiko. Seeing that, she turned and headed towards her room.

The elderly man waited until her presence faded away completely before letting his shoulders droop wearily. Certainly it was not Akiko’s fault that the Fujiwara princess’ entrance into the palace was delayed, nor was she the cause for Shouko’s illness.

The monkey-like imp and the one-horned imp looked at each other and nodded once. “See ya, Seimei! We’re off as well.”

“We’ll drop by again.”

“Don’t forget to prepare some sweets for us.”

These imps were starting to get a bit too fresh, so Suzaku glared daggers at them.

“Ooooh, how scary!”

“Your spirit summons are all so scary.”

“The creepiest are those four, but the rest are super scary too!”

The imps drew together as they chattered mockingly. Seimei smiled tiredly and sighed. “So you’re taking advantage of the fact that the creepy four aren’t around?”

“Hahaha ... there’s that. And when’s your grandson coming back?”

Seimei could sense that, among all the casual questions, this was one answer that was greatly anticipated by all the spirits and imps clustered outside the barrier. That child was certainly one of a kind, and was able to win the fondness of even these creatures.

They did not know what had transpired, and awaited Seimei’s response with wide, eager eyes. They had absolutely no idea about what had happened to Masahiro at all, and were simply hoping that he would return soon so they could tease him again.

“Well ... soon enough,” Seimei replied vaguely.

“Is that so? That’s great. We’ll have to go tell everyone.”

The two imps bounced up, spun around, and disappeared over the fence.

“Your grandson is certainly popular among these strange creatures,” Suzaku commented, impressed. Seimei made as if to respond, but then shook his head and fell silent.

The old man gazed up towards the twilight sky, the inky darkness having spread as far as the eye could see.

“The stars surrounding the Big Dipper are clouded.”

A hidden shadow was approaching the Lady Shouko. It did not appear to be targeting Michinaga, but was aiming straight for the Lady. Seimei was determined to unveil the source of this shadow and protect Shouko. At the moment, Shouko’s position in the Rear Court was still uncertain. If anything befell her, it would directly affect the clan of the Minister of the Left. But beyond all else, Seimei had to protect Shouko for Akiko’s sake.

He exhaled heavily and suddenly frowned. A piercing pain lanced through his left chest.

“Urgh....”

Seimei pressed his right hand against his chest and held his breath as he began to sway lightly.

“My lord!”

“Seimei!”

The two spirit summons cried out in alarm, but the old man raised his left hand and waved them back. Wiping away the cold sweat that had broken out on his brow, he slowly exhaled as the wave of pain dissipated in the blink of an eye.

Suzaku and Tenitsu stood there, ashen-faced, and their master smiled at them wanly.

Frowning uncomfortably, he commented, “Really now ... I guess I must have overdone it a bit....”

Since last summer, he had used his soul transfer spell several times. It was a secret spell that none but he could perform, and it heavily stressed his aged body.

“You are getting on in years. Please do not push yourself recklessly. Our master must remain healthy,” Tenitsu pleaded sorrowfully. Next to her, Suzaku’s glowing eyes seemed to admonish Seimei for making Tenitsu so worried.

Seimei smiled stiffly. “I suppose so....” he replied.

... At least, I have to live until he grows up a bit more. Otherwise I would never be able to rest in peace... he muttered internally and turned to look at the western sky. Beyond that horizon was his youngest grandson and heir, an elder grandson, a white *mononoke* and the other spirit summons.

“Please come back soon....”

Chapter 3

To Masahiro's surprise, their departure date had been delayed by several days. In the morning, the boy had thought to himself, *Alright, time to get ready*, but his older brother Narichika had firmly said to him, "I'm sorry, but I haven't finished writing the report. It will probably take two or three days."

"... Alright."

... Come to think of it, brother really dislikes chores like this....

Once he realised this, Masahiro, the *mononoke* and Taiin decided to head down to the village. Masahiro had recovered well, but his strength had still not been completely restored. If he did not gradually work up strength, the return trip would be a difficult one.

"Will Narichika actually finish his report?" Taiin questioned curiously.

Masahiro scrunched up his face. "Umm ... I think so. We can't go back if it isn't finished, so my brother will be trying, probably."

The *mononoke* at Masahiro's feet squinted and shrugged.

Genbu, the water deity, basked in the wind gusting from the south, a tense expression on his face. One of the twelve spirit summons, he appeared to be a 10-year old child. Appearances were deceiving, however, as he had actually come into existence several hundred years ago—nay, even longer than that—but unfortunately his aged master had always treated him by his physical age, ever since Genbu had entered the man's service. That was just Seimei's nature.

It was now the middle of the fourth month and the beginning of summer. Leave shoots adorned trees across Izumo.

"It's been almost one month and there's still no response. This is getting a little aggravating," Genbu scowled as he muttered restlessly to himself. He was standing on the roof of the Noshiro manor, which belonged to the overseer of this region. This roof was thatched with hay, unlike the pine bark-covered roofs of the nobles in the capital.

In the midst of his brooding, a shadow emerged next to him. This form was much taller than Genbu, with long dark brown hair gathered by a metallic accessory and covered by a flowing cloak the colour of deepest twilight.

“What should we do? Shall we resend the message?” asked a deep, smooth voice.

Genbu looked up to meet a pair of golden eyes peering down at him.

“Sounds good. Seimei ordered us to be respectful, but this is taking too long.”

“Then....”

“If we use Taiin’s wind, we probably wouldn’t be able to bear the weight of responsibility for whatever mess it causes, so we should use the water currents or my water mirror....”

Before Genbu had even finished speaking, Rikugou the wood deity was already nodding silently. On his chest swung a *magatama** bead that blazed red as fire. Genbu squinted—he might be imagining things, but it seemed like the colour had deepened.

“Is it reflecting Rikugou’s thoughts?” The words he mumbled to himself were lost in the wind before they ever reached Rikugou’s ears. His tall figure was gazing steadily towards the northeast.

“Genbu. It has appeared.”

“Hmm?”

A pair of gleaming black eyes swept over the horizon and came to rest on a shadow among the forest of trees bursting with budding leaves. It was the form of a gigantic chameleon, approximately 15 meters in height.

‘I am here at the command of Chigaeshi’s priestess. Follow me.’

Genbu and Rikugou sighed in relief. By Seimei’s orders, they had sent a spirit messenger to Chigaeshi’s priestess about a month ago and had been waiting for a response since then. However, no response had been forthcoming—until now.

* Comma-shaped bead or stone, often considered a sacred symbol.

“Why did it take so long?” Genbu fumed under his breath. “At the very least, we’re Seimei’s representatives.” He was quite put-out by the unrepentant attitude of the chameleon in face of their tardiness.

Rikudou patted Genbu’s jet black hair consolingly. “They represent a god, while Seimei is only human and we are merely servants to that human. No matter how we are treated, we have no right to complain.”

“That’s true,” Genbu grimaced and then growled, “But that doesn’t mean I can accept it.”

Rikugou listened to his comrade vent wordlessly.

‘Please convey this message to the priestess of the Chigaeshi holy ground.’ That was the order that Seimei had given the two spirit summons the evening after Touda had regained his memories. This information had been conveyed through Genbu’s water mirror, which had been connected to the water mirror of Tenkou, another water deity. As Tenkou had been by Seimei’s side, they were able to communicate directly, a feat possible only when there were two such mirrors.

Taiin had already used the wind to convey news to Byakko. Therefore, when Seimei’s visage appeared in Genbu’s floating water mirror, he had not asked how Touda was doing. He had merely stated, “Guren is back, isn’t he?”

Seimei had not commented on the events beforehand, and only wanted confirmation that the one by Masahiro’s side now was ‘Guren’ rather than ‘Touda’. This simple fact would have been more than enough for him. When Genbu and Rikugou responded with a simple, “He’s back,” Seimei had nodded and dropped the topic. The main business at hand was a message he needed to be conveyed to the priestess of the Chigaeshi holy ground.

The two spirit summons bade the chameleon to wait in the forest awhile so as to not intrude upon the human realm, and proceeded to seek out Narichika to inform him that they would be going their separate way for a different mission.

Narichika was working on his report for the Bureau in one of the rooms of the Noshiro manor. After having resolved the mystifying and macabre events in the region, he had decided to observe the Yamashiro village for a while longer to ensure that things had truly settled down. However, this was only excuse—his real motive was to linger until Masahiro was well. On the part of Noshiro no Shigeyori, he was glad to accommodate

the two *onmyouji* that had suppressed the terrible demon, and provided them with the utmost care.

“He probably wants to display his sincerity so that we can praise him to the Minister when we report back. Humans long for praise, after all,” Narichika had muttered cynically. Masahiro had looked at him, a troubled expression on his face, and the much older brother had beamed and winked back.

“That’s the way the world works. No matter how hard you try to live by the straight and narrow, the world is a cruel place. You cannot blame people for hiding ulterior motives behind a mask of sincerity. And in the end, we’re making use of this way of thinking as well,” Narichika had clarified with a sneaky grin. Masahiro’s gaze appeared conflicted; while he was not so young that he could not understand, he was not yet old enough to accept such truism easily.

“It would be wrong for such an attitude to become so ingrained and extreme as to become deceitfulness,” Genbu had tried to reassure him, “But there isn’t anything wrong about being smart about your actions.”

Masahiro’s face had still retained its unhappy look, while the *mononoke* at his side remained silent.

It suddenly occurred to Genbu that Touda, in the form of the *mononoke*, was speaking much less after the silver band around his brow had disintegrated. However, he currently had a mission to carry out; he shoved this thought to the back of his mind for consideration afterwards.

Narichika was seated in front of a table, working on his report. His hand paused mid-brush when he felt the auras of the spirit summons behind him.

“Is something the matter? If you’re looking for Masahiro, he’s with Shokichi and Yasuke down in the village.”

Rikugou blinked and made to speak before thinking better of it. Instead, it was Genbu who replied, “Narichika, you shouldn’t speak as if we only have business with Masahiro.”

Faced with such clear displeasure, Narichika cocked his head and scratched his brow with the end of his brush. His lips twisted strangely.

“Umm ... I’m surprised to hear you say that. But I really wasn’t implying anything in particular.”

Still caught in a steady glare, he finally laid down his brush and sighed heavily. “Grandfather treats Masahiro differently from everyone else,” he explained. “I have even mentioned it to Masachika that the twelve spirit summons are the same way.”

Even Rikugou and Genbu, usually paragons of unruffled calm, found it difficult to remain silent and opened their mouths as if to speak. However, Narichika cut them off with a wave of one hand.

“We are not so blind as to not realize how talented he is. No matter how diligently metal is polished, it can never become gold. Isn’t it because of this that Touda calls only Masahiro the grandson of Seimei?”

Now Rikugou and Genbu were completely silent. It seemed that they could not dispute Narichika’s words. However, noticing the flash of emotion in the normally stoic Rikugou’s face and Genbu’s dimmed eyes, the man hurriedly leaned forward and continued, “Wait, don’t misunderstand. We’re not saddened by this. How should I put this...? Well, the heavy burden of being grandfather’s successor actually isn’t something we want to bear.”

Had Masahiro said that he didn’t want to become an *onmyouji*, both his elder brothers would have given everything to allow Masahiro to follow his chosen life’s path. But because the boy had decided by himself to become an *onmyouji*, they had instead willingly stepped back and resolved to lend a hand whenever needed.

“It’s a bit complicated, which is why my words may have come out the way they did. In short, Masahiro is in the village, and if you don’t mind speaking to me, you’re welcome to state your business.”

At this jarring return to the matter at hand, Genbu felt a bit disoriented, having been led off on a tangent for so long. Rikugou made no comment, but he probably felt the same way. Had all twelve spirit summons been present, they would have been of one mind: it was exactly this sort of personality that unmistakably marked Narichika a grandchild of Seimei.

Genbu exhaled heavily and spoke. “The two of us are departing for Chigaeshi on Seimei’s command. Taiin and Kouchin will still be on hand for the return trip, so there

should be nothing to worry about. However, if you are concerned, you can let Seimei know and he will probably send over more summons right away.”

“No, it should be fine. At worst, there may be mountain thieves to deal with, but Taiin’s winds will blow them away in an instant.” If they didn’t have to care about injuries sustained by their enemies, that would be the simplest and fastest approach.

“Then let us go, Rikugou,” Genbu urged his comrade and rose to leave.

“Ah, Genbu, Rikugou,” Narichika’s voice floated over to them from behind.

When the paired turned back to look at him, he beamed at them sunnily before resuming his writing.

“Be careful.”

Rikugou blinked and nodded once, while Genbu replied firmly, “I will remember to do so.”

Kouchin was perched on the roof of the Noshiro manor. Even though the sun had not fully set yet, the breeze had begun to carry the hint of a chill by the time she saw Masahiro and the *mononoke* approach.

“Ah, they’re back. I didn’t think anything would have happened, but I couldn’t help being a bit anxious.” Arms crossed, Kouchin glanced over to the side at Taiin, who sat next to her in a pitiful slump. The smaller summon had left with Masahiro, but almost always returned first. Her hangdog expression was suffused with shame and she was muttering something under her breath.

“Speak up if you want to say something. I can’t hear you,” Kouchin said sharply. She wasn’t angry, but she couldn’t keep a tone of rebuke from leaking into her voice. The reason Kouchin hadn’t accompanied Masahiro herself because he was with Taiin and Guren, who was in his *mononoke* form.

Taiin tried to muster up the strength to protest, but quickly deflated.

“I’m sorry. I guess ... I’m still....”

“He has changed a lot, hasn’t he?”

“I’m not as afraid of him as I used to be. But ... he still feels different from before he lost his memories. He just seems so unapproachable. How should I put it...?” Taiin trailed off as she fumbled mentally for the right words. Her brows knitted in thought before her eyes finally widened. “Oh! I know! It’s like he’s still so restless.”

While Taiin’s physical appearance made her seem even younger than Masahiro, she was actually several thousand years old. And even though her personality matched her exterior, her age was undeniable.

Kouchin’s brow creased upon hearing her comrade’s words. She figured she knew the reason for such restlessness, but gave no comment. Her only outward reaction was to touch her lip thoughtfully with a single fingertip.

“Oh, what are the two of you up to?” Masahiro called to them, eyes wide, upon entering the manor grounds. The *mononoke* snuck a quick glance at them before turning away, probably in consideration for Taiin.

“We’re waiting for you to return, of course,” Kouchin replied gently.

Masahiro scratched his head guiltily. “Is that so? I’m sorry then ... I was just strolling along.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Alright then,” Masahiro smiled brightly and entered the manor, the *mononoke* trailing at his feet.

At that sight, the reason for Touda’s strangeness suddenly occurred to Taiin and she gasped in realization. “Ah!”

“What is it?”

“Touda still hasn’t ridden on Masahiro’s shoulder, not even once.”

Kouchin nodded quietly at Taiin’s shocked words.

“You’ve noticed it then. That means....”

Masahiro must have noticed it too.

“We’re departing in two days. You’ve only just recovered. Make sure you eat well and rest fully.” The *mononoke* lectured non-stop as one of its forelegs waved back and forth in emphasis.

“I know, I know. Mokkaun is really such a worrywart,” Masahiro replied spiritlessly, a forced smile on his face.

“I’m not a worrywart,” it replied with a frown that creased the flower-like pattern on its brow.

Masahiro reached out a hand and squeezed its head firmly. “Mokkaun has always been a worrier.”

... You don't have to worry this much. You don't have to feel this guilty. Don't blame yourself like this....

But even if he uttered these words, they would be unable to convey his true feelings. And so, Masahiro said nothing.

Guren’s recollection must have created a deep wound in his heart, and the pain born of those returned memories would never fade away. It was to avoid this scenario that Masahiro had cast a spell of forgetfulness. And yet ... it was Masahiro’s own selfishness that stopped him from sealing away those memories again.

Even though Masahiro’s injuries had all faded away, Guren probably felt the pain as if they were his own, for him to be feeling such torment.

The young boy rubbed his stomach, which was now completely painless, and sighed.

... I wish I could tell you not to look so tormented. That I really am in no pain ...

“Come, you need to sleep now.”

“I know, I know. You need to sleep too, Mokkaun. You must be tired out from walking here and there on those short feet. Oh, but then again, if you get tired, you can always rest on my shoulder. You’re so lucky.”

The *mononoke* blinked its crimson eyes, white tail wagging back and forth. “Why would I have to depend on anyone like that? I can walk by myself,” it huffed.

“ ... Good night then.” Masahiro quickly ducked under the large kimono spread over his futon and secretly heaved a heavy sigh.

Even though the memories had returned, something was still missing. What was it?

The young boy thought that, if only he could figure it out, the *mononoke* would perhaps finally look straight at him again, like before.

The *mononoke* watched over Masahiro until the boy's breaths evened out in slumber before sighing lightly and making its way to the roof of the manor. Narichika also slept in this room, and since he feared Touda, he might sleep fitfully in Touda's presence.

When it leapt up onto the rooftop, an uninvited guest was already there.

“What's the matter, Touda?” Kouchin asked. She was seated cross-legged on the tallest point of the roof, her face calm and expressionless. There was no sign of Taiin; she probably fled the moment she felt Touda approaching.

“I'm hated as usual, I guess,” the *mononoke* muttered. Shrugging, it made its way over to Kouchin and sat down on its haunches, one leg lifted to scratch its neck and eyes closing tiredly.

Kouchin simply placed an elbow on one knee and rested her head on her hand, eyes glancing over to the form by her side.

The *mononoke* stopped scratching and asked, “Where are Rikugou and Genbu?”

Kouchin turned to the northeastern horizon. “They went to Chigaeshi as representatives of Seimei.”

“Is that so.” The *mononoke* fell silent. The cool breeze of the fourth month ruffled its fur lightly and dispersed. Its long ears hung glumly and tightly-wound feelings glimmered from deep within eyes the colour of a warm sunset.

It seemed like time was passing more sluggishly than usual. Even now, the *mononoke* felt like there was a blank somewhere in his 'time'. It could recall with clarity the moment it had been pierced by the sword that could slay even deities, but the events after that were hazy, like they were smothered by a heavy fog. The only thing that clung firm to its memory was a pair of pained, sorrowful eyes that speared its very heart.

Long moments passed in an oppressive silence. Finally, the *mononoke* opened its mouth and spoke. “That Masahiro can’t *see*...”

A pair of onyx eyes peered down at the quivering form.

“It’s because of me ... isn’t it?”

“ ... ”

Kouchin remained silent, only raising a slender finger to poke softly at the *mononoke*’s forehead. It did not resist, but squinted as it looked up, its crimson eyes reflecting the scars on her face. Kouchin forced a smile when she noticed what the *mononoke* was looking at.

“You are definitely one of twelve all-powerful spirit summons. If I weren’t one myself, I’d probably carry these scars for life.” Even though almost one month had passed, she had not fully recovered despite having the greatly enhanced self-regenerative capability of a spirit summon.

The *mononoke* opened its mouth, forcing a thick voice through its clogged throat.

“... Sorry.”

This short word of apology somehow echoed with unnatural loudness.

Kouchin’s eyes widened briefly in surprise.

... *To think he could change so much...*

“How unusually docile of you,” she commented.

The *mononoke* didn’t bother to retort. Its gaze was lowered and its tail drooped lifelessly. To that pitiful form, Kouchin continued, “I already promised that, whatever happens, I’ll stop you when you need to be stopped. Still ... don’t make me do it again.”

In the past, Touda would never have apologized like this. That he had become so much more open with his expressions and emotions only happened after Masahiro’s birth.

“I’m truly sorry....” the *mononoke* repeated abjectly, never raising its head.

Cries of pain.... Unceasing cries of pain sounded relentlessly in its mind. In the stillness, it searched for a way to erase this anguish. Yet the grief and hurt crystallized into a vortex of misery that sank its claws deeper than any pain.

... *Why did I come back? What can someone like me do?*

Chapter 4

Taiin's wind had reached the spirit summon Byakko in one of the rooms of the Abe manor. His calm, deep voice boomed suddenly behind Seimei, who was working at his desk.

'Seimei, Genbu and Rikugou have departed for Chigaeshi.'

"Is that so? That took quite a while."

'About a month after the message was sent,' commented Byakko as he materialised.

"The guardian deities of Chigaeshi want less to do with us than I thought. I suppose it has only been a month and a half, so they may have only just finished cleansing the holy grounds."

Seimei's room was bursting with books and scrolls shelved, piled and scattered everywhere. While Byakko was slightly shorter than Seiryuu and Rikugou, he was certainly the bulkiest and therefore tried to shrink into himself to avoid dislodging anything. He soon concluded, however, that his efforts would be futile and retreated to the veranda. Outside, the sunlight of early summer blazed brightly and the flowers in the garden were in full bloom.

"There's no telling when Rikugou and Genbu will return, but Narichika and the rest will probably be back in a month. Which means..." Byakko trailed off and crossed his arms, his expression thoughtful.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing in particular. It's just that when I conversed with Genbu via the water mirror several days ago, he complained that she's been quite troublesome lately."

Seimei's brush paused as understanding dawned on him. Glancing at Byakko over his shoulder, his wrinkled face broke out into a wry smile. "Ah. I think I also heard something to that effect. Still, there's nothing better than the Genbu-Taiin combination to relieve a tense atmosphere."

"Seimei, that's not the issue. If you don't sternly reprimand her, who is going to rein in that scamp? In the end, I'll have to be one to clean up her messes."

“Ho ho ho! I suppose you’re right.” Seimei guffawed and lowered his brush. He had been working on a chant to be read during a spell recitation. Fujiwara no Michinaga had formally requested that he pray for the Fujiwara clan consort’s health, and he would have to visit the Tsuchimikado manor soon.

Initially, the consort from the Fujiwara clan was scheduled to enter the palace at the beginning of the fourth month. This date was delayed to the end of the fourth month after the Bureau of *Onmyou* consulted Abe no Seimei in the middle of the third month and he had divined this new, suitable date.

“I should probably visit Her Imperial Highness before the prayer ceremony. She has lived a quiet, uneventful life until now, and this change has likely beset her with many troubles. And more importantly, we are quite familiar with each other,” Seimei lied glibly. After all, the one he knew well was Akiko, not Shouko. He had met Shouko only once, and even then, they had barely exchanged any words. However, Shouko now held the position of a consort, and it would not do to overlook her. It was best to attend her as frequently as possible.

“I’ve been wondering about this for a while now....”

Seimei turned to see Byakko’s grey eyes looking at him curiously.

“Hmm?”

“Switching the ladies was a good idea. However, even if this can deceive the handmaidens and nobles in the palace, there is no way the entire clan would be fooled.”

Seimei nodded once as he made preparations to leave. “One day, when the opportunity arises, Lady Michiko will have to be told. As the mother, her reaction would definitely be suspicious if she weren’t warned beforehand.”

“A man like Fujiwara no Michinaga shouldn’t have overlooked something like this.”

“To be more precise, it’s more that he hasn’t had the time to consider it. At the time, Akiko simply had to be presented to the palace, no matter what. And yet, it was imperative that no one knew that Akiko had been befouled by a curse.”

Byakko listened to his master with great interest. When he saw the old man remove his usual *kariginu** and change into a *noshi*†, a brow rose in surprise.

“Are you going out?” he asked.

“I just said that I would be going to the Tsuchimikado manor.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

... *What on earth. He meant he was going right away?*

Byakko made a face, as if to say, ‘Then why didn’t you say it clearly?’ Seimei, however, only flicked a cursory glance at him. Positioning his hat carefully, he continued, “In any case, please guard the manor until I return. Don’t let those imps slip in like they did before.”

The other day, they had gained entry because Akiko gave them permission. However, it was not something that should happen on a regular basis, as the Abe manor acted as a critical seal in defense of the capital’s demon’s gate. Therefore, it was surrounded by a powerful barrier that was designed to purify spirits and prevent entry of evil.

“But who will protect you?” Byakko asked as he began to rise to his feet. Seimei stopped him with a wave of his hand, and his eyes trailed over to a seemingly empty area of the garden. For a brief instant, a shimmering shadow appeared like a mist. Seeing this, Byakko settled back down and sighed.

“Ah ... that’s alright then.”

“Isn’t it?” Seimei grinned broadly before leaving the room.

Out of the corner of his eye, Byakko observed that the figure shadowing the man still bore his ever-present ill-humoured expression, long blue hair gathered at the nape swishing as he walked.

‘Why didn’t someone go ahead to have them send a carriage?’ An irritated tone echoed in Seimei’s mind as he walked past the manor entrance.

* Literally, ‘hunting clothes’. A garment typically worn by the nobility of Heian.

† Official garment for court nobles

He replied cheekily, “Walking is important for preserving health and the shine of youth. Besides, we don’t own an ox-drawn carriage.” The Abe clan was not so rich as to be able to afford an ox and hire someone to care for it. When Seimei needed to enter the palace, an ox-drawn carriage would be sent over for his transport.

‘Don’t delude yourself.’

“Ho ho ho,” Seimei chuckled. “Still, extravagance is a terrible vice. Besides, this year, I’ve made it my goal to start living a quiet, simple and healthy life.”

‘How ridiculous. Act your age for once.’

These words were utterly lacking in any form of courtesy and consideration, and could be construed as either concern or contempt. Anyone else who heard this would think the latter, but Seimei knew that Seiryuu was only worried about him, and accepted the words with good grace.

After the events at Chigaeshi and their return to the capital, Seiryuu had been furious at Kouchin for preventing him from killing Touda. Just one more step, and he would have succeeded. Such was his towering fury that he ensconced himself in the spirit realm until his rage subsided.

... This will not happen again. Or I will slay Touda with my own hands....

In the past, he had thus vehemently sworn. However, Seimei as his master had expressly forbidden such action. In truth, Seimei felt poorly for imposing his will on Seiryuu, but no matter what, he had no wish to see comrades killing each other. If only Seiryuu could understand his feelings.

“Guren and the rest will be back sometime in the middle of the fifth month,” Seimei commented.

“ ... ”

Seiryuu’s divine aura became biting cold upon hearing Guren’s name. It did not seem like his hostility would be fading any time soon.

Seimei continued heedlessly, “Masahiro too. I will have to be stricter with him in the future.”

Because this young boy had been a great source of such desperate worry, and had made a terrible request without considering the feelings of others.

‘Seimei.’

“Hmm?”

“Stop saying things you don’t feel. It’s annoying.’ A tight voice laced with anger resounded in Seimei’s mind. His eyes snapped wide and an irrepressible laugh bubbled to the surface.

“Ah, I really can’t fool you.” The aged man said with a carefree expression and a smile that creased his eyes. “Well, anyway, I need to work out a bit. I’ve been overdoing things a lot recently, so I realise I really need to improve my stamina.”

His companion did not bother to argue any more, only heaving a long-suffering sigh.

Seiryuu’s expression was always tense, his words harsh and his manner reproachful, but Seimei knew well that, among the twelve spirit summons, Seiryuu was the one who fretted most about his health. It wasn’t that the others didn’t worry, but that he was the one who always went straight to the point and nit-picked at all the details.

“You’ve been so testy lately,” Seimei complained half-heartedly, for actually, Seiryuu was most scary when he fell silent.

... It’s should be okay. I can still manage this

Ever since his youth, even though he was considered to be the master of the twelve spirit summons, it seemed that he was always the one who was being taken care of.

Seimei continued to stroll ahead. Clicking his tongue in annoyance, Seiryuu finally fell in step behind him and followed silently. At this point, nagging was pointless; once his master had decided to do something, there was nothing anyone could say to dissuade him. Just going along with whatever Seimei wished would have been much less stressful for him, but he knew for a certainty that going along with the flow would just spell disaster for him. Either he’d get drawn into various troublesome situations or Seimei himself would set off *something* that would snowball into hair-raising life-or-death scenarios. Now that he thought about it, the events at Shinshu, which happened when Seimei’s wife Wakana was still alive and had yet to bear any children, was exactly one of those times.

...Why did I become a servant to a human like this?

Seiryuu knit his brows in frustration at the question that often popped into his mind at times like these. Suddenly, he halted in his tracks and began to survey his surroundings. He was shielding his presence so no one could see him, but Seimei felt Seiryuu's aura stall behind him and immediately stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Seimei asked without turning around, so as not to trigger any suspicions.

A moment's pause, and then ... ‘Nothing ... I’m probably imagining things.’

“Hmm?” Seimei squinted and peered to the left and right. At that moment, he was not able to detect anything out of the ordinary. “Imagining things, is it?”

After the events at Chigaeshi, and along with the need to delay the consort's palace entrance ceremony, his senses were much more sensitive than usual.

“Let’s go, Shouran. Let’s not waste too much time.”

Seiryuu remained wary, but after being prodded by his master, he shrugged resignedly and followed.

As Abe no Seimei and Seiryuu headed towards the Tsuchimikado manor, a man stood upon the roof of one of the surrounding manors, glaring at them. His presence was shielded and his aura dampened so skillfully that even the spirit summons would not be able to detect him. His skin was unusually pale and his lips dark and bloodless. Long, messy hair, obsidian like raven's wings, swayed with his every move. The crescent-shaped eyes that bore into Seimei were the colour of lead.

Finally, a low grating laugh wove into the wind.

“Found you.”

...There it is. The same bloodline as the child in Izumo. But the blood is oh so much thicker in this one....

“It has been greatly diluted, but it is unmistakably the scent of a fox.” Monstrous blood lying dormant deep in the human bloodstream—a mix between human and monster blood that granted powers beyond human reckoning slumbered in that frail form.

From those bloodless lips emerged a repulsive voice that seemed to creep and coil up one’s body. “Shouka, you can probably sense that blood as well. You’ve probably traced that scent all the way here like me and yearn for the blood of your race. Let’s see...”

...How to draw it out....

There was a large manor along the path Seimei was taking, its grounds broad and expansive. He could feel the noxious aura hidden there. The man smirked—this should work.

Fun ... so much fun. This new bait was marvelous indeed. If used well, his long-hunted prey should definitely appear.

“After all, those of your race can never abandon one of your own.” He chuckled in amusement.

A sharp voice suddenly pierced the air. “Young man ... no, you monster. What are you doing over there?”

Keen eyes gleaming like the reflection of a blade swung around, seeking out the one who had placed himself in his path. This newcomer stood on a side-street devoid of people. He was clad in tattered monk robes and a woven straw hat, and his hand bore a straight staff with hoops attached to one end.

“Since you have appeared so boldly before me, I won’t be letting you go.” Darkness glittered in eyes hidden deep within the hat.

“You won’t let me go? And just how would you manage that?”

The newcomer slammed the end of his staff against the ground. The small hoops jangled and rang out, and the sound radiated outwards.

The demon was still smirking, despite being trapped in the cage of sound.

“Ahh ... this is great. I’m having so much fun. Little human, is your vengeful spirit directed towards that one in that manor?” The demon pointed to the manor, his eyes thinning into crescents.

The monk’s eyes widened. However, his expression gradually became contemptuous. “Huh. So even you can tell, monster?”

“I know. But that old man will definitely get in your way.”

The disdainful smile faded from the face of the monk. Instead, hatred smouldered in his eyes. The demon peered down mockingly before floating down to the ground.

“I can lend you my power, if you want. I actually happen to have business with that old man too.”

“What...?” The monk tensed, preparing to defend himself.

“As it is, that old codger will definitely notice the spell lurking in that manor.”

Cruel eyes glowed as it traced Abe no Seimei’s shadow.

“Because he isn’t an opponent a human can deal with.” The demon laughed and tugged out a handful of hair. Silken black strands fluttered in the breeze. In the next instant, the demon had reappeared in front of the monk, who recoiled and tried to back away but was frozen in his tracks. The demon wrapped one strand of his hair around the staff; the hoops rang out in the sudden stillness, and the sacred barrier swelled and burst.

The monk’s eyes snapped wide. He snatched at the hair wrapped around the staff and tugged it off. Feeling the terrifying demonic power lurking in the hair, he jerked back in horror.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

Dark eyes stared out at the man standing before him. It seemed that the demon was amused by the cruel gleam in the monk’s eyes. The demon smiled thinly. “I told you. I have business with that old man. This arrangement suits you too, doesn’t it?”

For a tense moment, the two locked stares. The monk then turned away to consider the hair in his hand. It was true that this strand of hair greatly augmented his spell power. It would be child’s play to get rid of the meddling Abe no Seimei.

The Abe clan was constantly protecting the Fujiwara clan. But if only Abe no Seimei were to be removed from the equation, it would be possible to destroy the Abe clan and then move on tear down the Fujiwara clan.

For the sake of destroying the Fujiwara clan....

“ ...”

The monk narrowed his eyes. A man in his prime, his form should have been vigorous and sturdy, yet it surged with a malevolent hatred and his bloodless face was gaunt with protruding cheekbones.

Finally, the monk smirked.

“Alright.”

The second he fisted the strand of hair, the hoops on his staff reverberated with a spine-chilling clamour.

Proceeding east from the Abe manor along the Tsuchimikado avenue was a massive manor situated between the Tomi street and the Higashi Kyogoku avenue. This was the Tsuchimikado manor, the temporary imperial residence of the consort of the Fujiwara clan.

The consort resided in this manor with imperial handmaidens, retainers and servants. Michiko, Michinaga's principle wife, lived in the Tosanjou manor and would never visit this place without due necessity as wives and daughters of nobility rarely ever ventured outside their homes.

However, the Takasukasa manor that happened to be situated next to the Tsuchimikado manor belonged to Michiko. It was possible that she would remove to Takasukasa, and thereby visit Tsuchimikado by requesting an audience with the consort. Permission would certainly be granted. Seimei had to move quickly before such an event ever occurred.

As Seimei stood in front of the entrance, he felt an icy chill along his back for the briefest of moments.

“What was that?”

He did not feel anything else, however, and dismissed it from his mind.

Upon seeing a frail old man pass through the elaborate entryway alone without any attendants, the guards were suspicious and refused to let him pass.

“Who are you?” one of them demanded. “How dare you come without notifying us?”

“The Minister of the Left commanded that I come. But now that you mention it, I should have requested an introductory letter,” Seimei replied, scratching his head. “Oh dear.”

Seiryuu, who was still shielded nearby, narrowed his eyes and looked like he very much wanted to berate his master. Seimei merely glanced briefly at him, before addressing the guard again. “Please inform the caretaker of this manor that the *onmyouji* Abe no Seimei has arrived.”

Despite his distrustful expression, one of the guards departed to inform the caretaker. Seimei pretended to look around casually, but he was actually minutely inspecting the surrounding area. He did not feel any particularly threatening auras—did that mean that the clouded star on the periphery of the Big Dipper did not pertain directly to Shouko’s illness?

“No ... but...” The star’s light had undeniably dimmed. And because the one who had noticed this was Masachika, his grandson and the son of Yoshimasa, it was not something easily discounted. One could say that Masachika’s eyes were the most observant and discerning among everyone in the Abe clan. While his spiritual power was far weaker than his younger brother Masahiro’s and he was somewhat less talented than Narichika, Masachika’s dazzling intellect and brilliant decision-making more than made up for what he lacked. Yoshimasa, a master astrologist, had himself decided that this was a significant issue, therefore leading to the delay of the palace presentation.

In that instant, there was a slight shift in the breeze which only Seimei detected. The aura of a spirit summon settled down next to him. Seimei’s brows creased as he whispered, “Tenkou, what’s the matter?”

‘I had a strange premonition, so I hurried to your side.’

‘I’m here with Seimei. What is there to worry about?’ Seiryuu cut in with a frigid voice.

Tenkou looked uncomfortable. ‘It’s not like that.... I’m so sorry if I’ve offended you.’

‘Stop apologizing so profusely.’ Seiryuu snapped.

“ ... ”

The two were speaking behind Seimei, so he couldn’t see the expressions on their faces. He still had a good idea though. Scratching his brow, he mumbled faintly, “Then Shouran, you really should speak more gently.”

A quick glimpse revealed Tenkou standing with her head bowed glumly, while Seiryuu stood arms crossed, eyes narrowed in irritation. On first impression, it would seem like Seiryuu was bullying Tenkou. Were Kouchin standing there, she would have turned the full force of her glare on Seiryuu. Kouchin and Tenkou were very close to each other, since they physically appeared to be at similar ages.

Although Seiryuu bore his usual peeved expression, he made no move to chase Tenkou away, which meant that he wasn’t really angry at her. Seimei sighed helplessly.

At that moment, the flustered manor caretaker came running out, panting hard and face pale.

“My lord Seimei! A quick word from you, and we would have been more than delighted to send a carriage to pick you up! You should not have needed to walk all the way here! Guards, this gentleman is Lord Abe no Seimei, the great *onmyouji* highly esteemed by the Minister—have you never heard of him?” The caretaker castigated the guards severely before briskly ushering Seimei towards the manor. He appeared to be around the same age as Yoshimasa.

“Please don’t scold them on my account,” Seimei demurred. “The guards were carrying out their duties diligently. It was my own fault for coming alone without attendants.”

‘Exactly.’

‘Seiryuu!’ Tenkou’s voice rang out, as if to admonish the other summon for his outspokenness. If not for the presence of the caretaker leading the way, he would have loved to see the expression on their faces.

“Her Imperial Highness is still indisposed, and is not scheduled to enter the palace until the end of the fourth month. We can only pray for her speedy recovery. But even then, while the Minister has great power, the Rear Court is a place for women only. Who

knows what will happen there? Lord Seimei, you do enter the inner palace occasionally, do you not? What is it like in there?"

The caretaker of the Tsuchimikado manor was a servant of Michinaga. His rank was too lowly to merit entrance into the inner palace. Therefore, the place where the Emperor dwelt was as distant to him as the unreachable clouds in the sky.

"The architecture is not too different from the Tosanjou or Tsuchimikado manors," Seimei replied gravely, "But the embellishments are much more elaborate and extravagant, as befitting the resplendent dignity of His Imperial Majesty who dwells within."

The caretaker nodded delightedly.

"Indeed? It must be as exquisitely beautiful as the consorts that surround His Imperial Majesty. And soon Her Imperial Highness will stand among them. I breathlessly await that wondrous day."

Exquisitely beautiful ... people probably saw it that way.

Seimei could feel that Seiryuu and Tenkou had fallen speechless upon hearing the caretaker's words. They had entered the Rear Court frequently to escort and protect Seimei—to them, that place was like the devils' hive.

"So it is," Seimei agreed amiably. It was best to not correct him. There were things in this world that one would be better off not knowing. There was no point in tarnishing the caretaker's vision of purity. What would be the point of him knowing that the Rear Court was a warzone of endless conflict waged with violent cunning among the handmaidens of the consorts, or hearing of the sarcastic conversations veiled behind thin veneers of politeness?

The Fujiwara consort lay sick on her bed, hidden behind a set of blinds. This room was situated in the eastern side of the main manor.

Even into the fourth month, the inner and outer verandas surrounding the manor were closed and shuttered against the chilly wind. For the room to be enclosed in the middle of the day would certainly make the interior musty and depressing. That could not be very good for recovery.

"The entrance is this way. Please enter."

A sliding door on the eastern side of the manor was ajar. Bamboo curtains fluttered in the light breeze. From there, it was possible to see the outline of the consort's bed from behind a set of blinds. On the other three sides of the bed, the blinds had been rolled up and replaced with cloth screens to hide the consort from view. Nevertheless, in between the cloth screen, it was possible to see long, lustrous black hair carefully curled into a box next to the bed.

Seimei was reminded of Akiko's hair. Hers, too, was no less of a lustrous black and it was longer than she was tall. However, upon entering the Abe household, she had trimmed it slightly so that it was not longer than her height. Shocked, Seimei had asked her about it, and the young girl, once the pampered lady of an illustrious noble family, had smiled and said, 'It gets in the way of doing the housework, so I asked Tenitsu and Genbu to help me cut it. They only trimmed the ends a bit; I hope it doesn't look too inappropriate.'

Akiko's eyes were soft as she combed her hand through her cascade of hair. Had nothing happened, she would have led a comfortable life with handmaidens to comb her hair for her. However, that way of life was now past, and she had begun to adapt herself to a new one.

And instead...

Seimei lowered himself down onto the veranda, all the while examining the consort Shouko as she lay abed behind the bamboo blinds. This young girl before him was the one who had taken on Akiko's destiny in her stead and was now headed towards an uncertain future. It was probably because the path ahead had not yet been set that even Seimei was unable to divine her destiny.

"Please excuse my rudeness, but can you please move back a bit?" Seimei requested the caretaker.

"Huh? Oh, but..."

"I need to meditate into order to use a spell to examine Her Imperial Highness' condition. Having someone nearby will disrupt my concentration."

"Ah, is that so." The caretaker nodded in understanding. Even though this was their first meeting, those were the words of Abe no Seimei, the greatest *onmyouji* of the era. There was no reason to doubt him.

“In that case, I shall have Her Imperial Highness’ handmaidens wait next to the bed. Should you need anything, feel free to call upon them.”

“Thank you very much,” Seimei replied as he watched the caretaker’s receding back with a serious expression on his face.

“Handmaidens, huh?”

These handmaidens were skilled, well-educated attendants hand-picked by Michinaga. Obviously, they all believed that Shouko was actually Akiko. However, they would never dare utter her name, a consort to the Emperor and one with status so elevated it was beyond them. The mere act of saying her name would have been an act of lèse majesté punishable by loss of rank and exile, if not outright execution.

Seimei himself had no intention of doing something so dangerous. He settled himself down carefully and spoke.

“Your Imperial Highness. It is Seimei.” Seimei spoke tenderly, like he had always spoken to Akiko. The presence behind the blinds seemed to twitch in surprise and a breath hitched. A moment later, a faint voice replied, “Lord Seimei...”

Seimei lowered his head slightly. Meanwhile, behind him, the shielded Seiryuu and Tenkou started, their eyes widening.

They knew this voice. Or rather, they knew someone else’s voice that was exactly the same.

‘I never thought they’d be this similar!’ Tenkou gasped in amazement.

Seimei grinned as he listened to Tenkou’s bewildered mutterings. Seiryuu, on the other hand, had been shocked to complete silence.

“It has been a while, Your Imperial Highness. I have heard that you have taken ill, and have come today after receiving orders from the Minister to pray for your health.”

A light sigh sounded from behind the cloth screens.

“My lord father ... and everyone else ... are well?”

Seimei understood the true meaning hidden within the question.

“Yes, Your Imperial Highness. The flower we received from the Minister is doing well too.”

“Is that so...” The voice trailed off in a sound of heavy wheezing. It seemed that even brief conversation severely drained her.

“I will return to pray for your health another day. Please rest easy; I will watch over you and there will be no need for concern.”

Weak laughter could be heard. This time, a handmaiden shuffled out from behind the bamboo blinds and her silent stare appeared to bid Seimei end his visit.

The aged man nodded in acquiescence and bowed once. He should not linger here too long. As he raised up to stand, the familiar voice belonging to an unfamiliar person sounded once more.

“Lord Seimei...” The consort of the Fujiwara clan paused briefly, before continuing, “Thank you ... for doing this for me.”

Anyone who heard this would have assumed it to be a normal gesture of thanks. Yet those simple words sank like leaden weights pressing upon Seimei’s heart.

Seimei bowed again, even more deeply, and departed. He proceeded along the covered walkway leading to the front gate while heaving a tired sigh.

Akiko, whose destiny had changed, and Shouko, whose own fate had been rewritten—for Seimei, he placed greater importance on Akiko, who now lived in his own household. However, Shouko’s protection was now his lifelong responsibility as well.

“How much longer will these old bones last...?”

Immediately, he could feel a fierce stare boring furiously into his back. The old man smiled wanly—how long has it been that these joking words would cause such a dramatic overreaction among the spirit summons?

The twelve spirit summons had begun serving him almost fifty years ago. Compared to the extremely fussy, tight-lipped Seiryuu of the past, his behavior had softened a great deal.

... Why do you always look so tense? What will you do if the crease on your brow becomes permanent....

He had once voiced his exasperation thus in his youth. The target of his ire had merely cast a peeved glance at him and turned away without a word.

...This guy....

Seimei had studied his summon for a few moments before finally sighing in resignation and smiling faintly.

...In that case, wood deity Seiryuu of the twelve spirit summons, I will give you a name....

Seimei had always been proficient in the use of words of power. Even these fussy and demanding twelve spirit summons existed within the bounds of the rules of the universe, and were subject to these words of power as well.

Amongst the twelve spirit summons, Seiryuu was the second to receive a name imbued with such power.

And soon, the spirit summon who was the first to receive a name would return, bearing unfathomable depths of emotion, unmanageable thoughts and a pair of eyes reflecting the turbulence in his heart. What would Seimei say to him when they met?

“ ...”

Seimei halted suddenly in his tracks.

‘Seimei?’ he heard Seiryuu’s inquiry.

An icy chill raced up Seimei’s back.

Something was watching.

He didn’t know what it was, but something was watching him.

Dark, cold eyes were drilling into Seimei and he could imagine a pair of lips twisted into a sneer. Suddenly, he felt something crawl out from inside his body.

“Urgh!”

That something pierced his heart and tore through his entire body. White flashed before his eyes, and he swayed and fell.

‘Lord Seimei!’ Tenkou’s frantic cry rang out. Seimei tried to force himself to rise, but his knees buckled helplessly. A burning heat seared within his left chest.

“Seimei!” Seiryuu had materialised and was yelling, face white as a sheet.

“Calm down....” Seimei reprimanded them and took a deep breath. But as he did so, a sharp pain lanced through his lungs and burned through his chest, leaving him gasping for breath.

“Lord Seimei, please hang on!”

Hearing Tenkou’s pleas, Seimei smiled weakly at her.

Ah...I didn’t mean to make you so worried....

“...Tenkou....” He tried to reassure her that he was fine, but ended up collapsing down upon the path.

“Lord Seimei, Lord Seimei!” Tenkou cried as she rushed in to grab Seimei as he fell.

“Tenkou, get out of the way!” Seiryuu snarled as he pushed her away and hefted Seimei onto his shoulder. The lightness of Seimei’s body shocked him, but he merely clicked his tongue in irritation and spun around. At that moment, an authoritative voice sounded in his ear.

‘If he disappears suddenly, people will whisper that there are demons or spirits haunting this manor. Lay him back down on the path and wait for someone to come.’

“... Tenkuu!” Seiryuu bit his lip and then roared furiously at the newcomer.

Tenkou looked at him with quavering eyes and pleaded, “Seiryuu, let’s do as he says. Otherwise....”

“Damn it!”

Tenkuu, the leader of the twelve spirit summons, rarely appeared in the human realm. Even now, he had merely sent his voice directly to the spirit summons. His words rang

true, however—were Seimei to suddenly disappear, ugly rumours would definitely begin to circulate.

Seiryuu's incandescent rage was clear to see as he laid his master down upon the cold tiled path.

The deep creases upon Seimei's brow only served as a reminder to the summons that the man before them had grown very old. Compared to the summons, human lives were frighteningly brief and fragile. They had forgotten this.

Or rather ... they had tried not to think about it.

“Oh ... Lord Seimei? Lord Seimei, what's the matter!” The caretaker was passing by and noticed Seimei collapsed on the ground. He raced over to the older man and, upon hearing this yell, handmaidens and various servants also streamed out of the manor.

“Seiryuu, let's leave it to the people at the manor. We can only stay by his side....”

The only thing they could do was stay by his side.

Tenkou felt so wretched. If Tenitsu were here, she could probably lessen their master's suffering. But neither she nor Seiryuu had such a power. Even though she numbered among the twelve spirit summons, she was useless.

While the manor was in an uproar, with servants scurrying about and trying to carry Seimei inside, Seiryuu's eyes scanned their surroundings. His eyes abruptly froze on the western wall and he sped towards it without a word.

“Seiryuu?” Tenkou called out as she raced after him. She found him kneeling atop the wall, eyes sweeping back and forth.

“What is it? What's the matter?”

Seiryuu studied the area cautiously as he muttered in a low voice, “A dark shadow....”

Chapter 5

The servants of the Tsuchimikado manor conveyed the unconscious Seimei back to the Abe manor. It was the evening of the next day before he finally opened his eyes again.

The first thing Seimei saw after opening his eyes was his wife, looking down at him anxiously.

“...ka ... na....”

Wakana’s eyes wavered tremulously. Raising one hand to her mouth in relief, she whispered in a quivering voice, ‘Didn’t you promise you wouldn’t make me cry?’

...That’s right. But I ended up breaking my promise....

Seimei squinted as if staring at a dazzling light, and recalled a time long past.

The old man appeared to be lost in some sort of hallucination, at the cusp between dreams and reality. The young girl kneeling nearby murmured softly, “Lord Seimei, can you recognize me?”

That voice drew Seimei back towards reality. He blinked several times in quick succession and his eyes finally focused on the face of a young girl kneeling next to his pillow. He sighed, and then smiled gently at the girl and nodded.

“I do ... Lady Akiko.”

Hearing this, Akiko exhaled slowly in relief.

Looking around, Seimei could see the worried faces of Yoshimasa and various spirit summons arrayed around him. His son’s brow creased wearily. “Father ... you are getting old now. Please don’t go out on your own.”

“Don’t treat me like I’m infirm. I’m still in good health.”

‘Stop deluding yourself,’ came Seiryuu’s frigid voice. He stood leaning against the wall, looking down at Seimei, and appeared to be bristling with rage.

Seimei smiled stiffly at Seiryuu, whose every muscle appeared tensed, and tried to prop himself up on his elbow. Akiko and Yoshimasa swiftly stopped him.

“Please don’t. You really must rest!”

“Collapsing like that means your exhaustion has really been piling up, father!”

Faced with the consternation of both of them, along with the reproachful stares of the various spirit summons like Tenkou, Tenitsu, Suzaku and Byakko, Seimei yielded and lay back down. The intensity of Seiryuu’s glare had progressed beyond mere anger to sheer murderous intent.

That was probably because he was really worried ... Seimei hoped.

“Sorry.... I guess I’ve really overextended myself. The caretaker of the Tsuchimikado must have been greatly troubled.”

When his father appeared to act like a proper convalescent, Yoshimasa nodded, relieved. “Indeed. We probably rely on you too much.”

“Yes, yes. Now that I think about it, I’m not even an official of the Bureau of *Onmyou* anymore. Stop throwing every little thing to me.”

“If you can speak so heartily, I guess you’ll be just fine. Rest a while; I’ll be back to pester you again soon.”

“What type of unfilial child are you? Planning to make relentless use of a decrepit old man like myself. You are really heartless.”

“Well, I *am* your son.”

Akiko froze, stunned by the war of words between Seimei and Yoshimasa. She had thought the grandfather-versus-grandson verbal spars between Seimei and Masahiro were incredible, but this duel between father and son was on a whole different level.

Before Seimei had awakened, Yoshimasa had been worryingly pale as he knelt by the bed. Tsuyuki had also been around half an hour ago, but Yoshimasa came to relieve her because she had stayed by Seimei’s sickbed all night.

The day the servant from Tsuchimikado had come to notify him, Yoshimasa had hurriedly requested permission for leave and hastened home immediately. Soon after that, his elder brother Yoshihira had also rushed in after hearing the news. Thus Akiko had cooped herself up in Masahiro's room the entire time. Fortunately, Seimei's room was farthest away and the visiting Yoshihara did not pass by at all. It was not until after midnight that he had excused himself, and Akiko had finally emerged and approached Seimei's sickbed. After that, she had remained with Tsuyuki and helped watch over the unconscious man.

“As long as you depend on me, your skills won't improve, you know? Has that not occurred to you, my lord master astrologer?”

“That the venerable *onmyouji* of the Imperial Staff can predict with such clarity without the need to view supporting evidence greatly humbles us,” Yoshimasa replied with a deadpan expression. “Even our desire to better ourselves would not take us very far, in face of such greatness.”

He was in no hurry; he had requested leave from the Bureau for today as well.

Since the great *onmyouji* serving almost all the high-ranking aristocrats in the inner palace had fallen ill, the entire palace was in a furor. Masachika, who had come by in the wee hours of morning, had related how he had been stopped everywhere he went by people asking for news on Seimei's condition. Yoshimasa himself couldn't be bothered with what the nobles felt; for him, Seimei was his father—no more, no less.

“At any rate, father, you actually lost consciousness. Please rest peacefully. I will inform the Minister myself.”

“Just lying around is so dull.”

“Father, if you ignore my advice and get up, Seiryuu over there is going to blow his top,” Yoshimasa warned as he gestured to the simmering Seiryuu.

“Hmm...”

Seiryuu's cobalt blue eyes were glittering like blades of ice. The eyes of other summons and Akiko were also clearly displeased. Ringed by condemning eyes, Seimei finally surrendered.

Seimei sighed as if abandoning all hope.

At last, Seimei had obediently closed his eyes. Yoshimasa left matters to the spirit summons and left the room. A few paces away, he stopped and let out a long breath. Raising one hand to knead his eyes, he groaned faintly, “We really got lucky....”

Seimei was really quite old. This time, he had regained consciousness, but thinking of what might happen next time terrified him.

Yoshimasa could not remember his mother. When he was a child, he had once asked Tenkou, who raised him in his mother’s stead, to show him an image of his mother on the surface of the water mirror. The visage that appeared was one from Tenkou’s memory; although his mother had not been a peerless beauty, she was smiling tenderly as she stood at Seimei’s side.

Because he could not remember his mother, his father had become that much more of an important figure for him. Still, most people his age did not have living parents. In this era, Seimei was truly considered very old. It wouldn’t have been unusual for something to happen to him. Yoshimasa himself had prepared mentally for such eventually, but it seemed like he was not really ready at all. When that time finally arrived, it would seem like the ground opening beneath him to swallow him into a shadowy abyss.

“Lord Yoshimasa....”

Yoshimasa started and turned to the source of the soft sound to see Akiko peering at him with a concerned expression.

“Lady Akiko, please forgive me. My mind must have been in a jumble.”

“Not at all. Ah ... Tenitsu and the others are looking after Lord Seimei. Lord Yoshimasa, you should also get some rest. I believe you didn’t sleep at all last night.”

“I am alright. But Lady Akiko, it must have been awkward for you too, with both Yoshihira and Masachika coming by.”

Akiko shook her head. “Not at all. I’m truly relieved that Lord Seimei’s condition doesn’t appear to be too serious.”

Her tender heart, too, must have ached badly. Yoshimasa smiled gently at her sincerity.

“Don’t worry. Father is the son of a fox. He’s not going to give up easily.”

Perhaps the one who needed to believe these words of comfort most was Yoshimasa himself.

After Yoshimasa and Akiko had left the room, Seimei opened his eyes and propped himself up. Seiryuu glowered at him immediately, but his master paid him no heed. Tenkou and Byakko too also looked at him in displeasure, while Suzaku appeared determined to help him, and moved as if to help support him.

“Seiryuu, Tenkou, did you feel anything when I fell unconscious?”

The atmosphere turned frigid in an instant. Tenkou swung around to look up Seiryuu, who stood looming above her. His blue eyes flashed.

“A black shadow,” Seiryuu replied tersely. Narrowing his eyes, he continued, “Your symptoms aren’t those of a normal illness. What was it, Seimei?”

The other spirit summons, not having known this detail beforehand, turned to stare at Seiryuu in consternation.

“What do you mean?”

“This was caused by spirits or magicians targeting Seimei?”

Byakko and Suzaku blurted out at the same time. The one who replied, however, was Seimei.

“I don’t know. I have no idea who it might be, but I felt a pair of eyes on me, and....”

Seimei brushed one hand against his left chest. The force that lanced through his entire body had arisen in there. It had pierced his heart before rampaging all over.

A powerful voice that had once rung out in the deep twilight of an early spring night resounded again in his mind.

...It’s almost time....

A god might be able to foresee these events, but a mere human would never be able to know whether such a prediction was true or false.

The face of his youngest grandson, absent for over a month, flashed in his mind's eye. He suddenly yearned to hear the cheerful voice that he had not heard for so long.

There was a woman waiting for him on the shore of a distant river. Knowing this, he wanted to hurry to her, yet at the same time, he still desired to linger a while longer in this world.

“Seimei,” Seiryuu, who had stayed silent, finally spoke up in a cold voice, “No matter what the reason, your body is nearing its limit. I won't let you say that you aren't aware of this fact.”

Silence descended. The twelve spirit summons and Seimei all knew this.

Seimei's soul transfer spell had sapped his spiritual power and life force drastically. Had he used it sparingly, allowing for intervals of rest, there would not have been such a considerable effect. However, he had used it too frequently. Simply put, the massive spiritual power emanating from the form of his youth had come at the cost of his soul.

Seimei was the master of the twelve spirit summons. Therefore, they could not stand by and allow Seimei to act in ways that would shorten his own lifespan.

“Never use that power for your grandson again,” Seiryuu declared icily and disappeared. There were probably things he wanted to discuss with his remaining comrades in the spiritual realm.

The rest of the summons were torn. While they likely agreed with him, it was completely contrary to their master's own wishes and they also wanted Seimei to be able to live as he pleased.

The painful silence was shattered by the carefree laugh of the old man.

“Really, he's so hardheaded. Won't even let an old man do what he wants.”

Seimei closed his eyes with a heavy heart, raising one hand to touch his brow. The burning at the corner of his eyes was getting unbearable.

An inky darkness had fallen upon the world. A breeze whispering promises of warmer nights caressed the cheek of Takaogami*. This god of Kifune was seated upon a boat-shaped boulder, eyes closed. Upon sensing an aura woven into the breeze settling down nearby, she opened her eyes. A slender figure shimmered into view upon the boulder and, upon seeing that form, Takaogami's eyes widened slightly.

“You're ... Shouka!”

Shouka flashed a satisfied grin at having successfully surprised a god. Floating up lightly, she appeared to seat herself in mid-air and crossed her legs.

Her arms, which were crossed in front of her chest, glowed whiter than snow. Her garments were so thin and fine that a viewer would feel chilly just looking at it. Her left arm and both ankles were adorned with tarnished silver bracelets. A transparent necklace hung around her neck in loops and a large crystal ball lying upon her bosom glowed with a pale blue light. Silver hair extended in a stream below her waist and rippled in the breeze. A pair of clear greyish blue eyes was fixed upon the god Takaogami.

“I have a favour to ask from you.” A faint smile emerged on Shouka's shapely face. She continued, in a soft yet powerful voice, “From here on, no matter what happens, stay out of it.”

Takaogami, who had been listening to the words of her old friend with her chin in her hand, was completely taken aback by her words.

“Great. You can still be surprised.”

“You haven't changed at all.” Takaogami laughed and cocked her head. “That'll depend on the situation, of course. In these last several decades, you've been roaming all over the country but haven't even come close to this region. What wind blew you over to these parts?”

Shouka stilled for a moment, her expression lost in thought. Averting her eyes slightly, she seemed to be staring into the far distance.

“A lot of troublesome things are about to happen.”

* Takaogami is referred to in a few different ways: the abbreviated and casual Takao, by the name Takaogami, or respectfully as the god Takaogami.

“About to happen? Meaning, from here on out?”

“It’s still just a guess, but probably.”

Her arms fell to her sides as she shrugged and let out a heavy breath.

“After all that effort in luring him away from the capital...”

She turned to look upon the capital city that lay sprawling at the foot of the mountain.

“There’s one of my race in the capital, but it seems like he has found him.”

Takaogami considered her old friend with a meaningful gaze.

“Race, huh...?”

“Yes. I didn’t intend to involve him, but he doesn’t care about things like that. He’ll probably do everything in his power to draw me out. He found a member of the bloodline at Izumo; he’ll definite trace things back to the capital and the beginning of the bloodline. What a nuisance.”

“Which essentially renders all your effort meaningless?”

“You seem to be amused, Takao. I wouldn’t mind sharing half of the effort with you.”

“No thanks. I’d hate to impose. Besides, watching from the sidelines is much more enjoyable.”

“Even so, if I didn’t drop by to let you know, you’d be quite cross with me. So here I am.”

Hearing these resigned words from her old friend, a low laugh emitted from the god Takao before she changed the topic abruptly.

“There’s someone interesting in the capital.”

Shouka glanced over. The other continued without waiting for her friend’s reaction, “That child interested me so much that I actually gave him permission to call me Takao.”

“Is that so? How very unusual.”

It used to be that, aside from the gods, only Shouka was allowed to call this god 'Takao'.

"Right now, he is in Izumo, a land to the far west. He should be back in a month. Don't you want to meet him?"

"If our paths are destined to cross, even without your prompting, we will certainly meet. Still I..."

Shouka stood up in mid-air, her smile cool.

"I don't really want to meet him. If he's a child you're 'interested' in, I can imagine what sort of power he has."

"It's just as you say."

The god Takao must have been pleased at her friend's conclusion, for she then laughed exuberantly.

Chapter 6

Abe no Yoshimasa performed the prayer ceremony for the Fujiwara consort's health in place of the ill Seimei. The consort's health improved, and she was able enter the palace at the end of the fourth month, even if that date was much later than what was originally planned. Still, she had not yet fully recovered, and was still bedridden frequently. Thus, she had returned to the Tsuchimikado manor at the beginning of the fifth month.

"Tenitsu," Akiko addressed the summon who was helping her clean up Masahiro's room.

"Yes?"

"Last night, I heard that Lady Shouko had returned to the Tsuchimikado manor about ten days ago. Is that true?"

Tenitsu blinked. Akiko's expression was very solemn, so she thought carefully for a moment, trying to couch her response in reassuring words.

"So I heard," she replied simply. "She is still quite ill, and remains abed almost all day."

"Is that so...." The young girl turned away, sighing with a gloomy look on her face.

Tenitsu threw her a questioning glance. "Who did you hear this from, my Lady?"

"From the imps. They've been coming by the gate every day lately."

"... I see."

...This could be bad. Something will have to be done soon....

The spirit summon fell silent with a troubled expression. Akiko, craning her head to look at her, suddenly noticed something.

Tenitsu was about as tall as Seimei. Suzaku, who was often by her side, was obviously very tall, so Akiko had never paid much attention. But now that she thought about it, Tenitsu was taller than a typical woman. And actually, Kouchin was taller than Tenitsu, while Rikugou was even taller than Kouchin. Having to tilt her head to look at them for long periods of time would practically give her a crick in the neck. Fortunately Genbu and Taiiin were shorter than her, probably because they had childlike forms.

The twelve spirit summons belonged to the race of gods, which was probably why they were so tall.

Akiko's mind wandered idly as she went back to cleaning up the room.

Every day, she would open the doors to let in the breeze, sweep away the accumulating dust and then wipe the floor with a dry cloth. Masahiro had a lot of books and scrolls, but they were mostly piled up in a vague semblance of neatness. While cleaning up the room, Akiko had therefore tried to organize them by type, asking Seimei or the various spirit summons for help in deciphering characters she couldn't read. Things were much more orderly now.

Akiko also patched up torn clothing that Masahiro had secreted away. This had been completed even before the fifth month. Now, she was washing them, a few pieces at a time, so that Tsuyuki wouldn't notice.

"What should I do after that...."

It would be nice if Masahiro came back before then.

Rajou Gate* seemed much more worn than he remembered. That was probably because Masahiro didn't have clear memories of it in the first place, since a month or two could not have changed it much at all. And he may not see or pass by this gate again.

"Ah ... we're back," Masahiro murmured with a sentimental smile. Next to him, Narichika cracked his neck left and right before sighing, "Ah, home sweet home. I'm coming."

"Brother, you can't go yet," his younger brother interjected immediately.

Narichika's grouchy expression was not faked.

"Hey, I just want to drop by my home first. My son, my other son, my daughter, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law and the various handmaidens and servants are waiting."

"... Was that a subtle attempt to deliberately omit mentioning my sister-in-law?"

* Demon's gate, also known as Rashoumon.

“You’re imagining things,” Narichika denied vehemently. His mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Of course she’s waiting for me. That goes without saying.”

It was a pity his voice had trailed off into such a low whisper that the words did not reach his younger brother’s ears.

Masahiro sighed and peered down at his heels.

“We’re finally back, Mokkaun.”

The *mononoke*, which had been padding by the brothers’ feet the entire time, raised its head and squinted. “Hmm ... we’re really back at the capital.”

This capital city with Seimei ... there were a lot of things he wanted to ask, and things that he needed to ask, but where would he start? There were so many things and some parts of those were so complicated: lost memories, faded memories, things he needed to know, things he wasn’t allowed to know, and things he had become aware of.

After the memories had been restored, Masahiro had seen that those eyes, the colour of a warm sunset, quivering with tightly-suppressed emotions. Perhaps the *mononoke*’s eyes reflected its attempts to quell the emotional storm roiling its heart.

“I cannot answer all your questions either....” Masahiro whispered in the depths of his heart.

Even so, in the past, Masahiro would have been the first one the *mononoke* asked.

Wordlessly, the boy reached down to scoop up the white form. He could feel it tense briefly.

“What are you doing, all of a sudden?”

“Just wondering if you’re tired. Since I am such a kind-hearted person.”

Realising that Masahiro was teasing him, the *mononoke* blinked and flicked its tail.

“Are you crazy? You should worry about yourself before worrying about others. I’m fine, after all, I have much more energy than humans.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

With that, the *mononoke* slipped through Masahiro’s arms and dropped down to the ground to resume walking. Its back seemed so far away.

The young boy felt like a hole had been drilled in his heart and he lowered his eyes forlornly. A broad hand stroked his head lightly. Glancing up, he saw Narichika looking at him tenderly. The older brother nodded slightly.

It was alright, because now it was nearby, within arm’s reach.

Taiin and Kouchin, who were shielded nearby, watched in silence.

Masahiro half-dragged his whining brother towards the Bureau of *Onmyou* the moment they stepped foot back in the capital. Along the way, he had stopped to knot his hair into a bun and put on a hat. Both were dressed in *kariginu* dress and *karibakama** pants. Hopefully the palace guards would grant them entry, considering that they had only just returned from Izumo, but if not, they would ask the gatekeepers to request someone from the Bureau come and accept their report.

“Masahiro, let’s go home and dress up properly first.”

“This is work. For a master of calendar sciences to be so whiny ... how are you ever going to get people to obey to you?”

“Woah ... you sound just like Masachika.”

The *mononoke* narrowed its eyes. The tableau before it was the image of the elder brother gripping his head and the younger brother kneading his brow. Meeting Kouchin’s eyes, it shrugged while the other merely smiled wryly and did not say anything. Taiin remained skulking behind Kouchin’s back, darting occasional glances at the *mononoke*.

‘Still ... a bit more....’

Even though she didn’t find the *mononoke* as scary as Touda, she still found it unnerving. The long ages of entrenched fear could not be so easily erased.

* Literally, ‘hunting trousers’.

‘I’m thinking of going ahead to let Seimei know that we’ve arrived at the capital.’

Both Masahiro and Narichika nodded at Taiin’s words.

“Hmm, that’s a good idea. Can’t you drop by my house as well?”

Taiin materialised before Narichika. “I could go, but who will be able to see me? If I just go and appear before them, they’re going to panic. That’s just not happening.”

Narichika grimaced and fell silent. Taiin decided to ignore him and floated into the air.

“Then take care. I’ll be waiting back at the manor.”

They had been proceeding north along the bustling Suzaku avenue. With so many people around, they could not wave to Taiin but only watch her depart. Masahiro, his face raised towards the sky, could see that the summer sun had passed its apex and was beginning its westerly trek.

“Ah, it’s summer.”

At the time he had left for Izumo, this same time of day would have seen the sun even further west and the sky would have been awash in red.

Heading north from the Rajou Gate along the Suzaku avenue led to the Suzaku Gate^{*}, which lay at the far end guarding the entry to the palace grounds. The Bifuku Gate to the west of Suzaku Gate was actually much closer to the Bureau of *Onmyou*, and the Ikuhou Gate and Taiken Gates even closer. However, it would require detouring around the palace grounds for quite some distance, so they had chosen to hail the gatekeepers at the Bifuku Gate instead.

“Please inform the Bureau of *Onmyou* that the master of calendar sciences and general clerk that departed to carry out duties abroad have returned to the capital.”

Fortunately, one of the gatekeepers was familiar with Narichika and had immediately headed off.

As predicted, they had not been allowed to set foot in the palace grounds. If they were able to hand over Narichika’s report to someone, however, it should be able to reach the director of the Bureau.

* See map of avenues and palace gates at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heian-kyo>

As Masahiro stepped back from the gate to gaze at the earthen wall surrounding the palace grounds, he heard a slightly irked tone call out to him.

“Lord Masahiro!”

Masahiro twitched and his eyes widened. Looking towards the Bifuku Gate, he spied a serious face. It was a person dressed in *noshi* and *karibakama*, and wore a hat that perched unflinchingly straight upon his head.

“Oh....”

He was rendered speechless as Fujiwara no Toshitsugu rushed over to him and wagged a reprimanding finger.

“At a time like this, you should be standing humbly beside Lord Narichika, not staring blankly at a wall! What will people think about the intellect of people in our Bureau?”

“Ah ... umm.”

“What was that!”

“Uh ... nothing, my lord.” In face of the strident demand, Masahiro scrambled to find something to say. “I apologize for my conduct. I will be more careful in the future.”

“As long as you understand,” Toshitsugu replied in a peeved manner and turned towards Narichika.

“Forgive me, master. I have come on your command.”

Narichika had been viewing the events with great interest. Eyes creased with suppressed amusement, he replied to Toshitsugu, “In that case, I would like to entrust you with this report, to be delivered to his lordship, the director of the Bureau. Please inform him that we will be heading straight home. If tomorrow is an auspicious date, we will enter the palace to present ourselves. If not, we will wait and choose an auspicious date according to the calendar.

“Yes, my lord. Ah ... I might be overstepping my bounds, but I feel like I should inform you....” Toshitsugu paused hesitantly and eyed Narichika and Masahiro, who had inched

closer. “Lord Seimei, *onmyouji* of the Imperial Staff had collapsed about a month ago and is now still bedridden.”

“Wha...” Masahiro blurted out, forgetting himself. Narichika’s eyes snapped wide, staring at Toshitsugu. After a long moment, the older man drew his wits together and tried to settle his emotions to a semblance of normalcy.

“Is it life-threatening?” he asked.

“I heard not. But he is very old. To be on the safe side....” Toshitsugu’s voice trailed off. In the distance, someone was saying something to someone else.

To Masahiro, it suddenly seemed like all the noise around him had been shut off.

What happened ... to whom?

His heart pounded with anxiety, and he could feel his blood draining away, leaving his hands and feet chilled.

The young boy strained at his memory, trying to recall the face he had last seen—his grandfather’s face, the aged face full of wrinkles and creases that had barely changed since the day he was born. Even though he wanted to recall that face, the image that appeared in his mind’s eye was the form of the youthful magician.

He tried to remember his voice instead. He had heard that voice calling out his name countless times since his infancy, yet the voice that echoed in his mind was a powerful voice filled with the vigour of youth.

...Masahiro, chase after the demon. Go ... you promised, didn’t you?

Because they were the last words he had heard.

Narichika looked at the form of Seimei’s youngest grandchild whose trembling hands clutched desperately at the hem of his robes. He smiled weakly.

Because they were the last form he had seen.

“Grandfather....”

As Masahiro rasped, his throat suddenly gone dry, a warm hand patted his back. Looking up in surprise, he saw Narichika's worried face and Toshitsugu, whose lips had set into narrow line.

“Uh....” Toshitsugu began again uncertainly, his face tense and serious. He seemed to be considering his words very carefully. Finally, he spoke again, each word coming out slowly and cautiously. “I heard from Lord Yoshimasa and Lord Masachika that Lord Seimei is quite healthy, just that he needs bed rest for a while. Perhaps he is just worried that you and Lord Narichika were sent so far away to Izumo. If he sees that you have returned safely....”

“Yes....”

Masahiro clenched his fists and bowed his head.

“Yes ... yes....”

Toshitsugu felt like he had made a grievous error and looked over to Narichika apologetically.

“Then I will take this report to his lordship.”

“And thank you for informing us beforehand. It'll help us mentally prepare. Isn't that right, Masahiro?”

Narichika slapped his brother's back several times before smiling calmly. No matter what happened nor however dire the situation, he would never lose his cool. At least, externally.

Masahiro nodded and bowed his head to Toshitsugu.

Toshitsugu saw Narichika and Masahiro off as they hurried away. His face dulled with a trace of self-loathing.

“I should really have chosen my words more carefully.”

He had spoken because he had thought it was better for them to know beforehand than to go home and be caught unaware. Unfortunately, it seemed to have the opposite effect.

“I still have a lot to learn,” he mumbled weakly before turning to head back towards the Bureau. Lacking the *sight*, he did not see that, the moment he had mentioned Seimei’s illness, the *mononoke* and Kouchin had been even more stunned than Narichika and Masahiro.

They had practically forgotten to breathe as they fought off tremours that threatened to weaken their limbs. They both knew well that humans were delicate creatures, and as a human, their master had already lived too long. Furthermore, he had been exerting himself by casting spells and overreaching the limits of his powers, even though he was smart enough to know full well the consequences of such actions.

Kouchin suppressed her panic. Biting her lips, she followed behind Narichika and Masahiro.

‘Seimei!’

The *mononoke*, on the other hand, had swallowed all the words it wanted to say and followed with an expression even grimmer than Kouchin’s.

The dearly missed Abe manor drew closer with every step. Even though he should be glad, Masahiro’s heart constricted more tightly as the distance slowly shrank. His legs felt as heavy as lead, and it was difficult to breathe, as if a heavy weight lay on his chest.

He wanted to see him, but was also scared to do so.

Masahiro fisted the front of his robes tightly.

He had planned to apologise. The first thing he had planned to do was apologise. He’d be scolded, but in Masahiro’s mind, Seimei was a cunning and strong grandfather who simply couldn’t be considered an old man.

“What should I do?”

...I don’t know how to face grandfather....

Masahiro grimaced and lowered his head. Seeing this, the *mononoke* reassured him firmly, “Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. Seimei won’t die just because of something like this.”

The *mononoke* had declared it confidently, but it remained surrounded by an air of depressed gloom. Kouchin watched them and sighed lightly. Taiin, who had returned first, probably learned of this already. The fact that she hadn't hurried back to them suggested that their master's condition wasn't severe. Still, she realised that this guess was based on her own wishful thinking.

They could see the gate to the Abe manor.

“...”

Masahiro halted, his legs refusing to move as if rooted to the ground.

‘Ah.’

Hearing a faint mumbling, Taiin materialised before Akiko.

“I'm back.”

“Really?”

Taiin was about to turn and respond to the serious question, but the young girl had not bothered to wait for her answer before racing towards the front gate.

“Eh...”

Taiin had been left behind, the hand she had stretched out left grasping empty air. She peeked left and right before slowly backing away.

Akiko ran off without a glance to her surroundings. It was apparent that she had awaited Masahiro's return with great eagerness. Because Taiin had been with Masahiro the whole time, she had asked her a lot of questions about him. Taiin had refused to answer, in part because she wasn't sure how much she should say.

“Both about what happened, and about Masahiro not being able to *see*,” Taiin murmured. She exhaled slowly before something suddenly came to mind.

“Or ... would he come with Masahiro....” Her voice trailed off as she paled.

“Oh no!”

The summon sped off towards the gate, but froze when she saw the predicted situation unfold before her eyes.

People were standing at the gate, eyes wide.

Akiko, who run out to greet Masahiro, was rooted to the ground, staring at the other speechlessly.

The atmosphere was filled with tension.

The one who broke the silence was Masahiro, who had arrived at the manor much more slowly. Both Masahiro and the *mononoke* noticed something strange in the air and looked up. His eyes bulged as he let out a strangled yelp.

“Ahhhh....”

Hearing both their shouts, Narichika stopped eying the statue-like Akiko and turned slowly to Masahiro.

“Masahiro.”

“Y-yes...?” the flustered boy stammered.

Narichika faced his younger brother expressionlessly while pointing to Akiko.

“Who is this?”

Akiko’s shoulders twitched. She was facing a danger so unexpected that her throat had gone dry. Her lips moved as if to form words, but no sound came out.

‘Oh no, I completely forgot.’

Even Kouchin had been so engrossed in her concern about Seimei that this had slipped her mind. Taiin stood behind Akiko, her face in her palm. Her eyes seemed to ask, ‘What now?’

The Abe manor had welcomed Akiko into their household about half a year ago. It was only now that an outsider of the household had found out about her.

“Well, we can leave the details for later,” said Narichika. Gauging from the reactions of Masahiro, the young girl and the various summons, he could vaguely guess what this was about. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced at Masahiro.

“Let’s go see grandfather first. And ... my lady....”

“Y-yes!” Akiko answered with a start.

Narichika beamed at her. “Is my father still at the Bureau?”

“Ah, yes. He’ll be back in the evening....”

“And my mother?”

“She just left for the market earlier. L-lord Seimei is resting in his room.”

“Really. Good,” Narichika muttered in a low voice. He smiled thinly but there was a strange glint in his eye. Noticing this, Masahiro prepared to turn around and flee, but his older brother had anticipated his reaction.

Spinning around quickly to grasp the neck of Masahiro’s robe, he purred, “Ah, Masahiro, where are you going? We rushed all this way because we were worried about grandfather, didn’t we? Let’s go see him ... and have him answer lots and lots and lots of questions.”

“Ah ... uh ... well....”

“Touda, Kouchin. Don’t you dare run away either.”

Narichika would not let the *mononoke* and Kouchin, who were preparing to slip away, get off scot-free either. He scowled until even the *mononoke* reluctantly turned back.

“We’ll leave our things here. Please watch over them,” Narichika said as he tossed down their baggage carelessly and headed inside. He dragged Masahiro along, and the *mononoke* followed them docilely. Kouchin materialised and watched them go, her sigh unusually heavy.

Akiko’s face was pale as she brought up both hands to cover her mouth. Taiin approached her and tried to console her to the best of her ability.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be alright. Narichika is a son of Yoshimasa. He’s also quite sharp. If he understands the situation, rest assured he won’t be going around announcing it to the world.

“But ... but father and Lord Seimei had both ordered me....!”

She had been in such a flurry that she had forgotten that it could have been someone else at the gate. Her father had stressed so vehemently that no one must see her, because this secret was something that had to be hidden for the rest of her life. When the manor had been overflowing with guests over the new year, Akiko had had to leave the Abe estate and retreat temporarily to a different manor.

By profession, the Abe clan often dealt with high-ranking nobles. Even though Fujiwara no Michinaga’s power was currently stable, one should heed the saying, ‘Even a mighty dam can be destroyed by a single ant hole.’ It was imperative that as few people knew about this as possible.

But considering what had happened, it was actually lucky that it had been Narichika.

“Just as Taiin said, Narichika won’t tell anyone about this. But he’ll have to know the truth so he won’t form any undue suspicions.”

“Kouchin.”

Akiko’s face twisted as if she would break into tears. Kouchin ran her hands through the girl’s bangs and smiled. “Don’t worry, Lady Akiko. Narichika is Yoshimasa’s son, and the most devious among them.”

Otherwise, he would not have been able to stay in the palace, the center of politics brimming with such endless contention and rivalry that some called it the devil’s residence, nor work at the Bureau of *Onmyou*, which was unavoidably drawn into the political games.

“But....”

Kouchin crossed her arms uneasily.

“He’s probably mad that no one told him anything.... Well, it couldn’t be helped.”

Masahiro glanced up guiltily at the back of his brother who was marching towards the interior of the manor. He could feel displeasure emanating from that back in waves.

“Narichika.” The *mononoke* tried to explain instead of Masahiro, who was beginning to look extremely antsy. Narichika stopped abruptly, and the *mononoke* swallowed its words in surprise.

“Grandfather, Masahiro and I have returned.”

His words made Masahiro and the *mononoke* realize that they had already reached Seimei’s room. They had been so shaken up that they hadn’t noticed.

“Oh, you’re back? Come in.”

“Please excuse us.”

It seems like Taiin had already reported in. Therefore, the sudden appearance of Narichika and Masahiro did not startle Seimei, who had calmly bid them enter his room.

A rush of wind accompanied the sliding of the door. The sliding doors facing the garden were open and, as the cooling air found a new exit, the wind blew past them. Seimei lay upon a futon spread between a pile of books and his desk. Tenkou was seated beside him. It seemed that the summons took turns sitting by Seimei.

Tenkou furrowed her brow when she saw Masahiro and the *mononoke*, and shielded her presence, her aura fading away. The *mononoke* reacted only with a single swish of its long tail.

Seimei appeared to have only been lying down, not sleeping. He might have been chatting with Tenkou. Seeing the books scattered next to his pillow, he could have been perusing through them idly to ward away boredom.

The old man beckoned to both grandsons and chuckled happily.

“It’s good that you’re both back here safe and sound. Have you already been by the Bureau?”

Narichika lowered himself down next to the futon and replied, “Yes. That’s how we heard from an apprentice that you’ve taken ill and came to visit.”

“You came straight here without going home? That’s unusual for you.”

“I am still one of your adorable grandsons, after all. And if I didn’t hurry over, there’s no telling what sort of tongue-lashing I’d get later,” Narichika riposted placidly.

Seimei let out a boom of laughter. Hearing this, Narichika’s hand rose to his chest in relief. ‘How lucky,’ he thought, ‘His condition really isn’t serious.’ He turned to his younger brother, who had remained still and silent. Masahiro was seated respectfully slightly behind Narichika. His face was lowered, and his hands were squeezing his knees so tightly that his knuckles were white. The *mononoke* next to him was staring at the floor, mouth firmly shut.

Narichika had heard everything from Masahiro when they were at Izumo. He shrugged wearily. Feeling a gaze upon him, he turned back to meet Seimei’s eyes. The old man was smiling wryly.

Ah ... that’s right.

Narichika felt an aching pain and lowered his eyes.

“It seems like you are doing quite well, grandfather. I guess there’s nothing to worry about. I’ll excuse myself for now. I’m drop by again some time with Masachika.”

“Is that so? Sorry for the trouble; I know you’re quite busy.” His grandfather nodded and Narichika shifted to a more respectful position.

“And who is that young lady?” he asked abruptly.

Seimei blinked once and replied, expression unchanged, “Narichika, doesn’t everyone have one, two, three or four secrets that they don’t want anyone else to know?”

“That’s true. But I don’t want to hear that from you, grandfather, with your five, six, seven, eight and more secrets. I’d feel sorry asking the lady herself though. But it suddenly reminds me of what the minor imps have been gossiping about before.”

“If you can’t distinguish between rumour and truth, you still have a ways to go.”

“Hahahah. I guess I set myself up for that,” Narichika laughed before his expression became serious again. “But...it seems like it’s true. They were saying that the concubine ... ah no, now she’s the consort of the Fujiwara clan who has presented herself to the

palace ... she was famous for her powerful *sight* but actually does not have that ability at all.”

Narichika scratched his head and continued, “Some time ago, I had accompanied father to a party at the Tosanjou manor. At that time, I had accidentally run across a young lady who was secretly spying on the party from a balcony.”

The young girl had scurried away the moment she noticed Narichika. She had headed straight for the northwest wing, where Akiko, the eldest daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga, was said to reside. The age was right, so he had understood right away that the young girl was Akiko herself. Narichika had related this to his wife, telling her that he had met the sheltered young lady that very few had ever met. He still remembered this encounter well.

“Even though she was young, her face was quite seemly, I remember. But no ... she’s still no match for my little girl,” Narichika proclaimed with a nod.

Seimei sighed and replied, “It is a *fuji* flower* whose colour has faded slightly. It requires constant and tender care for it to bloom.”

That was good enough. Narichika bowed before slapping his stiffly seated younger brother on the shoulder.

“I’m going home. Rest well, and I’ll see you again soon.”

Masahiro forced himself to nod.

“Should I visit father and mother another day?” an airy mumble floated in from beyond the door. When the door slid closed with a slam, the wind died down into a sudden stillness.

Masahiro still gripped his knees tightly, searching for the right words to say. He had things he needed to say, words he needed to speak to his grandfather, but no matter how hard he thought, he could not find those words. So many feelings and emotions whirled tumultuously about in his mind, refusing to settle down or solidify. He was so scared he could not bear to face his grandfather.

The young boy squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath. At that moment, a warm voice intruded upon his senses.

* Wisteria

“You met your grandmother?”

Masahiro started, his head rising involuntarily.

It was a wrinkly face wreathed with a gentle smile.

The face of his grandfather that he couldn't picture earlier was right before him.

Masahiro tried to hold down the emotions that were swelling within him. He nodded.

“Yes....”

“Is that so.... She's very kind, isn't she?”

“Yes....”

His voice quavered. Unstoppable feelings were gushing forth from his heart, and the corner of his eyes burned. The image before him blurred through unshed tears.

“She told me to come back ... that she would support me....”

The kind lady he had met near the shore had said thus to him, when he had been too weak to move.

...Ah. That's right....

Masahiro recalled now what words he had to say to his grandfather.

“Sorry ... I'm sorry.”

“Hmm?”

“I ... made a very cruel request to you!”

Seimei looked at his youngest grandson, who was forcing out words that appeared to be stuck in his throat.

“Ah ... you are really so reckless, Masahiro.”

“Yes....”

Seimei beckoned for Masahiro to come closer. The boy scrubbed his eyes several times as he shuffled towards his grandfather. A shriveled, bony hand rose up to tap lightly against the boy's cheek.

“You're really so reckless. Now that you realize it, don't do this again.”

Ever since before, Seimei was a person who rarely ever raised his voice to anyone, since there were other people who did that for him. He chose to simply lecture until Masahiro finally accepted it. At the moment, it only just occurred to Masahiro that, while his grandfather may have chewed him out on occasion, he generally admonished him gently like this.

“You're happy to be back, aren't you?”

“Y-yes....” The boy nodded vigorously as large tear drops streamed down his cheeks. Seimei looked at him lovingly.

He was so happy to see this grandchild once more. It was so fortunate for these old ears to directly hear his voice once more.

Seimei's eyes then swept over to the white *mononoke*, which had been standing stiff and unmoving the entire time. Following his grandfather's line of sight, Masahiro sat up suddenly. Scrubbing his reddened eyes again, he said, “I will come and give my report later” and stood up. He bowed his head guiltily and padded out of the room.

“So loud. It's been so quiet and peaceful, and but it's gotten noisy all of a sudden,” Seimei commented with a light voice. The *mononoke* did not respond, its face lowered as it stared motionlessly at the floor.

The old man sighed softly.

“Guren.”

The *mononoke*'s back shook violently, its ears twitching, and a pair of eyes the colour of sunset turned slowly towards Seimei.

Seimei felt that those eyes were just like those of a lost child. He beckoned again, as if to say ‘You're too far away. I can't reach you. Come closer.’

The four white legs moved sluggishly, as if inspecting each and every step. Careful not to disturb Seimei's rest, it stopped near his shoulders and blinked. The pattern on its forehead glowed faintly, marking the absence of the seal.

“His skill really needs a lot of polishing. I had shown him how to cast that seal myself.”

“I have some questions for you.”

“Really? But let me say something first.”

Seimei reached out to stroke the *mononoke*'s white head.

“Welcome back. I was waiting for you, Guren.”

That voice rang out so softly, so gently. Its tone was just as tender as when he was given his name.

Chapter 7

After washing his face and returning to his room, Masahiro found Akiko sitting glumly with her arms wrapped around his luggage, her face lowered tiredly.

“Akiko, what’s the matter?”

The young girl started and raised her head, and look in her eyes wavering as if trying not to burst into tears.

“Ah ... Akiko, what’s the wrong? Why do you look like you’re about to cry?”

Masahiro hurriedly kneeled next to her, his eyes sweeping across the room. Taiin or Kouchin should have been with her, and he would have been able to get some answers from them. They were not, however—he could neither see them nor sense their auras. They might be shielding their presence, but in that case, Masahiro would not be able to see them.

“The person a moment ago was your older brother, wasn’t it?”

“Huh? Oh ... uh ... yes. Narichika is my eldest brother. We’re 14 years apart.”

“What should I do? I was warned not to let anyone know that I’m here!”

Feeling the girl’s distress, Masahiro tried to reassure her.

“That won’t be a problem. My brother doesn’t have a loose tongue, and it seems like he has a general idea about who you are.”

“Isn’t that bad!”

“Not at all. Now that he knows, he’ll make sure word doesn’t get around. Even though he’s pretty angry that no one told him.”

His brother’s back spoke volumes about his emotions. And the moments when he fell silent were most unnerving. Generally, Masahiro found great comfort from that broad, reliable back, but at times like these, he really had no idea what to do.

“Really?”

Masahiro nodded firmly in response to the questioning look.

“Ah ... alright then.”

Akiko heaved a long sigh in relief, and then suddenly look up.

“Masahiro...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Akiko’s eyes shimmered again. This time, Masahiro drew in his legs and sat politely with his back straight, wondering what she wanted to talk about.

The young girl laid a hand on her chest and smiled faintly.

“Welcome home.”

Masahiro was speechless for a moment, before realizing that they had not met ever since separating near the end of the second month. His heart pounded when he remembered their parting. He had thought he would never see her again.

At Izumo, when Masahiro’s heart had ached with such misery that he had felt completely lost and so very alone, Akiko had suddenly appeared in his dreams as if having sensed his pain. The boy had thought that it was only a dream, but it was a dream that helped soothe his heart greatly. Her words had helped him return, even though he should never have returned at all.

So many emotions churned within him now, and he had no words to express them all.

Masahiro held his breath, and finally replied, “... I’m back.”

Akiko nodded. Something glimmered in her eye when she met his glance. An uneasy hand covered her mouth as she said, “I’m sorry. I’m really glad. I saw you in my dreams so I believed that you were alright, but without really seeing you face to face, I really didn’t know if it was true.”

“Huh...?” Masahiro looked confused.

The girl lowered her eyes shyly.

“Lord Seimei taught me a spell that would allow me to meet you in my dreams. You can laugh if you want.”

Masahiro was rendered speechless for a moment.

...I dreamed it too. I'm sorry. At the time, I was too scared to face you fully ... even though I was so glad to see you ... even though I was so happy to feel your warmth ... but I was too stubborn to look straight in your eyes.

Masahiro remained silent. Akiko looked at him curiously.

“Masahiro, is something the matter?”

“No ... uhh ... th-that’s right.” He jerked forward and pulled over his luggage that lay on Akiko’s lap. Rummaging inside, he finally found what he was looking for and his eyes gleamed happily.

“Found it.”

“What is it?”

Akiko leaned over to look as Masahiro pulled out a small drawstring pouch.

“On the way back, I passed by the Tamatsukuri* community and saw this.”

Opening the mouth of the pouch, he tipped it over and a small bead on a leather thong fell onto his waiting palm. He handed it over to Akiko, saying, “A souvenir. I’m sorry it’s nothing special.”

The bead was a small agate stone, polished until smooth, its colour a red so pale it was almost orange. White streaks ran through the stone. As Masahiro said, it was not a high-quality stone.

The small round stone was about 9 millimeters in diameter and shaped into a bead, with a hole drilled in the center. Flanking it were long, thin beads, one on each side. They were strung through a thin leather thong that had been bleached white. The thong was less than 30 centimeters in length, which meant it was probably designed to be a bracelet or anklet.

* Literally, ‘bead maker’. A famous community of stone bead artisans in the Izumo province (currently the Tottori province).

Akiko stared at it for a long moment, before slowly stretching out both hands to accept it. Once the agate bead had been placed in her hands, she bent down to examine it so intently that she forgot even to blink.

She slowly closed her fist around the bead, while a smile bloomed on her face like a budding flower.

“Thank you ... I’m really happy.”

“I’m glad. At first I was so anxious because I had no idea what to buy. I don’t really know what girls like.”

Seeing Masahiro clutching his head in despair, a married man like Narichika had heaved a mocking sigh.

‘Not even knowing what the other person likes? You’ve still got a ways to go. But that’s right, you’re fourteen now. I suppose it wouldn’t be strange for there to be a lady or two that you want to find souvenirs for. Wow, you’ve really grow up.’

At the time, the *mononoke* had interjected, ‘There would be a real problem if he had up to two ladies at this early age,’ but had been soundly ignored by Narichika.

Narichika had acted weepily sentimental as he fondly ruffled the hair of his distraught younger brother. Then, he had proceeded to purchase a souvenir for his wife as well, but Masahiro had no idea what it was.

“Agates have the power to repel demons, so I thought it would be good for you. It’s also quite beautiful, although the colour is a bit faint. Still, your complexion is pale, so it should suit you well.”

“Yes, I’ll take good care of it.”

Akiko beamed with heartfelt delight. Masahiro looked at her, feeling a light tickle under his eyelids as if tears were about to fall. He could still remember the warmth of her hug when he thought that it would be their final parting. But to have her smiling joyfully next to him like this warmed his heart even more profoundly.

“Oh, that’s right. Masahiro, bend down your head a bit.”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

Upon bending down his head, he felt something being looped around his neck. The beautiful fragrance that wafted by and tickled his nostrils was enough to tell Masahiro what it was. He examined the sachet lying against his chest with a slightly perplexed expression. Akiko, meanwhile, slipped the agate bead bracelet onto her wrist and tilted her head thoughtfully.

“The string snapped while you were in Izumo, so I changed it to a sturdier one. Is the length alright?”

Masahiro fingered the sachet gingerly. Akiko’s warmth still lingered in it; perhaps she had worn it around her neck the entire time, like he usually did.

“Mmm...”

He grasped the sachet in his fist and lowered his face, overwhelmed by emotion.

...Ah ... how could I have been so stupid? How could I have thought I could leave this warmth behind, even for a moment?

“Yeah ... it’s just right....”

He had been so selfish, reckless and ignorant. Even so, there was no way he could abandon the person who had been waiting for him, of all people, no matter what he needed to sacrifice in return.

The sun had set.

“I’m closing it.”

“Ah, thanks,” said Seimei, flicking his hand to Kouchin to give her permission to close the sliding door. He then propped himself up.

“Hey. You still need to rest,” exclaimed the *mononoke* heatedly.

Seimei brushed it off with a flippant reply. “Hardly. I’m only tucked into my futon because, if I don’t rest, Seiryuu will glare at me, Tenkou will stare at me silently with her scolding eyes, Tenitsu will fix her accusing eyes on me, Suzaku will look at me coldly and Byakko will scowl at me.”

...Doesn't that mean everyone has been telling you rest...?

The *mononoke* squinted up at his aged master. Even though he disliked Seiryuu and didn't get along with Tenkou, he knew well that they were sincerely worried about him. They were always by his side, and should know his condition best.

"Then that means you need to rest. Hey, Kou, you also should say something."

"If saying something meant that he'd listen and obey, we wouldn't feel this troubled," Kouchin shot back and knelt down next to the *mononoke*.

"You and your blustering," the *mononoke* complained at Seimei. "I'm warning you, you're lucky you just have to bear with Seiryuu's glares. Don't force Tenkuu to come out of the spirit realm."

Tenkuu was the commander of the twelve spirit summons, but he very rarely left the spirit realm to visit the human world. Even Seimei had met him less than five times.

"Ahh, Tenkuu. I guess that's the one person I can't win against," Seimei muttered ruefully as he scratched his brow. The *mononoke* and Kouchin looked at him and couldn't help but agree.

"I can't win against Tenkuu either."

"He's hard to stand up to."

Seimei resolved to make sure Tenkuu didn't get involved.

He stretched out a hand towards the arm rest, but Kouchin noticed and moved it over for him. Once Seimei had leaned against the arm rest, the *mononoke* draped his kimono over his shoulders. Their master's gaze flicked between the two of them and grinned jovially.

"It's so nice having the two most powerful spirit summons waiting on me like this."

"Is this really the time to be thinking of things like this?"

"Are you a bit too cavalier about all this? At least think of how we feel."

Kouchin crossed her arms, her face becoming severe. “I’m sure you can imagine how shocked we all were when we heard that you had fallen ill. Remember that, even if you are on death’s door, if you don’t have our permission, you’re not allowed to enter.”

“Please don’t do that,” Seimei replied seriously. “The keeper of the underworld will be terribly put-out.”

His expression turned grave, and the *mononoke*’s and Kouchin’s backs automatically straightened in response.

“Guren, I just told you everything I know. As for the rest, probably only the god Takaogami of Kifune can give us the answers.”

The *mononoke* grit its teeth.

Seimei was referring to Masahiro’s lost *sight*.

The *mononoke* had only just had the opportunity to question Seimei, and had learned about all the events that happened after falling to the enemy’s spell. It couldn’t ask Masahiro about it, Narichika wasn’t there, and Kouchin did not know all the details.

There were matters that it simply had to know.

“...”

A sharp gleam flickered in those eyes the colour of the setting sun.

Kouchin glanced at it from the corner of her eyes and then changed the topic.

“Anyway, Seimei ... I heard something strange from Tenkou,” she began as Seimei tugged the slipping kimono back onto his shoulders.

“About what?”

“That before you collapsed, there was something there.”

Crimson eyes flew around towards her. Seimei blinked once and raised a hand to his chin.

“Kou, what do you mean?” the *mononoke* growled, feeling like it had been left in the dark. A pair of cool black eyes turned to it.

“Seimei had probably overexerted himself and fainted, but I heard that he had sensed someone’s eyes on him at the Tsuchimikado manor. That stare had been full of malicious intent,” she clarified, looking over to Seimei for confirmation.

The man nodded thoughtfully. “Seiryuu also felt something. If I remember correctly, he called it a black shadow.”

“A black shadow...” the *mononoke* repeated. Seimei placed a hand on its head and stroked it gently.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the *mononoke* squawked, but Seimei ignored its protests and continued for a while before giving its head a light, final slap as if marking the completion of a ritual. He exhaled softly.

A tinkle like the sound of cat’s eye crystals striking each other reverberated in the air and faded.

The *mononoke* craned its head to examine its master confusedly. The colour of the pattern on its forehead had faded somewhat. “It didn’t have to be done now....” it muttered under its breath while looking over at Seimei with eyes brimming with emotion.

Seimei nodded, saying “Maybe so” but then narrowed his eyes. “You are a gentle person, and that gentleness drives you to give so much that it comes back to hurt you in the end. I think it’s time you eased back a bit.”

Seimei smiled, the glow in his eyes unchanging from half a century ago. However, his eyes were surrounded by deep creases, reminding them of the flow of time.

“Even though we don’t know who was staring at me, but it is quite worrisome. We’ll need to keep a close eye on the Tsuchimikado manor.”

Seimei exhaled slowly. Seeing this, Kouchin removed the kimono from his shoulder.

“Sleep now. Even though we’re not Tenkou and the others, we still won’t allow you to push yourself.”

“Indeed. And I *am* feeling a bit tired.”

This time, he obediently lay himself down and closed his eyes. Soon after, they heard his breath evening out.

The *mononoke* twitched its tail. “Oh no. We sat around talking without lighting the lamps.”

Kouchin herself only just realised this as well, and her eyes widened. The twelve spirit summons did not need light, even in the middle of the night, because their eyes could see in darkness and detect the various monsters lurking there.

The *mononoke* lowered its voice so as not to awaken Seimei. “A black shadow staring at Seimei... Kou, what do you think?”

In the completely dark room, Kouchin blinked thoughtfully and raised a pale, white finger to the corner of her lips.

“A new enemy? To come to think of it, I completely forgot to tell Seimei....”

“About what?”

Kouchin’s eyes trailed over to the direction of Masahiro’s room and frowned slightly.

“Something unusual happened with Masahiro at Izumo.”

At that time, she had seen very clearly a white flame flickering briefly in the boy’s eyes. She had heard that he had borrowed the deity-slaying power from the god of Kifune to deal with Touda. He had imbued Suzaku’s flame blade with its power before killing Touda.

The power of a god was too massive to contain in a human body. Masahiro himself was just a half-grown boy, even if he was perhaps closer to the realm of the divine than most adults.

Onmyouji have the power to control magic at will. One could say that they had a unique status: not quite human, spirit, nor divine.

Not a human being. Not a spirit. And not a god.

The *mononoke* stare at Seimei’s profile.

It had been said that Seimei was the child of a human and a spirit. If that were true, what type of existence was he?

Past midnight, after the *mononoke* was certain that Masahiro was deep asleep, it shielded its aura and slipped out of the Abe manor. Its white form shot through the darkness like a streak of ink, heading towards the north of the capital.

Tiny imps saw that form from the nooks and crannies of a building and turned to look at each other.

“Hey, that’s one of the spirit summons.”

“Does that mean Masahiro is back?”

“To think of it, one of the guys from earlier thought he saw him last night.”

“Then it must be true. We have to tell everyone!”

The imps nodded in agreement and dispersed in various directions.

Meanwhile, the *mononoke* left the boundaries of the capital and sped through the newly sprouted grass. It had run this way before with Masahiro; at that time, they were both agitated, their hearts frantic, scrambling and fumbling as if their lives depended on it.

The *mononoke* bit its lips harshly.

They had passed this way in winter, with fresh, soft snow piling deep on the ground and hindering their progress. Despite sinking and getting stuck in the snow several times, the young boy had stubbornly persisted in moving forward even as sweat drenched his body.

And once upon a time, there was a young child, wailing out in fear of the dark. He had been crying tremulously, thinking he had been abandoned.

So many memories were lurking here at Kifune, both nostalgic ones and agonizing ones that tore at its heart.

The image of the boy swaying after being stabbed in the chest had been seared into its’ mind’s eye and would never fade away.

The *mononoke* grimaced. It bore no resentment against anyone. Everything had started over 50 years ago—the one that had triggered the chain of events with none other than itself.

...You were the killer...!

Even though that woman's accusing scream arose from being deceived, it had no right to blame her.

Even so, its heart ached.

Kasane had paid for her deeds with her death.

If so, what about itself? This life that should have been snuffed out of existence still remained here, unchanged.

After an indeterminate amount of time, the white form reached the ruins of the main temple in the deepest part of Kifune. Calming its panting breath and its mouth grimly set, the *mononoke* prepared to step towards a boat-shaped boulder. Suddenly, it stopped and turned around with a tense expression.

“...”

After a moment's silence, a shadow shimmered in the empty air.

The spirit summon Kouchin shrugged and smiled wryly. The *mononoke*'s face twisted as if wanting to express its displeasure.

“What are you doing here?”

“That's what I should be saying, Touda. Why did you leave Masahiro's side and come here?”

“That has nothing to do with you,” the *mononoke* declared unfeelingly and stepped towards the grounds of the main temple. Kouchin followed, unperturbed.

“Kou.”

The woman tilted her head as gleaming crimson eyes glared at her.

“Suzaku and Tenitsu are at the manor. A quick call would summon Byakko and Taiin immediately. There’s nothing to worry about even if I’m not there.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

As its voice turned harsh, an overpowering divine aura floated down upon the boat-shaped boulder.

Turn around in surprise, it saw the human form of the god of Kifune hovering above the stone, eyes cold as a sheet of ice staring intently at the *mononoke* and Kouchin.

“The god Takaogami!” the *mononoke* called out. The expression on the god’s face became fiercer, but it paid no heed.

Stepping forward, it opened its mouth to speak, but was stopped by Takaogami’s raised hand. Just that simple motion was enough to cause the *mononoke*’s throat to constrict. Its real form might have been that of Touda, one of the twelve spirit summons that were considered deities, but they were considered to be the lowest tier of gods. Had Takaogami wished it, it would not be able to utter a single sound.

Takaogami’s frigid aura radiated over the entire sacred mountain. The *mononoke* and Kouchin held their breaths as the incomparably massive divine power washed over them.

Finally, the god lowered herself down onto the boulder and sat down without ceremony. Propping up one leg with a bent knee and resting her chin on her palm, a trace of emotion appeared on the expressionless face. Takaogami leaned down to peer at the two for a moment before the corner of her mouth quirked up.

“Touda, of the twelve spirit summons.”

The *mononoke* narrowed its eyes and tensed. Behind, Kouchin’s breath hitched.

“God Takaogami, I...”

“Touda,” the god interjected and jutted out her chin haughtily. “Do you think it is appropriate to remain in that disguised form in front of me?”

The *mononoke* stilled. An aggressive red aura enveloped its white body like flames, and Guren appeared. He glared at the god Takao challengingly.

“I have something I’d like to ask you,” he declared.

“Is that so? If it interests me, I might answer you. Let’s hear it,” Takaogami replied with a cold smile.

Guren steadied his breathing and continued, “Is there ... is there a way to restore Masahiro’s power?”

The eyes of both Takaogami and Kouchin snapped wide at the same time. This was an unexpected question.

Guren was serious. Masahiro had died to save him—he had practically reached the underworld, but had returned only with the sacrifice of something else. Something absolutely vital to Masahiro’s life. It was second only to his life itself and irreplaceable.

“Masahiro traded his life to save my soul from the poisonous aura,” Touda pleaded desperately. “I will do anything to repay him.”

Hearing these words, Kouchin closed her eyes.

Masahiro had desired only one thing, as he hugged that unmoving white form tightly.

...Please come back....

And now Touda wanted to restore what had been torn away from Masahiro, like fragments lost in an endless maze and struggling to find an exit.

“If there is anything I can do, I will do it. That is why I returned.”

A pair of golden eyes glowed. A golden hoop lay upon his brow, symbolizing a new seal. A breeze ruffled through the thin cloth wrapped around Touda’s arm, and Kouchin’s straight hair fluttered. The keen gaze of the god who stood above all things carried an edge as sharp as a blade and a stillness like the surface of calm waters. It was impossible to divine her thoughts.

Guren could not endure the silence. “God Takaogami, your answer!” he cried.

Takaogami finally spoke, her voice regal and awe-inspiring. “Touda, of the twelve spirit summons.”

Guren's eyes snapped wide. The eyes of the dragon god of Kifune swept over him once and then declared in a patient tone, "You said you would do anything. In that case, it means that you are willing to sacrifice everything."

"Yes," Guren replied without hesitation.

A cruel gleam flashed like lightning in the god Takao's eyes. "Then I request the life of one human being in return."

"...!"

Guren was stunned speechless.

Seeing this, Takaogami continued, calmly but mercilessly, "To save you, that powerless child announced without hesitation that he would give his own life in return. Because he had come with such sheer, unwavering determination, I told him how to save you from the poisonous aura."

The young child had come here alone, and had chosen a path of such torment it was like his body was being torn apart. Compared to gods and the various spirits, humans were weak, fragile and violent, but their existences so sorrowful and fleeting.

"That was a decision filled with the reckless passion of a human child, so what can a spirit summon like you do about it? Such arrogance—you should know your place."

Guren's heart spasmed torturously like it was struck by lightning. Those words hammered home again his own mistakes. Kouchin could see liquid dripping from his tightly clenched fists, sharp nails digging deep into his trembling hands.

"The child's power will never return. That was the path he wished for, and the endpoint he chose for himself. To restore this will require something in exchange."

Takaogami sighed faintly.

"Or would you throw away your life to restore the child's power, Touda?"

Guren stiffened. Seeing this, the god's mouth twisted into a smile. "You cannot do that, because that would be directly denying the boy's wish."

Takaogami stood up unceremoniously and leaned down to peer at Guren and Kouchin. “Human thoughts are often prideful and selfish—that is what makes them pure. They can create miracles that even gods cannot dispense. The more I watch them, the more amusing they become.”

Even though humans could not do everything, sometimes it was the human heart that drew closest to the power of creation.

Guren stood motionless, dumbfounded. Takaogami glanced at him once before narrowing her eyes. “What you need to do now is not to find the way to restore the boy’s power, but prevent tragedies from happening in the future and protect him. Is that not so, spirit summon and servant to humans?”

Realization shot through Guren at these words.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. The time of reckoning is drawing near. Without your knowing, the wheel of fate has begun to turn.”

“God Takao!”

“Touda, I do not permit you to use this name. Correct your words.”

“!”

Guren bit his lips tightly. Killing intent suffused his glare. Seeing this, Kouchin stepped up and stood before him.

“God Takaogami, I have something I’d like to ask you about.”

The god merely blinked.

Unlike Guren, Kouchin always treated others in a composed manner. She had shown no sign of anxiety throughout the dialogue between the other two. Her eyes, the colour of jasper, were as implacable as the darkness of twilight.

Takaogami slumped back onto the boulder, as if to listen.

Keeping a careful eye on Guren, who seemed ready to explode, she continued, “At Izumo, I saw a flash of flame in Masahiro’s eyes.”

“Is that so?”

A pair of blue eyes glowed keenly.

“I heard that Masahiro had borrowed the Kagutsuchi flame from you. After his task was complete, where did that flame go?”

Guren’s breath hitch as he fixed his eyes in a fierce glare somewhere around Kouchin’s ear. Because Kouchin was about one head shorter than Guren, he had to lower his eyes to do so.

“...Flame...” Takaogami repeated and fell silent. Her eyes narrowed pensively, one finger tapping her lip.

“The divine power of Kagutsuchi is too vast to be stored in a human body. Seimei was also concerned about that. Or perhaps...”

The divine flame still burned, helping supplement the lost power of *sight*.

Divine power will corrode the human body. A vast power such as that cannot manifest without a vessel. And if it does not manifest when contained in such a fragile vessel, it may burn the human body from within.

Kouchin waited for the god’s response patiently, knowing that angering the god would mean that any forthcoming answer would be lost.

At long last, the god Takao opened her eyes and looked straight at Kouchin.

“The Kagutsuchi flame has returned to my hands a long time ago,” she replied under no uncertain terms. “Yes ... by human time-keeping, it would have been around the end of the second month.”

Her eyes turned to pierce Guren.

“After the boy had killed Touda.”

Masahiro felt cold all over, and woke up with a start.

“... A dream...?”

He had been curled up alone in a place that was pitch dark and freezing cold. He knew that place. In what seemed like the distant past, he had searched for endlessly for the *mononoke*, and had ended up in that place. It was a place of cold solitude, so he had taken Guren ... taken the *mononoke* that had been lingering there alone, and had brought it back.

“Eh? Where’s Mokkaun?”

Masahiro had not cast a spell so he could not see in the complete darkness of his room. He waited impatiently as his eyes adjusted to the dark before sweeping over the entire room. Even so, he found no sign of the *mononoke*.

The boy crawled out of his futon and drew a kimono over his shoulders before slowly sliding open his door and calling out softly, “Mokkaun? Hey ... Mokkaun.”

The darkness still lay deep upon the world, with no sign yet of dawn. It was now early summer, and it should have gotten light fairly early. This meant that it was still the hour of the rat* or early into the hour of the tiger at most. He had turned in at the hour of the pig, so it wasn’t like he was short on sleep. However, he had been walking the whole time and should be exhausted, and yet somehow had woken up.

Masahiro scratched his head, his hair falling unkempt around his face. Brushing it aside in annoyance, he grimaced. “Hmm ... Mokkaun doesn’t seem to be around. Where did it go, that *mononoke*?”

* The Thai translation explained the hour division as:

- Hour of the pig: 9 pm–11 pm
- Hour of the rat: 1 am–3 am
- Hour of the tiger: 3 am–5 am

Wikipedia divides the time into flexible, roughly-two-hour intervals where the hours between sunset and sunrise are divided into 6 intervals. At equinox (where there would be a total of 12 hours in this time frame):

- Hour of the pig: 10 pm–midnight
- Hour of the rat: Midnight–2 am
- Hour of the ox: 2 am–4 am
- Hour of the tiger: 4 am–6 am

For more information, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_clock

On the surface, those words appeared normal, but a trace of disquiet lurked in Masahiro's eyes.

“Where did it go? It'll probably....” He slid down to the veranda floor and hugged his knees miserably. “... come back, right?”

The spirit summon Guren stood stock still, his shoulders drooping sadly.

“Abe no Seimei is growing old. Watch out for him”

The god of Kifune bade thusly before transforming into her original form and shooting into the heavens. If one were to call for the god Takaogami, she would often appear and float down upon the boat-shaped boulder before them. Nevertheless, she did not reside here. The entire sacred mountain of Kifune was her home, and her dragon form was too vast to remain in a place like this.

Kouchin stared pensively at the empty boulder and muttered in a low voice, “Tragedy.... What on earth is going to happen to Masahiro?”

If one were to believe the god Takao's words, it would mean that something had already begun to move. Seimei's condition could be one of those things.

A flame had flared in Masahiro's eyes at Izumo, and the boy had also uttered things of which he should not know.

Kagutsuchi was a god that resided in heaven, and obviously should know of things that Masahiro did not. Kouchin surmised that some memory might have lingered, along with the deity-slaying power. However, Takaogami had completely shot down that theory. Then whose memory was it? What was that flame? There were too many unknowns. They had very little information, yet events had been set apace and were moving ahead swiftly regardless. At this rate, their enemy would be constantly several steps ahead of them.

Kouchin signed and turned back to Guren.

His tall, bulkier back seemed strangely fragile, as if it were the back of a young child. A faint scar remained below his left shoulder—it was the mark of Suzaku's ‘sword of flame’. While the bodies of deities did not usually scar, this was a special case. It was possible that, even if the scar kept fading, it would never completely disappear.

Did Touda still remember the agony being seared by the god-slaying flame? If he did, surely the pressure and pain constricting his heart should have waned somewhat. After all, not remembering would have hurt him even more.

“Kou.” At that moment, Guren mumbled so faintly the words seemed to disperse with the breeze.

“Hmm?”

Guren raised a hand to touch his brow without turning to look at her.

“What ... what can I do for him?”

Masahiro wanted to become a top-class *onmyouji*. He would struggle to do so, because he had made such a promise with Guren.

In that case, what could he do for Masahiro? He swore that, should Masahiro ask it of him, he would lend him his power and devote everything to help him. He would protect Masahiro even if it cost him his life.

Even now, his vow remained buried deep in his heart. It was something irreplaceable, like the name ‘Guren’ that Seimei had granted him.

“...”

Kouchin withdrew the hand that had stretched out towards to him and lowered her eyes. She had not helped Masahiro in order to see this anguished form.

“Do whatever you want.”

Her soft response somehow reverberated bleakly in the silence. Guren glanced over his shoulder to look at her, his golden eyes staring at her questioningly.

She uttered the next sentences slowly, as if to emphasize each word. “Masahiro did what he wanted. You too should follow your heart. However, if you’re at the end of your tether....” She raised a hand to tap her chest and announced, “You can just say, ‘Help me’.”

“And if I said that?”

“I would help you ... any way I can.”

“I see....”

Guren craned up to look at the sky. Finally, it occurred to him. He had come into existence so very long ago but, thinking back, he had never directly asked anything of his comrades among the twelve spirit summons.

Touda had been alone from the very beginning, so he had never thought twice about this. Being all alone was something normal for him. The one who had reached out his hand to the lonesome Touda was a powerless youth; the one who had changed him was an innocent child. No matter what happened up ahead, that child would still reach his hand out towards him without hesitation, pulling him again and again out of that maze that spanned infinity, and leading him to his proper path so easily like a guiding beacon, constant and eternal.

Guren closed his eyes, even as he remained facing the twilight sky.

...*What can I do?*

Even though he had recovered his memories, he still felt the distance between them. Even though he had been determined to stay by Masahiro's side, something deep in his heart made him hesitate.

Was it the missing time, or the profound guilt that refused to allow forgiveness?

Guren knew that Masahiro sometimes looked at him with a gaze that held back words unspoken.

In the past, how did the *mononoke* speak to Masahiro? How did it act? How did it react?

Everything seemed so distant and hazy.

He was terrified.

Was his soul that precious, that that boy would be willing to trade his very life for it? Had he lived his life well enough he could stand without shame before that dazzlingly radiant spirit?

“You’re going to stress yourself out by thinking too much,” came a light whisper. Looking down, he met Kouchin’s eyes as she peered up at him serenely. Her straight onyx hair fluttered in the wind, revealing briefly the scar on her face.

“Will it heal?”

“Hmm?”

Guren reached out to brush away her hair. Realising what Guren was referring to, she tilted her head and replied, “Ah ... if it doesn’t heal, prepare yourself.”

“... I know.” The response was mixed with a sigh. The woman smiled faintly.

Chapter 8

The holy grounds had been severed from the outside world. Inside, time flowed much more slowly.

...Maybe because the sunlight shining here is different from that in the human world...?

Genbu craned his head to look up at the sky that spread out endlessly above him and made a strained face.

“The Jibiki seal certainly marks the boundary between dimensions. In that case, does this mean that this place is connected to the Plain of High Heaven*?”

...But no ... that would mean that the Plain of High Heaven would be connected directly to the underworld. Yet legends say that the underworld lies behind the earth. Isn't that contradictory...?

“Hmm ... that's a tough question.”

“... What are you mumbling about?” The usually taciturn Rikugou looked down at Genbu with a long-suffering expression.

By human time-keeping, they had been called to the Chigaeshi holy grounds about one month ago. However, it felt like not even ten days had passed. This difference in time flow was probably because this place lay at the doorstep of the great god. A regular human staying here for a long time would definitely encounter severe problems. To come to think of it, this was probably why, over fifty years ago, Seimei had tried not to stay here too long, preferring to wait on the other side of the Jibiki seal.

A loud rasping sound like bamboo scraping against each other resounded in the silence. Turning around, they saw the giant centipede, one of the guardian spirits of Chigaeshi, scuttling over to them, its hundreds of legs moving in waves.

‘Are you done here?’

* Takama-ga-hara, the dwelling of the gods in Shinto mythology. Governed by the sun goddess Amaterasu.

Genbu nodded firmly. “Yes, this should be enough to deal with the remaining poisonous aura. Still...” His eyes swept across the holy grounds as he furrowed his brows. “I think the number of guardian spirits is still too low. Won’t this be difficult?”

The guardian spirits were helping cleanse the poisonous aura that sullied the Chigaeshi holy grounds. However, these grounds were truly expansive, and their numbers were far from enough. The chameleon and centipede had not really requested it of them per se—they had merely looked at their two guests with a mildly intimidating glare. As a result, Rikugou and Genbu had been compelled to offer their assistance.

There had been other guardian spirits as well—a giant spider, which had lost its life in the earlier battle, and a small crow, which was similarly deceased. Now, the centipede and chameleon were the only guardian spirits left to protect the Chigaeshi priestess.

The centipede lowered its head to meet Genbu’s eye. ‘Don’t worry. The priestess said she has requested new guardian spirits from the great god, as there are not enough of us. New comrades will be born soon.’

“That is good. I will tell that to Seimei as well, since he has been concerned.”

‘Is that so?’ The centipede nodded once and beckoned to Genbu and Rikugou. ‘The priestess is calling for you. Please head over to the main sanctum.’

Genbu nodded in response. Something suddenly occurred to him, however, and he said, “That’s right, centipede.”

‘Hmm?’

“What building is that? It seems empty, but is cloaked by a luminous aura.”

Rikugou’s gaze followed Genbu’s pointing finger, his golden yellow eyes blinking but not remaining expressionless.

Upon being asked, the centipede flashed Rikugou a quick glance.

‘...’

Genbu’s breath hitched, his body tensing rigidly upon noticing the red gleaming eyes turned upon his comrade.

... *Was that killing intent?*

A chill ran up Genbu's spine. Deciding that he was just imagining things, however, he turned his attention back to the blue-tiled roofs of the building.

The centipede shook its head slowly, its tentacles waving to and fro as it looked at the building. 'That is the building where our young mistress grew up in ... and now she slumbers there in peace.'

Genbu's eyes widened as he grasped the hidden meaning of that sentence.

"That's the sanctum for the dead!" he exclaimed. No wonder the guardian spirits had not allowed them to approach the building.

The sanctum for the dead was a place where the bodies of the highly-esteemed lay in state for worship before undergoing their final funerary rites. It was also known as the Agari sanctum.

The 'young mistress' the guardians referred to was Kasane, who had passed away. Genbu glanced at Rikugou from the corner of his eye; the red *magatama* bead that lay upon his chest once belonged to Kasane. Her mother, the priestess of Chigaeshi, had entrusted it to Rikugou as a memento.

"I..." Genbu sensed that the atmosphere had turned cold and felt inexplicably uneasy. His eyes flicked left and right, unwilling to meet the centipede directly. "I'm sorry for my rudeness. Please excuse me."

'The priestess is waiting. Please come this way.'

The sound of hundreds of feet scuttling away could be heard. Genbu's gaze slid away from the centipede's back and over to Rikugou in time to notice him eying the blue-roofed building briefly.

Rikugou had his back to him, so he had no idea what sort of expression he might have had on his face. However, the air around him made him feel unapproachable.

Genbu turned away wordlessly. Intuitively, it occurred to the small summon that he should leave Rikugou here on his own for a while. The other summon had a firm, resolute spirit. He would likely not mind being left behind here.

Afterwards, both Genbu and Rikugou conversed with the priestess and departed from the Chigaeshi holy grounds. They had conveyed Seimei's words to the priestess and had received an item to bear back to the capital to their waiting master.

Near dawn, Masahiro raised his lowered head upon hearing the barely audible patter of footsteps. At the far edge of his sight, he spied the *mononoke*, which had frozen in its tracks.

“Mokkun, you're back?”

The *mononoke* raced over to the relieved-looking boy and glowered at him. “What are you doing, sitting here!”

“I woke up and didn't see you, so I wondered where you went off to. I couldn't go back to sleep, so I decided to sit up and wait.”

The *mononoke* saw the young boy's smile and lowered its head. Seeing this, Masahiro reached out to pick up the white form. “Ahh ... so warm. Even though it's the middle of the fifth month, the nights are still quite cold, aren't they?”

Masahiro rubbed the *mononoke*'s head vigorously before resting his chin down.

“Mokkun is so warm. You're a perfect scarf for the winter. When it's just a touch chilly, you'd serve as a good warming stone. Well, it would be a bit stuffy in the summer, but you're so useful in spring, autumn and winter. What a perfect *mononoke*!”

“...”

There was no reply.

Masahiro blinked furiously, waiting for the burning in his eyes to die down to a light prickle.

Perhaps the *mononoke* itself did not realize this. However, before, at times like this, it would predictably retort with ‘Don't call me a *mononoke*, grandson of Seimei!’

He felt the distance between them. Even though it was right next to him, it felt so far away. Cold eyes once pained his heart, cold tones piercing his chest, but now its refusal

to say anything to him incited its own pervasive misery. He didn't want it to feel guilty, but in the end, nothing he could do or say would change that.

Chin still resting on the *mononoke*'s head, Masahiro turned to face the dawning sky, its colours slowly changing.

“It's almost light.”

“Hmm.”

Will this grief fade away one day, like the dawn which approaches unfailingly each day?

“Masahiro, you can wait until tomorrow to go to work,” Yoshimasa stated over breakfast. “The master said it himself. Ah, Narichika tried to take leave, but the staff protested vehemently so he had to go in. Which isn't surprising, since he's a master of the calendar sciences.”

Yoshimasa didn't make an exception for him, but he actually had his own reason. Narichika had returned to the capital and even stopped by to visit the Abe manor but left before he returned. The father felt that he should have at least waited to exchange a few words since he had finally reached home safely.

Even knowing that it couldn't have been helped because Narichika's own family was waiting for his return, Yoshimasa was still a bit upset—Narichika had already come by the manor, after all. In addition, Narichika had to work overtime the previous day. He had not been able to step foot outside the Bureau because so much work had piled up during his absence. Ultimately, Yoshimasa had not been able to meet his eldest son.

As a father, he was understandably concerned about his eldest son's safety. Masahiro, on the other hand, lived under the same roof, so he had been greeted with his youngest son's beaming face when he returned home from work.

“Ahh ... he has it really rough....”

Masahiro was truly concerned about Narichika, because he had a suspicion that, if Narichika's workload exceeded the limits of his patience, he might simply go off on a rampage.

In any case, Masahiro had been given leave until today. He had things to do. Upon finishing breakfast, he therefore headed over to Seimei's room.

It seemed like Seimei was feeling quite energized this morning. He had risen from his futon and changed into a *kariginu*. It seemed to Masahiro that it had been a long time since he saw his grandfather seated at his desk reading a scroll, and so felt inexplicably delighted at the sight.

“Grandfather, good morning.”

Seimei hummed in response. “I heard that you're free today?” he asked.

“Yes sir. I thought I would try heading over to the Tsuchimikado manor for a bit.”

“Hmm?” Seimei's eye slid away from the scroll over to Masahiro, who was seated slightly behind him. The boy was dressed in a *kariginu* and *eboshi* hat, looking ready to head out of the manor.

“I'm curious about the gaze you felt. I can't *see*, so I probably can't do much, but I can still sense things, so I thought I might go investigate a bit. You haven't been back there ever since you fell ill, have you?”

Seimei crossed his arms and looked contemplative.

This morning, Genbu had sent a wave of power to Seimei, notifying him that they would be back soon. The old man was considering whether to have Masahiro wait or not; if the priestess of Chigaeshi had heard his words and deigned to respond, it would be better to wait.

“Also...” Masahiro scratched nervously at the back of his neck as he continued before Seimei could speak. “Akiko requested it.”

“Hmm? What did she say?” The old man's narrowed eyes and tone of voice suggested great interest.

Masahiro hesitated, then answered honestly. “She's worried about the consort residing in the Tsuchimikado manor and asked me to protect her from danger.”

Aside from that, she had also requested something that could never happen.

...*If you meet her, please be kind to her....*

This was a heartfelt plea from Akiko, who felt restless because she herself was unable to do anything. Her feelings were so intense that Masahiro himself could almost feel her distress. Therefore, Masahiro could only nod firmly to her in response.

“The prayer ceremony for the consort’s health has already been performed. Frankly, there isn’t anything I can actually do, and if any wayward spirits targeted her, it would really be a problem. But if something like that actually happens....” He turned to look at the *mononoke* seated next to him, and continued, “I’ll ask Mokkaun to teach them a lesson.”

“You’re going to just use me?” The *mononoke* narrowed its eyes grumpily, but Masahiro ignored it and turned to Seimei.

“In short, I’m heading out.”

“That’s fine, but it’s better to wait until after dusk.”

Masahiro blinked in confusion at the sudden input.

“Why’s that?”

Seimei reached for the pinewood fan on his desk and pointed the tip towards his grandson, his eyes hooded.

“Is it obvious, you idiot! One look is enough to tell me that you hardly slept last night!”

Seimei’s eyes were truly all-seeing. Masahiro and the *mononoke* both fell speechless, and the boy, being unable to argue back, acceded to his grandfather’s wishes as always.

Daytime during the fifth month was exceedingly long. It was nearing the summer solstice, and daytime during this season would be the lengthiest in the whole year.

At dusk, Masahiro was caught by Tsuyuki as he tried to leave the manor and was forced to sit down for dinner. He promptly cleared his plate, since he didn’t want to be struck down by hunger pangs along the way.

“I’m off then. I might get back late, so go to sleep and don’t wait up for me.”

“Yes, don’t worry about it. Go on, and be careful,” Akiko replied as she stood on the balcony to see Masahiro off. The boy nodded once and climbed over the roofed wall.

“We haven’t done this for a while, haven’t we?”

“Yeah,” the *mononoke* agreed as it leapt nimbly down to the ground. Near them stood Kouchin, whose presence remained shielded, so no matter what happened, things would probably turn out alright.

To come to think of it, this was the first time that Kouchin had joined them on one of their nightly excursions. Realising this, Masahiro’s eyes darted sideways nervously.

“What’s the matter?”

The boy craned his head to look over at Kouchin, who had materialised. “Nothing, but I feel guilty for dragging you into this. Mekkun always comes with me, and Rikugou’s presence is practically a given by now, but ... maybe I should let grandfather know first?”

“That would not be necessary. I’ve already told Seimei,” Kouchin responded easily and smiled.

“Actually, Touda alone would be fine, but I’m interested in your excursions.”

“Oh, is that it?”

When Masahiro nodded in understanding, Kouchin shielded her presence and disappeared.

Heading east along the Tsuchimikado avenue led to the Tsuchimikado manor. It was now nearly past the hour of the dog* and the sun had set. The mountains to the far west still held the last glimmers of sunlight, but complete twilight was drawing near.

Masahiro cast a spell for night vision, after not having used this spell for so long. While his lack of *sight* was troubling, the long rest at Izumo had helped him fully recover his physical and spiritual strength. As Izumo was renown as the land of deities, spiritual power was concentrated there in higher levels than here at the capital, possibly helping him recover much more quickly. And now, even without his *sight*, there were probably other things he could still accomplish.

* 7–9 pm (Thai translation); 8–10 pm (Wikipedia)

The *mononoke* tilted its head up curiously. “Masahiro, we could go tomorrow, couldn’t we? Why the hurry?”

“Huh...?” The young boy blinked, unable to answer. He mulled the question over for a moment longer, but still could not come up with a definite answer. “I just feel that ... it is best to hurry,” he finally replied.

Seimei had fallen ill in the middle of the fourth month. And as Masahiro and Narichika had hurried back to the capital, it was still the middle of the fifth month, nearing the sixth month. And on this night, the sky was dark and overcast, with neither moon nor stars in sight.

The boy peered up at the sky absently, eyes slightly lidded, as he murmured, “Just thinking that it has been a whole month since grandfather fell ill....”

He felt like he had to hurry over to the Tsuchimikado manor as quickly as possible, as if something inside him was sounding an alarm.

The *mononoke* furrowed its brows as it wondered ... was this the instinct of an *onmyouji*?

Masahiro was an *onmyouji*, and his lack of *sight* may have strengthened his other magical powers. Therefore, it was best to believe that this alarm was true. Furthermore, the *mononoke* was still quite concerned about those ‘eyes’ that Seimei felt at the Tsuchimikado manor.

The *mononoke* nodded and turned around. “Even if we go to the Tsuchimikado manor, we won’t be granted entry. What do you plan to do?”

“At least we should try looking around it, in case we notice anything....” Masahiro trailed off as he heard something.

The loud clattering of wheels drew near, accompanied by a growing sense of a demonic aura. It was a familiar aura that held no sign of ill-intent.

“Ah....” Masahiro’s eyes swept around quickly. The aura felt very close, yet his eyes saw nothing. A sense of irritation rose in him as he clenched his teeth in frustration.

Noticing the sound of wheels and Masahiro’s reaction, the *mononoke* looked around and raised its front paw. “That, over there. Oh, it stopped.”

Masahiro sped off in the direction opposite of the Tsuchimikado manor. The *mononoke*'s eyes could clearly see the carriage demon nimbly scaling the foot of the Ichijou Modori bridge, which crossed the Houru river that flowed in front of the Abe manor.

“Kurumanosuke!” Masahiro called out, even though he couldn't see anything. His first retainer wiggled its axles delightedly, and the creaking noise seemed to say, ‘Yes sir, I'm here.’ Masahiro tried to gauge the distance between them as he reached out his hand.

“One more step, that's right.”

His hand felt something in the empty air and moved up and down to confirm that it was Kurumanosuke. Even though he couldn't see, he could feel the huge wheel whose diameter was longer than he was tall. The walls of the carriage were sturdy as he felt along the body of the carriage.

Finally, he grimaced and said, “Kurumanosuke, I'm sorry. I can't see you right now.”

The smiling face of the demon shifted into a wide-eyed look of shock.

Kurumanosuke couldn't speak the human tongue, but it could communicate its thoughts to the *mononoke* and the imps. So, as the carriage demon shifted and creaked in conversation with the *mononoke* at Masahiro's feet, the curtain at the rear of the carriage snapped open and a horde of imps burst out. They had hidden themselves with the intent to prank the boy, but upon hearing such an unexpected confession, they couldn't bear to remain silent any longer.

“Is that true, grandson!”

Masahiro couldn't see them, but he could hear their voices and felt their auras. His feet had retreated automatically the moment he sensed a large number of something raining down right before him.

“Ack!”

The white form was flattened by things he could not see. Masahiro leaned down to look at the *mononoke*, which was squirming violently as it tried to claw its way out. It was also muttering in sudden empathy, “So this is what it's like to be piled on.”

It would seem funny if one didn't experience it for themselves. The ones that did the piling also would have found it fun. However, the *mononoke* was being crushed by this

pile for the first time. It was much smaller than Masahiro, rendering futile its efforts to squirm free. The young boy couldn't bear to watch, and help pull it out like how Rikugou often helped him.

The *mononoke* was apoplectic, its shoulders trembling in fury, and began to rant at the imps. "Why didn't you go for Masahiro!"

"Hey, wait a minute, Mekkun the *mononoke*. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't call me a *mononoke*!" The *mononoke* bared its fangs and glared at the imps. "If you're going to pile on Masahiro, then go pile on him alone. If not, then don't do it at all. Choose one or the other, damn it!"

The imps that were piled up like a mountain began to wail.

"But ... but...."

"Well...."

One imp hesitated before sticking out its lips in a pout. "Well, piling up on someone who can't see seems a bit unjust."

"..."

A pair of eyes the colour of sunset narrowed.

... What the heck is this about justice? They're imps for crying out loud!

Its mouth moved as if muttering complaints, but no sound came out. Even though its face retained an expression of exasperation, it couldn't deny that the imps' argument had merit and decided to drop the topic.

Masahiro sighed resignedly and reached out to pat the head of Kurumanosuke, who was exuding a distraught air. The kind and gentle carriage demon was probably looking very distressed. The young boy also noticed that it was emitting a pale blue demonic flame—it usually took care not to emit this flame because normal people could see it. It was probably doing so now for Masahiro's sake.

"I'm really sorry. I know you're here, but without seeing you, it's a little inconvenient. I could cause some trouble for you, so it's alright if you want to stop being my retainer."

Upon hearing these words from its master, Kurumanosuke frantically and hastily shook its axles left and right.

“It says that its master is its master,” the imps translated. The *mononoke*, on the other hand, stayed silent with its brows furrowed deeply.

“Spirit summon, don’t you think this is a good experience on occasion?”

“Yes, yes. It wouldn’t hurt to have this done to you once.”

“If you want, we can pull out all the stops next time for both you and the grandson.”

“Get lost!” the *mononoke* roared and spun around to look up at its partner. “Let’s go, Masahiro. If we stand around wasting time with them, it’ll be dawn before we know it.”

“That’s true. We can’t waste time. Mokkun’s right.” The boy nodded and stroked Kurumanosuke’s head. It occurred to him that this was the first time he had touched the carriage demon’s head. Even though he had ridden on the carriage regularly and had touched the wheels, axles and yoke, he had never touched the face or head before out of consideration.

“There’s no need for your service today. I’m just going a little ways. Why don’t you go rest under the bridge? I’ll call you if there’s anything.”

Kurumanosuke complied docilely and rolled under the Ichijou Modori bridge.

Seeing this, the various imps waved to Masahiro and the *mononoke* as the pair headed east, while throwing glances at each other.

“He says he can’t *see*. That’s bad.”

“Yeah. And more importantly, how are we going to have our fun?”

As the imps chattered on heedlessly, one grim-faced imp suddenly cried out.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

When its fellows turned to look, the three-horned monkey imp squinted one eye and tilted its head.

“The grandson’s attitude ... no, his aura ... his aura looks strange....”

“Aura?” The remaining imps chorused. The monkey imp nodded with a conflicted expression on its face. “It seems very similar to us somehow ... it shouldn’t be like that....”

Chapter 9

The Tsuchimikado manor was situated near the outskirts of the capital. Its grounds were vast, encompassing an area similar to the Tousanjou estate. The massive complex was made up of a main manor surrounded by a multitude of wings and secondary manors. The sprawling gardens had canals and a pond like the Tousanjou estate, although the pond was slightly smaller.

“The garden in front of the main manor is probably larger. Maybe so that it is easier to hold festivities there,” the *mononoke* explained while walking next to its partner, as it had entered the manor once before.

Masahiro looked awed. “Really? They’ve planned that far ahead? Noblemen really have to consider so many little details. Must be exhausting.”

The Abe manor had never held celebratory parties, much less ones where those outside the family were invited. At most, there was the new year, when family members would gather, but those were spontaneous events when people happened to come offer their new year’s greetings at the same time.

Considering Seimei’s and Yoshimasa’s stations, the Abe manor could be considered extremely vast. Masahiro had heard that it had been inherited from their ancestors, so he had never paid much attention to the details. However, once he had started working, he had come to realize that this was quite extraordinary. How could the Abe clan possess a manor and such vast grounds when their station didn’t even permit them to meet the Emperor? Furthermore, as far as Masahiro knew, all his ancestors before Seimei had never held anything higher than fifth rank^{*}. This was truly a mystery.

“Hey, Masahiro, that’s....”

“Huh?”

While Masahiro was lost in his thoughts, the *mononoke*’s strained voice pulled him back to the real world. Eyes the colour of a burning sunset were faced forward in a harsh glare. Following that line of sight, Masahiro saw a man wearing monk’s robes and a straw hat standing in the darkness.

* The Heian court was divided into ranks. Ranks 1–3 were nobles, 4–5 were court officials, and 6 and below were minor officials.

Masahiro squinted suspiciously—he felt like he knew this man, but couldn't quite place him. He combed through his memories for a moment before it struck him, and he gasped out loud.

“That’s the corrupted monk we met in the first month!”

At that moment, the monk stopped walking and slowly turned around. The staff in his hands tilted his hat upwards to reveal a stare followed by a smile. The monk looked to be in his thirties or more, possibly even around the same age as Yoshimasa. The man had sunken cheeks, a belligerent expression, and eyes as hard and cold as a blade of ice. He also seemed bulky, perhaps because he was more muscular than Yoshimasa. He was probably shorter than spirit summons like Guren, but appeared taller than Masahiro by at least 15 centimeters.

The man’s lips curled slowly. “You really appeared, child of Abe. Time has certainly passed, and now that old man is on the verge of death. What a wonderful opportunity!”

“What!” the young boy snarled in anger.

An amused laugh rumbled deep in the monk’s throat. “But you’re just a hatchling. If it’s just you, this will be easy.”

“What are you going on about!” the *mononoke* growled. “He’s the most powerful child in the Abe clan. I don’t know what you’re planning, but I’m not going to hold back!”

The monk slammed the heel of his staff against the ground, and the hoops clashed and clanged against each other.

Masahiro and the *mononoke* held their breaths and braced themselves.

Seimei had mentioned feeling a stare upon him, and Masahiro had heard of the dark aura that drifted in the air.

The young boy remembered that, sometime after the new year, he and the *mononoke* had encountered this man before. He had ensnared one of the heirs of the Fujiwara clan and had commanded magical spirits to attack the eldest son of the Minister of the Left. At that time, the monk had disappeared before they were able to confront him. His holy powers were fearsome, and they could not afford to underestimate him.

As both Masahiro and the *mononoke* composed themselves, the monk narrowed his eyes at them and suddenly turned around and sped off.

“Stop!”

A split second later, the two raced after him. Even though he must have been at least twice Masahiro’s age, he was fleet-footed enough to gradually outpace them.

“Damn it!”

Masahiro and the *mononoke* had been so intent on the chase that they had no idea they had completely passed by the Tsuchimikado manor.

The monk ran past the Kyougoku avenue and emerged outside the capital. They chased him without hesitation, feeling that confronting him outside the city where there were few people was certainly preferable to doing so inside the city. A battle involving magic had the potential to cause a lot of collateral damage, and avoiding such a situation was ideal.

Finally, after running along the Houjou temple and reaching the banks of the Kamo river, the monk halted and turned around to face them. Despite the long distance, the man showed no sign of tiredness nor was there any change in the expression on his face. Masahiro, on the other hand, was panting harshly, shoulders quaking in exhaustion, and he raised a hand to wipe away the sweat on his brow.

“Is he some sort of monster?” the *mononoke* grumbled aggravatedly.

“He’s probably trained himself quite extensively. Monks all live in the mountains, such as Mount Kouya, Mount Hiei, or Mount Kurama.”

“Ah....”

Masahiro tried to steady his breathing as he inched towards the monk. He had earlier cast a spell for seeing in the darkness, but he had no idea whether the other had done the same or not. If not, then he and the *mononoke* would have the upper hand.

“On....” chanted the monk in a low voice as he brought his hands together. In that instant, his staff emitted a sharp, ear-piercing sound. He slammed the staff against the ground in a loud thud, and the hoops clanged out in a clamorous din.

From their previous clash, Masahiro remembered that this sound had turned into an offensive attack and readied himself. Seeing the boy's expression, one corner of the monk's lips tightened into a smirk and he muttered coolly, "You're no match for me, kid."

"What!"

Holy power burst out suddenly, creating a great gust of wind. Masahiro hastily raised his arm in defense as the wind battered painfully against him. In that instant, a shrill sound pierced his ear—the violent ringing pounded at his head as he cried out and pressed his hands against his ears.

Around him, unnatural phenomena were occurring. The gentle wind that blew on the river bank suddenly stilled and the flowing water stopped as if frozen. All sound vanished and a strange pressure weighed down upon Masahiro.

"Caught in a barrier," Kouchin commented as she materialised, clicking her tongue in annoyance.

The monk's eyes narrowed curiously under his hat. "A spirit summon... I see ... this kid is truly that old man's grandson."

The summon that had clashed with this monk during their accidental meeting last time was Rikugou. This time, however, Rikugou still had not returned from Izumo.

An aggressive red aura flared around the form of the white *mononoke* as it transformed. Seeing this, the monk removed his hat and threw it aside. "You're also one of the spirit summons? Interesting. So I'll get to battle the servants of the acclaimed Abe no Seimei himself. I probably wouldn't get a great chance like this again."

"You'll regret saying that," Guren declared as divine aura exploded from his body.

Masahiro restrained him, crying out, "Guren, stand down!"

A pair of golden eyes swung around towards Masahiro. Guren opened his mouth to speak, but the boy stopped him and stepped out in front. "Our opponent is human, even if we don't know who he is."

"In that case," Guren said as a flame danced in his hand, "I will destroy this barrier!"

The monk slammed his staff against the ground again. “Dream on,” he replied as he began to chant a spell. Raising his staff, a horde of black demons materialised around him.

“Phantasms!”

These phantasms pounced towards Masahiro in unison, as if in response to the shout. Guren and Kouchin fell into defensive positions—even though they couldn’t lend a hand when dealing with human opponents, demons were an entirely different matter. However....

“Spirit summons, I won’t let you get in my way.” The monk raised his right hand and began to chant another spell in a low voice, and the screeching cries of the phantasms prevented Masahiro from deciphering the nature of the spell. Even so, he could feel a chill creeping up his spine.

“What....”

As Masahiro hesitated, the horde of phantasms clustered before him. The boy raised his hand to cast a spell, but the scene before him wavered.

“Huh...?”

The phantasms vanished.... No ... it was Masahiro himself that couldn’t see them.

A crushing pressure forced Masahiro to one knee. The pressure came down again on both shoulders so heavily that he was unable to move.

“Damn it!”

The furious roar reverberated in the air. Surprised, Masahiro struggled to look around—that was Guren’s voice. Did that mean that both Guren and Kouchin were also being overpowered by the spell?

“Guren ... Kouchin!”

An unbelievable sight appeared before his eyes. A large number of twisted black vines had sprouted from the ground, entangling the bodies of the spirit summons and slowly tightening their grip as thorns on the surface of the vines stabbed into skin.

An immense force pressed down on Guren and Kouchin, and their knees sank into the ground, the gravel beneath them disintegrating into dust at the pressure. The more they tried to move, the more tightly the vines constricted around them, their thorns digging in and carving their skin until blood flowed, staining the white gravel.

Kouchin's delicate features were twisted in a grimace of pain as vines constricted around her throat, obstructing her breathing. Red welts could be seen on her neck. Guren was in a similar state. The pressure on them was heavier than on Masahiro, perfectly sealing off the divine aura of the spirit summons.

Vines wrapped around the summons' limbs squeezed and pulled them to the ground. Constriction around their necks and checks tightened rapidly until they could not breathe.

"There are spells to seal deities in this world. How truly foolish not to know of them," the monk taunted.

The monk's barrier did not exist merely to separate this place from the outside world. It was also a cage to suppress the divine powers of the spirit summons.

Masahiro paled in shock. A human could use a spell so powerful as to suppress the divine power of the spirit summons? Other than Abe no Seimei, he could not imagine that anyone else could manage such a feat.

"Guren! Kou ... chin!" Masahiro choked out as the pressure doubled until it seemed like his bones were cracking. Using his arms to prevent himself from completely collapsing onto the ground, he strained to look up and saw the monk looking at him with cold eyes.

"I have heard that the twelve spirit servants of Abe no Seimei are bound by a rule ... that they must not harm or kill humans. There's no need for me to get rid of you, but you will get in my way if I leave you around."

"!"

Masahiro glared at the monk. At the same time, the pressure increased even further as if to grind his body to dust. The boy resisted the power with all his strength while straining to find an opportunity to strike back.

"Hah. Still won't give up? Know your limits, kid." The monk swung his staff to the side and a bright light flashed. The ringing in his ears renewed its force. In that moment, he felt something charging towards him, and a heavy force unlike the massive pressure

rammed into him. Numerous unseen somethings assaulted him from all sides. They had the aura of the phantasms, which had not disappeared but only become invisible.

“Urgh!” He crumpled as if punched in the solar plexus. The knee which had been struggling to hold him up gave way to the pressure, and in the blink of an eye, Masahiro was slammed against the gravel. The pressure had not weakened at all; rather, it continued to crush him. His bones were nearing their limits, as they began to crack loudly.

“Masa ... hiro!” Guren forced out as he struggled, trying desperately to rise. A fighting aura of fire wreathed around his body as the golden band around his head gleamed dully in the flickering light.

“You....” Kouchin ground out as her head strained to face the monk.

Such unimaginably vast holy power. How could a normal person possibly possess something like this? Was he born with it? But she had never seen any human, albeit one, with such immense power.

This man in front of her had created a barrier, created phantasms and had completely sealed not only Masahiro but two spirit summons. In addition, the spirit summons in question were war deities that ranked first and second in power among the twelve summons. Holy power that could manage such feats simultaneously with such ease could not possibly be human.

“On ... magariagia ... basoro ... shunisha ... basa ... urgh!” The mantra for the spell Masahiro was trying to cast was suddenly cut short as his face twisted in pain.

He could not breathe; his lungs and throat were being crushed and he could hear the blood pounding frantically in his ears. Then, he heard a sound like the parting of the wind, and in the next instant, something crashed against him.

His body flew in the opposite direction just as he heard the howl of the phantasms.

“Tou ... da!”

Guren’s golden eyes swept towards Kouchin. The other stared at him in response as her divine aura crept towards his hands and feet.

Kouchin's power stopped the vines' movement for only a split second. Guren did not waste this opportunity, his flames exploding out to burn the vines to crisp in an instant. A fire snake, burning a brilliant red, pulverized the spell entangling Kouchin.

Kouchin pushed herself up, coughing harshly as she did so.

"Masahiro!" she yelled as she spun around, left hand pulling out a three-pronged dagger. Despite her legs feeling drained of all strength, she forced them into motion as she leapt towards the phantasms that were about to bite Masahiro's neck. The summons were able to see these phantasms because the monk had only used his holy power to shield their bodies.

"You...!" Guren's eyes had turned red as blood. A wrathful divine power hammered against the barrier walls until the very air itself vibrated. However, the monk merely reached into his robes with a smirk, seemingly unaffected.

"This really isn't enough. I guess it can't be helped..." he muttered as he pulled out something like a black thread. "I don't really want to, but I guess I'll try Ryuuju's power. Let's see what it can do."

Masahiro had taken Kouchin's hand and stood up at last. When he saw the item in the monk's hand, however, he drew his breath in shock. An indescribable chill raced up his spine.

"What..."

His eyes automatically turned towards Guren's back.

Boiling fury swirled around Guren's body and coalesced into a violent and barbarous aura. If it hadn't come from Guren, Masahiro would have shrunk in fear, yet the man before them held an expression of perfect calm—even in the face of such an aggressive show of divine power from the most powerful of the twelve spirit summons.

"Hey, Abe kid," the monk called out in a cold voice. He had probably noticed Masahiro's gaze. "Even with them around, it would make no difference."

The boy ignored the terrible pain lancing through his body as he shouted out heatedly, "What did you say!"

“I said you are all eyesores—the spirit summons, Abe no Seimei and you.” This was the first time the monk’s face had shown traces of dark anger.

“Anyone who stands in my way is an annoyance.”

The black thread in the monk’s fist lashed about violently as if it were alive. Slipping out of his grasp, it expanded as it sped towards Masahiro and the summons, wrapping around them like a snake.

They drew their breaths—the thread was emitting a demonic aura.

“A magic relic? No ... it’s...!”

It’s not that.

The demonic aura was so immense that it completely dwarfed the monk’s holy power. The seal reappeared, even more intense than before, and wrapped around the three of them in the blink of an eye. The black thread followed in its wake, wrapping around them in a second layer and gleamed with a peculiar light as it drained life energy from whatever it touched.

“This is ... hair?” Masahiro muttered hoarsely. Coldness invaded his body, numbing both his mind and his spirit. He fell as if in a faint. He tried to maintain a detached consciousness as he forced his throat to work. “Gure ... Kou...”

However, those words faded without ever being sounded.

Guren and Kouchin themselves were fighting against the oppressive pressure, which was even more overwhelming than before. There should not be any human with the power to suppress spirit summons so completely like this.

“Kou...”

Kouchin could only swivel her eyes in the direction of Guren’s low growl. His lips were flecked with blood from being bitten.

“Is that ... human ... or a monster?”

The monk's holy power was greater than any normal human being, and he also possessed a demonic power that could not possibly be human. The phantasms that circled them hungrily, waiting for them to weaken, perhaps, but that monk....

“Not a monster ... that's....”

Guren could see her lips move to form the words ‘definitely human’ as the hair radiated a malicious power and tightened around Kouchin's neck, preventing her from speaking.

The twelve spirit summons were bound by a rule forbidding them from harming or killing humans. They were born from human thoughts and therefore those were acts that negated their own existences. It was because human hearts existed that they existed, but....

Guren strained to draw out his power. The golden band around his head began to glow luminously as his eyes gleamed a vicious red.

They did not have to submit to a mysterious human who displayed such overt killing intent and malice and allow themselves to be killed without resistance.

“Guren ... you ... can't...!” Masahiro had guessed Guren's intent and called out in a hoarse voice. He could not allow Guren to violate the rule of the spirit summons any more. Guren was preparing to cross the line again, and for Masahiro's sake.

The first time Guren had confessed that he had violated the rule once was a snowy day in the middle of winter. He could remember the summon's vulnerable form back then. And he knew well how much Guren had blamed himself, back in Izumo after his memories had been returned. Even though he would have been so much better off if he had never remembered at all....

...But I'm sorry. I'm so happy that you've remembered. Even though I know it isn't right, I still can't help but be happy. And so....”

“You ... mustn't!” Masahiro yelled as he gritted his teeth and forced himself to his feet. The monk's holy power pressing down on him had not diminished in the slightest, but was rather growing more intense by the moment.

Guren tossed his head, his fighting spirit blazing. Kouchin's eyes were on him, shining fiercely despite the traces of pain lurking in the tense lines of her face.

The boy ground his teeth until he could almost feel them shattering, and screamed out in an agonized voice, “Don’t!”

His power just wasn’t enough. His grandfather would never have allowed the summons to feel such torment. He was weak, and he even lacked the *sight*. But even if he could *see*, it wouldn’t have made an iota of difference in this situation. Because the monk’s power was simply incredible....

...Because I am powerless, the spirit summons have to suffer like this, and force themselves to violate their rule....

It had been like this, over and over. The various summons ... Guren ... for his sake....

His sound of his heartbeat roared and engulfed his senses.

“I forbid ... you!”

A pale white flame flared to life deep inside his body.

Sometimes he would dream old, nostalgic dreams.

Seimei, who was leaning against his arm rest, opened his eyes.

“Oh dear, I must have fallen asleep.”

As he shifted to rise, the kimono on his shoulder slid off and fell to the floor. Noticing Byakko nearby, he surmised that the summon must have covered him to protect him from the chill. It seemed like, ever since he fell ill, the spirit summons had been exceedingly overprotective of him. It was already the middle of summer; surely in this season, falling asleep in the middle of the day wouldn’t warrant fears of catching a cold.

“Although it is a little cool today....” he mumbled to himself.

“It’s better than not doing anything. At least doing so puts our minds at rest,” Byakko interjected calmly, and looked towards the closed shutters.

“Masahiro left a while ago. He climbed over the wall like always, when he could have just taken the gate.”

It was understandable if he were embarking on one of his nightly ventures, but there was no need for the cloak-and-dagger act when he had told Seimei where he was going.

“I figured I’d let him do what he wants until he realizes that for himself.” Seimei grinned as he thought about his grandson’s straightforward nature. The *mononoke* that was by his side probably noticed this too, but since it had not regained its normal composure, it had not offered any of its usual ribbing comments. Perhaps a little more time, and it would return to the way it was before.

The old man smiled wanly and sighed. In that moment, he recalled the dream during his nap.

He had dreamed of the past, the mother whose face he could not remember leaning down to look at him.

His mother had disappeared before Seimei was old enough to remember anything. She had not died, but disappeared. When he was older, he had asked his father and had gotten the response, ‘She is no longer here.’ No matter how much he asked and pestered, his father never said any more than that.

The old man closed his eyes and tried to recall the image he saw in his dream.

The light shining from behind left his mother’s face shadowed, so he could not discern the expression on her face nor the nature of her gaze as she looked upon her infant child. Seimei could not remember whether the palm that stroked his forehead was warm or cold, gentle or not.

Black hair that was normally tied up in a bun cascaded around her face. The bright white light piercing his eyes and the smooth, brilliant black hair were all that remained in his memories.

“Yoshimasa and Yoshihira don’t remember Wakana’s face either....” he mused.

He had heard that his sons had once asked the spirit summons to show them their mother’s face on the water mirror. But for Seimei, this was not possible, because the spirit summons themselves had never seen their master’s mother.

Seimei breathed out heavily and blinked.

He had never dreamed of this before, but after he had fallen ill, it had happened frequently. Perhaps this was some sort of sign.

“Hmm ... I guess that means it’s soon.” He tilted his head pensively. The corner of Byakko’s eyes tightened immediately upon hearing the old man’s barely audible words.

Noticing Byakko’s reaction, Seimei deliberately looked away, avoiding eye contact.

“...”

An unnecessarily tense atmosphere blanketed the room. He couldn’t chatter so idly these days, it seemed.

He sighed again, and searched for a different topic. He supposed it was his own mistake, but it was too uncomfortable to remain silent.

“Come to think of it, what is Taiin doing?”

Byakko stared at Seimei tensely for a moment longer, but finally relented. Crossing his arms, he replied, “She’s reflecting on her mistakes in the spirit realm. Genbu had told me about many things.”

She had caused too many problems, and so, upon her return, he had grabbed her and taken her back to the spirit realm to prevent interruptions. There, he had sat her down and lectured her for four hours straight. Hearing this, Seimei had muttered, “Four hours....” with a slightly spooked expression on his face.

The other nodded impassively.

“If she isn’t lectured to that long and sternly, she’d never learn her lesson.”

Byakko’s lectures never involved scolding or yelling. They were about carefully explaining in a straightforward and logical manner all the minute details, from one to ten, about which of Taiin’s actions were wrong for what reasons, in order for her to learn to regret her actions. From there, he would explain in a similarly straightforward and logical manner all the minute details, from one to ten, onwards and endlessly, about what sort of things she should definitely not do for such and such reasons. One could say it was a devastatingly dull and a torturously tedious lecture. It was a lecture reserved only for Taiin when she got too much too handle. Usually Byakko was not someone so finicky and querulous, which made it all the more effective against Taiin.

“... If she’s feeling guilty, then I guess you can just leave her alone for now,” Seimei commented idly, while thinking ‘A four-hour lecture sounds like a pure torment’ and changing the topic.

“Ah, Genbu and Rikugou will be returning from Chigaeshi soon. I’m sorry, Byakko, but can you go pick them up?”

“Certainly. Can you guess where they might be?” Byakko pushed himself up on one knee as Seimei scratched his brow thoughtfully.

“Genbu reported yesterday morning that they had departed from Chigaeshi.”

At this, Byakko gave a slight nod. “Ah, then I have a rough idea.” Raising the shutters to one side of the room, he turned to comment before leaving. “If anything happens, be sure to call for someone. Seiryuu or Tenkou should be able to come at a moment’s notice.”

“Oh? And where are Tenitsu and Suzaku?”

“I heard they’re comforting Taiin,” he replied before slipping into the wind.

Seimei watched as the shutters fluttered down and mumbled faintly, “*That Taiin?*”

Byakko’s lecturing was truly terrifying.

“Should I try that with Masahiro?” he mused.

If the *mononoke* were here, it would most certainly vehemently oppose it. ‘Don’t. He’d definitely hate you if you do that. Don’t you dare do it.’ Seimei’s technique held a hint of humour in it, which softened the blow. If he switched over to Byakko’s technique, he’d definitely be viewed as a sly old fox.

As his thoughts rambled aimlessly, he suddenly drew up short.

“...”

He shuddered from a sudden sense of foreboding.

Seimei’s eyes snapped wide, his shoulders twitching, and he could feel the hair rising on his skin. Something cold seemed to crystallize in his chest as his heart pounded and he felt like his blood was draining out of his body.

“Masahiro?”

Cold sweat broke out on his brow the moment he whispered his grandson’s name. A chill lanced through him as an indescribable turmoil roiled his gut. It felt like his blood had reversed its flow and a veritable whirlwind was screaming a warning in his heart.

His heart raced with growing anxiety. Seimei’s pale face darkened as he croaked out, “Impossible ... this cannot be!”

But in a situation like this, he could only come up with one explanation.

The child’s blood was crying out. Something in the blood had awoken, and in its wake, it had roused something sleeping deep inside Seimei as well.

The old man recalled that spring night when he had conversed with the god of Mount Kifune. The god’s powerful voice echoed in his mind.

...Stop insisting that you’re human....

One day, that overwhelming power will be turned upon yourself.

“Seimei, what’s wrong?” Seiryuu had noticed a sudden shift in his master’s aura and had hurriedly appeared from the spirit realm. Upon approaching the form of his master, who was acting strange, his eyes narrowed tensely.

“What’s wrong? Calm down.”

“I have to find Masahiro.”

Seimei tried to rise, but was prevented from doing so by Seiryuu.

“No.”

“Don’t get in my way!” Seimei snapped at him.

The spirit summon, however, merely looked at him with cold eyes and said, “If you go, you will shorten your lifespan. You are my master.”

“And this master is ordering you to stand back!”

“I don’t care.”

Seimei’s face, which had been suffused with rage, composed itself instantly. However, his eyes glowed with power like lightning striking Seiryuu. The summon started, his eyes widening.

With an impassive stare, he opened his mouth and spoke, deliberately drawing out his words, “Shouran. Who is the master of the twelve spirit summons and the one who gave you that name?” His voice was monotone and expressionless, but its ferocity was like a crashing thunderbolt.

The spirit summon gritted his teeth, hands fisting tightly to keep his violent emotions at bay.

“You, Abe no Seimei.”

“In that case, as your master, you will obey my commands. Stand aside, Shouran. Don’t think for a moment that you can thwart my determination!”

Chapter 10

A fire was blazing. Its pale white flames burned deep within his body and his heart convulsed almost audibly. The buzzing sound of something whirling and twirling rang in his ears.

“... On ajaradasendasahadaya un...”

The entangling vines halted abruptly.

The pounding of his pulse grew louder as it raced throughout his body. His wide eyes stared blankly at nothing as a flame flickered behind them.

Guren started as he felt an overwhelming wave of power wash over him from behind, and he glanced backwards. In that moment, the vines wrapped around his arms and legs turned into stone, snapped in a loud crack, and crumbled into dust.

“Masa ... hiro?”

Masahiro stepped forward slowly, impassive eyes boring into the monk.

“... May this spell impede all evil...”

A strange power cloaked the form of the young boy. It was a power that radiated from within him.

“... Destroy the chains of karma...”

The monk's expression began to waver. Even though the person before him was an Abe, he was still a powerless child who was, until moments ago, struggling futilely against his spell's cage. He had been helpless to defend himself. So what was this power? He had been deliberately hiding it? Both his aura and the threatening spiritual power he was emitting were completely different from before, as if he were someone else.

The shocked monk narrowed his eyes, lips quirking up into a smirk as understanding dawned. “Ahh ... so that's what it means.”

He glanced at the remaining strands of black hair in his hands and spat out, “So this is what it's about, Ryuuju.”

That wasn't a human power.

The spirit named Ryuuju had told him that his target was an old man named Abe no Seimei, but that perhaps this child could become a hindrance because he shared the same nonhuman blood.

... That's right, nonhuman blood....

"It galls me to fall so neatly into your plans, but it can't be helped."

Even if Seimei were destroyed, this child would definitely become an obstacle, which was probably why Ryuuju had pressed him into dealing with the boy. As this piece of knowledge fell into place, everything suddenly made sense. Ryuuju had said he would help, but instead had intended to use him as a pawn. But the monk didn't mind; he had intended to use Ryuuju as a pawn as well.

The monk raised his staff and bellowed, "Fighting a monster! Interesting!"

The rings clashed together in a loud clang, and the various phantasms that were lying in wait leapt towards Masahiro in unison.

"Scram!" Masahiro's eyes glowed fiercely as he raised his right hand, formed the sign of the kris, and swept it to the side. The sound of his chanting resounded in the air.

"Demons begone!"

The pattern traced by his hand became a blade of air that sliced through the numerous phantasms within the blink of an eye. The blade did not stop with the phantasms, but continued to plunge into the gravel at the feet of the monk, raising a cloud of stone and dust.

Masahiro's pulse pounded again as another wave of power swirled in his body, emitting a faint blue light.

Guren and Kouchin were speechless at the sight.

The power radiating from Masahiro ... was not spiritual power.

"That ... is....."

Masahiro unerringly released another blade of air towards the phantasms that should have been invisible to his eyes. Did that mean that his lost *sight* had returned? But it could not have been as simple as that.

“Is this ... demonic power?!”

“No!” Guren interjected immediately, rebuffing Kouchin’s muttered words, before catching his breath with a start.

Seimei’s origins ... the nonhuman blood that ran in his veins.

Abe no Seimei, heir of the bloodline of the celestial fox—not any spirit fox, but one that had the right to enter Heaven.

“The flame of the celestial fox!” He gasped. Indeed, the flame that enveloped Masahiro was fox fire, a distinct mark of the celestial fox.

The phantasms that had been struck down revived and charged Masahiro again, but the boy did not even spare them a glance. His target was the monk standing in front of him.

“...I humbly offer ... I beseech you....”

Within a sealed dimension, Masahiro could only hear his own voice, rambling as if in feverish delirium, the sound of his pulse roaring through his body, and the surging of power fueling flames that almost blocked out all other sounds. Everything seemed surreal.

“Come, god of lightning!”

A blue thunderbolt pierced the heavens and slammed into the barrier, slicing through it with ease, and into the monk.

Light flashed so blindingly that Guren and Kouchin had to raise their arms in front of their eyes. The massive impact churned the area within the barrier. It was ironic indeed that, without the barrier, there would have been great damage to the surrounding area.

The monk remained standing, however. He laughed fearlessly and shook his staff as if to mock Masahiro.

Hazy thoughts flickered in Masahiro's heart. His eyes gleamed coldly as they remained fixed on the monk as his hair, tied at the nape of his neck, whipped wildly in the wind.

“Not yet.”

His pulse pounded again, but he had no time to wonder what it meant. The phantasms that had dodged the thunderbolt were going berserk. Nor did he have time to wonder why he could see so clearly things which he should not be able to see.

“Onkiriku shujiribikiritanada....”

His power was building up, spinning and churning like a cyclone.

“Nasayasatambaya sawaka!”

Masahiro only wanted the power to protect Guren and Kouchin. For power that could protect all the spirit summons in moments of crisis like his grandfather, he was ready to sacrifice everything.

The monk shook his staff. Its hoops clashed against one another, creating layer upon layer of clamorous ringing. The air itself began to twist, channeling his thoughts into a cyclone that raced towards Masahiro.

Masahiro's foot stumbled, and his world tilted violently. Everything disappeared instantly. The rhythm of his pulse changed and he suddenly felt a powerful impact. In the blink of an eye, the force overwhelmed and crushed him. He sunk down onto one knee.

The phantasms did not miss this opportunity. The demonic aura that they had suppressed exploded once again, and they bared their fangs, howling in barbaric fury.

“Masahiro!”

The shout reverberated in his ears.

Masahiro's eyes snapped wide at the sound. Pain lanced through his head. His vision swam before him—the scene before him seemed to be drenched in red, and the phantasms that lunged towards him seemed to move sluggishly. In the eerie silence, their shrieks pierced his ears jarringly.

In that moment, a burning snake of flame shot past his cheek and burned the phantasms around him and disrupted the monk's wind. Then, the snake opened its mouth wide and charged straight towards the monk.

Awareness began to surface in Masahiro's eyes as he fought against the flame's possession. Feelings that were seemingly smothered crammed back into his mind.

He did not wield his powers so that Guren would do such things.

His heart lurched unnaturally.

The snake of flame ... that was Guren's flame. And who was standing out in front?

... The rule of the summons ... Guren must not break it again!

The monk's black robes whipped in the wind. He slammed his staff against the ground, the hoops ringing out, and the air twisted. The snake of flame spun and sped straight towards of the center.

The flames that burned in Masahiro's eyes dispersed abruptly.

"No!" Masahiro regained his awareness and raced forward to block the snake of flame. One hand snapped out in the form of a kris and swept out horizontally as he chanted a spell.

"Masahiro! What are you doing?!"

Blood draining from her face, Kouchin immediately raised her three-pronged dagger, but she would not be able to release her divine power in time.

Guren's breath caught; he would not be able to suppress that flame.

Guren's snake of flame smashed into the wall that the boy had erected. The clash of divine and spiritual powers resulted in a powerful impact that shook the barrier before they both dispersed.

Masahiro had spent every ounce of his power to stop Guren's flame, and collapsed down upon his knees again.

“Idiot,” came a voice dripping with contempt. At the same time, the monk’s staff swung around and struck him square in the middle of his back.

The boy smashed into the ground helplessly. The monk pressed his staff into Masahiro’s back and turned to Guren and Kouchin. “Don’t move,” he threatened.

The fangs of the phantasms hovered dangerously around the neck of the boy.

Seimei used his soul transfer spell to separate his soul from his body, and then followed the traces of his grandson’s aura with blinding speed.

To the west of the capital ... footprints headed in that direction and disappeared.

“Masahiro!”

Behind the desperate man was Seiryuu, his features twisted hatefully as he followed, knowing that he could not divert Seimei from his path.

“!”

In that moment, Seimei’s heart spasmed and his feet halted in their steps. This gaze was familiar.

“This gaze ... at the Tsuchimikado manor....”

“I’ve been waiting, Abe no Seimei.”

Suddenly, a man appeared in Seimei’s path. His uneven black hair fluttered in the air as it hung below his waist. His eyes were hidden behind his hair, yet a dark gleam could be seen as his gaze fixed on Seimei.

“O half-human child who shares the blood of my people. Your blood will definitely call that one here.”

The man inched closer and smirked. Gourou alone was not enough to drag Shouka out, but in the process, he had found the heir to this human’s blood. The child’s ability to call on their kin was still weak, but surely this human would be able to do it.

“If we sense a premonition of danger to our kin, our blood will cry out. If that child’s life is in danger, you were sure to appear.”

The man laughed, and released a powerful demonic aura.

“Come, use your blood and call that one out. I could, of course, just kill you and pluck your heart out, but I am kind and don’t really want to kill.”

Seiryuu stepped in front of Seimei, his blue eyes glowing cruelly. “Who are you?!” he demanded.

The man’s lips twisted and he snapped, “I have no business with you. Scram.”

Immediately, his demonic power slammed into Seiryuu. As the summon crossed his arms in front of him to ward off the blow, he could hear a soft whisper ringing eerily in his ear.

“I don’t want to kill needlessly.”

“You...!”

“It’s annoying.”

A sharp blade pierced Seiryuu’s right shoulder even before those words faded. No, it wasn’t a blade, but an elongated claw that extended from the man’s hand.

“Shall I cut off your right arm? Don’t worry; just losing one arm won’t kill you.”

He laughed delicately and twitched his finger. The claw embedded in his shoulder ripped out a chunk of flesh.

The summon grimaced but made no sound. In the next breath, he had closed the gap between them, having trapped the man’s claw within his shoulder, and released a wave of power.

The impact threw the man back. The claw came loose from his shoulder and blood spurted from the wound. It must have severed a tendon, as he could no longer move his arm freely.

“Seiryuu, stand back! A wound like that...”

His master shouted at him, but Seiryuu did not heed his words. He raised his left arm and summoned a gigantic scythe with a handle as long as he was tall. The crescent blade was about three feet long, and radiated power. Seiryuu swung the scythe at full force, and its blade sliced the enemy's abdomen. However, the wound was too shallow.

"Damn it!" Seiryuu swore, appearing clearly aggravated. His right shoulder was still bleeding profusely, attesting to the severity of the injury.

"Seiryuu!"

The enemy had much greater demonic power. As far as Seimei knew, very few spirits had this much power. It was likely that their opponent was closer to a deity than a spirit.

The man licked at the blood oozing from his stomach and smirked.

"Call out. Your blood will call that one here."

"Shut up!" Seiryuu cried as he lunged towards the enemy again.

"How annoying. Get out of here," the man snarled irately. Tugging free a strand of hair, he released it. Massive demonic power rushed towards Seiryuu as the hair expanded and wrapped around the summon, and proceeded to press him down.

Seiryuu sank to his knees helplessly, but still managed to yell to his master, "Don't worry about me. Go!"

"I can't do that!" While Seimei was shouting back at Seiryuu, the enemy's eyes fixed on him once more, causing fear to rise up within him. In his current state, he would not survive a battle with a demon with power of this magnitude.

The man smiled dreamily. "The blood in your veins will call that one here. Come on, call."

His eyes gleamed darkly. At that moment, the blood that flowed deep and hidden within him began to churn in response, and Seimei could feel his heart beating irregularly.

His blood was in turmoil. Nonhuman power, far too great for a human body, was eating away at his body. The more power he drew upon, the closer this nonhuman power came to surfacing as it replenished his lost energy. And now, it had completely awakened in an instant. With his current weak state, his life would be in danger.

A terrible pain lanced through his entire body. Seimei could barely breathe as he pressed a hand against his chest and his legs gave way.

Perhaps Masahiro was in the same state. His blood was probably also calling to Seimei like this man said.

The pain grew unrelentingly in its intensity.

“Seimei!” Seiryuu’s shout sounded strangely high-pitched. He hadn’t called his master’s name in this manner since the events of over 50 years ago.

The man before them didn’t make a move to attack, but merely peered down at the tormented Seimei with cold eyes.

“Our powers are too immense for a human body to handle. For you, it is merely a poison that eats away at your body. Your parents probably didn’t tell you that.”

He raised a shoulder mirthfully and knelt down.

“What are your parents’ names? They might have been among those I killed. Why don’t you try telling me?”

Seimei’s eyes snapped wide. What did that man just say?

His mother had disappeared suddenly when he was but a young child. The name he had heard from his father was ‘Kusunoha’.

“I told you that the blood of our kin calls to each other. Now, what are your parents’ names?”

“Ryuuju. I thought it would be you.” A cold voice suddenly pierced Seimei’s ears.

The eyes of the laughing man began to glow.

Seimei’s eyes widened.

“Pierce the air!” Seimei released a burst of spiritual power so vast that it belied his near-death state. The power turned into a blade of air, but the enemy had easily dodged it.

The unrelenting pain threatened to cloud Seimei's thoughts. He held tightly to the last remnants of his slipping awareness and forced his eyes to remain open.

Seiryuu watched the enemy leap backwards, and spied a willowy shadow right behind his master.

A cascade of silver hair fluttered like a beacon in the darkness of twilight.

“Ryuuju, you kin-slayer. What business do you have with those who have secluded themselves to live human lives?”

The man called Ryuuju bared his teeth and replied in a powerful voice, “To find you, Shouka! To take the Pearl of Heaven from you and offer it to Nine-Tails!”

“Nine-Tails....” Seimei mumbled in the midst of his pain. That was the name of a great foreign demon.

“Is that so. You've lowered yourself to become a servant to Nine-Tails. Such a stain upon the honour of the celestial fox clan.”

Shouka raised a slender arm and flicked downwards. The demonic power pressing down on Seiryuu disappeared immediately while numerous cuts appeared all over Ryuuju's body. Blood gushed from the gaping wounds.

“Such power ... you are so powerful, Shouka. That is why Nine-Tails cannot let you live.”

Demonic power exploded from Ryuuju. He was a member of the celestial fox clan, being that were the equals of gods, yet his power was defiled by spilling the blood of his own kin.

Nevertheless, that god-like power was real.

“Retreat, if you do not want to die,” Shouka warned. “I will not chase you down.”

Ryuuju laughed disdainfully at Shouka's words. “What are you going on about? Didn't you hear me say that I will take the Pearl of Heaven from you?”

At that moment....

“On abiraunkan sarakutan!” Seimei propped himself up on one knee as he slowly rose, chanting a spell as he radiated intense power that shot towards Ryuuju.

“Seimei!” Seiryuu yelled, his face pale.

Shouka lunged towards Ryuuju who had leapt nimbly away, and sharp claws lashed out in a long streak.

“!”

A thin red line appeared along Ryuuju’s neck. The woman clicked her tongue in annoyance; he had managed to dodge the attack and the resulting wound was merely a scratch. Even so, Seimei’s spell had hit him squarely and had caused significant injury. The man swayed and he grunted angrily.

“Shouka, don’t you dare run away. If you run away again....” He pointed to Seimei and smiled cruelly. “I will kill him. Surely someone as kind as you will not abandon those who share the blood of our clan.”

Shouka’s eyes burned furiously.

Ryuuju laughed uproariously at her reaction, and, without any warning, immense demonic power burst forth from him.

“Damn it!” Seiryuu cried as he planted his scythe into the ground and attempted to reflect the demonic power. The clash of powers kicked up a cloud of dust, and when it finally settled, Ryuuju was nowhere to be seen.

Seimei pressed a hand to his chest as he looked around slowly. “Celestial ... fox....” he mumbled.

Upon closer inspection, he could see that the celestial fox that had come to their aid had a form much more slender than Ryuuju.

“That’s right, human who bears the blood of my clan.” Shouka’s eyes lowered. “This power eats away at your life energy ... yours and all those who inherit the power. If the blood of the celestial fox should awaken in you, you will die.”

Masahiro screamed as the monk's staff pressed into his back. He could not breathe—the pressure of the staff aside, the power that was running amok within him was eating at him from the inside. He could feel a heatless flame burning within.

The boy's hands fisted the gravel on the ground. The pain from the stones biting into his hands was the only thing anchoring his consciousness to his body.

“Soon, this boy will die from the nonhuman blood eating away at his spirit.”

Masahiro was being held as a hostage, so Guren and Kouchin could not move an inch. Vines reappeared at their feet and began to slither up their bodies along their legs. The areas in contact with the vines became numb, and they began to lose the feeling in their bodies.

Guren glared at the monk with burning eyes. “Let Masahiro go! Don't you think I care about the rules!”

“Touda!”

“If you do anything more ... no matter how powerful you are, I will kill you.”

It wasn't only the monk who heard this cold declaration, but Masahiro as well. Even with his consciousness on the verge of fading, those words shocked Masahiro like a sudden punch to the stomach.

... No, don't. If you do that, what would have been the point of stopping the snake....

The boy released the gravel in his head, pushed away the pain ravaging him and took a deep breath.

The monk was not paying attention to him.

“Such mindless bluster. It seems like the twelve spirit summons are truly fools.”

Behind Guren, Kouchin noticed that Masahiro's fist, which had been clenched earlier, was now spread out, his forefinger moving. In the air, he was drawing ... symbols.

... That's....

Her expression unchanging, Kouchin blinked her eyes. The monk still had no idea.

There was only a subtle change in Kouchin's aura, but Guren felt it and shifted his red eyes slightly.

A faint wind.

The monk felt an inexplicable sensation, and looked down at Masahiro.

A moment ago, the boy had looked completely drained, as if the only thing he could do was await death. However, now, eyes that had not lost their fighting spirit were glaring at the monk, and the flame that accompanied his nonhuman power raged again deep within them.

“Kou!” Guren bellowed and jumped. Behind him, Kouchin flicked her three-pronged dagger, creating a vacuum blade. The moment the monk turned his attention to the two summons, Masahiro mustered all his strength and shouted, “On!”

The ground trembled. The disruption caused the monk to sway, but he regained his footing immediately. His staff swung out and struck Guren in the arm, before he kicked Masahiro and sent the boy rolling away.

“Onbasaraginiunhata!”

The holy spell slammed into Guren and sent him flying. In the meantime, Kouchin tried to make her way to Masahiro, but was blocked by phantasms that stood in her way. Straining to remain upright, she swept out her dagger to slash at the phantasms, but the scene unfolding before her eyes caused her breath to catch. The monk's staff was swinging down, right at Masahiro's unprotected throat. *No time....*

Guren roared, and the searing heat of his power exploded and engulfed all the phantasms.

“!”

The monk's movements suddenly halted, as if arrested by something. At the same time, they heard the sound of a drop of water reverberate like a gong. Then, in the next moment, there was a crash like the shattering of a crystal.

All these sounds had occurred within the barrier, a separate soundless dimension. But now, that barrier shattered from some outside force. The holy, divine and demonic powers roiling within the barrier twisted into a savage wind that sucked in the gravel on the ground and even the water from the nearby river, turning into a gigantic cyclone.

A metal spear shot through the cyclone, knocking the staff away from the monk's hand.

A cold wave of water washed away everything in sight.

The monk clicked his tongue in anger and leapt backwards. Seeing the new spirit summons that had arrived, he ground his teeth furiously.

Masahiro felt eyes peering down at him, and slowly opened his own eyes.

“Masahiro, hold this.”

The image before him was blurry, but he could make out a pair of eyes as dark as absolute twilight looking at him.

“Gen ... bu...”

“A bead made from Izumo stone, gifted by the priestess of Chigaeshi. Seimei requested it in order to supplement your lost powers.”

It was a cerulean stone the size of a fingernail, threaded onto a leather thong. When Genbu pressed it into his hand, the pain that wracked his entire body ceased immediately.

“The twelve spirit summons place the rules above their own lives. You dare to turn your blade against a human being?”

Rikugou hefted his spear and shifted into battle posture, his eyes fixed coolly on the monk. He paid no attention to the disdainful contempt in the monk's stare, and responded in an unusually wordy manner. “Unfortunately, this body is already defiled by sin and bathed in blood. If you still wish to attack, I will not hold back.”

The tip of his silver spear pointed squarely at the monk's brow.

Hateful malice suffused across the monk's face, before he finally laughed mockingly. “Abe no Seimei gave his summons such an order, I see. How interesting. Such actions are so perfectly suited to the child of a monster.”

The monk slowly raised his hand and pointed at Masahiro, his gleaming dark eyes glowing even more ominously.

“And you are truly a monster. No human could possess power that immense.”

Masahiro's eyes widened as Genbu and Guren helped him up. A chill raced through his chest, and his blood seemed to freeze in their veins.

"Mon ... ster..." Masahiro mumbled blankly.

"Nonsense!" Guren's incensed retort sliced through the boy's absentmindedness. "How is he a monster? What about yourself, with your powers?"

The monk had holy powers immense enough to overpower the spirit summons. However, the man merely laughed derisively. "Me, a monster? How droll. Yes, ever since I sold my soul to Hell, I've become a monster!"

He laughed, his contorted face resembling that of a vicious demon, and then narrowed his eyes.

"Huh ... seems like Ryuuju has also failed," he whispered under his breath, preventing Masahiro and the summons from hearing him. Then, he slammed his staff against the ground.

The hoops clanged, and their multi-layered echoes became a spell that rushed towards Masahiro and the summons. Genbu's wall of water enveloped the entire party in the blink of an eye. Upon the clashing of spells, gravel and sand exploded and hung suspended in the air, blocking their sight.

In the chaos, the monk disappeared.

Chapter 11

Silence blanketed the entire area.

Masahiro raised his head to look up at Guren and Rikugou. “Come here, both of you,” he said, ordering the two spirit summons to approach. He swayed uncertainly, but waved off Kouchin who had reached out a hand to support him, and steadied himself.

“What’s the matter, Masahiro?” Guren asked hurriedly, wanting Masahiro to quickly return to rest at the Abe manor. However, he was silenced with a glare.

The young boy was so weary that even the slightest movement left him out of breath, and he took several deep gulps of air before yelling, “Idiots! The both of you!”

The sudden scolding took Guren and Rikugou by surprise, and they could only stare at Masahiro unblinkingly. The boy’s eyes were ablaze with so much fury that it was clear he was truly angry.

Rikugou blinked once before turning to Kouchin questioningly. The woman tried to recall all the events that had transpired since running into the monk, trying to figure out what had angered the boy. After a moment, her onyx eyes widened as if something came to mind.

“Ah, Touda really did say something ridiculous.”

“Rikugou too! And probably you too, Kouchin!” The boy barked back immediately, and Kouchin looked at him with a clueless expression.

“Me too?” she asked dubiously. Now confused as well, she craned her neck and crossed her arms as she walked over to stand next to Guren. “Please explain so I can understand.”

The faces of all three shone with curiosity. Pale with anger, Masahiro said, “I ordered you not to harm him.”

“That’s....” Guren began to argue, but stopped when Masahiro turned his glare on him again.

Stopping only to take a deep breath, the young boy continued unrelentingly, “I forbade you, but you didn’t listen to me. And Kouchin refused to stop Guren.”

Kouchin's eyes widened slightly as she finally realised what he was referring to. Even the expressionless Rikugou appeared to understand. The boy stared at him and narrowed his eyes.

“Finally, even Rikugou was spewing that nonsense. Right in front of me!”

The spirit summon could distinctly remember recklessly declaring that he would attack without mercy.

“...”

Yet Rikugou still used silence as a response. Even though this was normal for him, Masahiro suddenly felt unbearably irritated at this behavior.

“I ... don't want you to have to act against humans...”

Heat flared in the palm grasping the Izumo stone bead. And not only his palm—the chill flame that burned through his body until a moment ago left his entire body aching. Still, he could not stop speaking. He could feel a prickling under his eyelids.

Guren looked back and forth between him and his fellow summons worriedly.

“If it were grandfather, he'd never allow things to get to the point where you'd have to say something like that. He wouldn't let you do anything like that either.” But because he was weak, he almost made the summons violate their rule. He had become fully conscious of this fact.

No matter what words came out of his mouth, Seiryuu had sworn unconditional trust and loyalty to Seimei. This was likely the same for all other summons, even if they didn't show it as much. His grandfather had received such sentiments because he was powerful enough to merit their trust. He had maintained that power, never having betrayed their loyalty until now.

Masahiro looked back at himself. He had sworn to become stronger than his grandfather, to become a great *onmyouji* second to none. This meant that he needed enough skill and ability to be trusted by all the summons and to be responsible and resolute enough to command them freely.

He didn't want to just depend on them, be protected by them and need to borrow their powers in a tight spot. That was pathetic. He needed to be able to understand the situation

as a whole so the summons could use their abilities to the greatest effect at all times. This was something the master of the spirit summons needed to possess. What he needed now was this broad vision and reliable decision-making.

The wounds on his body galled him, and the fact that the summons had suffered in his stead tormented him. His shoulders shook and he slowly lowered his face. "It's always like this ... you getting hurt...."

Guren and Kouchin looked over themselves. Like the boy said, they were wounded all over and dried blood clung to them in patches. Nevertheless, in the silence of their hearts, they protested. The wounds they sustained protecting their master were not considered painful. Their hearts clamoured restlessly and endlessly until they could be certain that their master was safe. In fact, no matter what harm befell them, it was their role to protect their master such that none could even lay a scratch on him. Yet they had failed.

The summons blamed their own helplessness just as Masahiro blamed himself. Yet saying so would definitely lead to another round of scolding, so they held their tongue.

They had heard these words before in the past. When Abe no Seimei was young, he had spoken words like these as well. He had bemoaned his own weakness and apologized for his powerlessness. But the deniable fact remained that, even with his peerless strength, there were things even he couldn't do. And so the twelve spirit summons were content to follow Abe no Seimei.

To them, their master was unwavering beacon guiding their path. They were born from human thoughts and lived solely for human purposes. Yet their aged master had always considered their nonhuman selves as 'friends' ever since the day they came to serve him. What greater joy could they ask for?

"Damn it...." Masahiro muttered and bit his lip.

Genbu spoke up, softly. "Masahiro, we don't get hurt just to end up upsetting you."

The boy didn't understand, and looked at him uncertainly. A pair of intent eyes gleamed back at him.

"Seimei wants to protect you. We want to carry out Seimei's wishes. These things are linked together. Are our desires just a burden to you?"

Genbu paused as if arranging his thoughts, and then glanced at the young boy's fist.

“The bead came into existence because the priestess pleaded to the great god of Chigaeshi to imbue the stone with a portion of his power. Seimei had been concerned that the loss of your *sight* might have allowed the nonhuman blood in you to waken, which is why we went to Chigaeshi at Seimei’s bidding. And while Seimei did command us, that was not the only reason....”

It appeared that Genbu becoming flustered, his eyes shifting back and forth anxiously. He certainly didn’t expect to have to talk about this, and had neither steeled himself nor prepared his words. The right words just didn’t seem to come, and it was irritating him.

Byakko or Tenitsu would have been able to explain more clearly in better detail. Genbu was simply not good with words, and he felt drained at the effort.

“Uhh ... what I mean is, if it bothers you, then just train harder. Train so hard that you won’t have the time to sit around worrying about things like this ... uh....” Genbu spoke awkwardly, his face becoming more and more distressed.

Seeing this, Masahiro’s face crumpled as if ready to break into tears.

“But ... I won’t want you to get hurt.”

... Much less if it forces you to attack a human and violate your rule....

A word that lingered like a barb in his heart suddenly came to mind.

... Monster....

He had heard that his grandfather’s mother was a fox. If that were true, if it weren’t just a malicious insinuation or a lie....

If the cold flame that had raced through his body were a proof of that....

If that were the case, then Masahiro wasn’t human. He had inherited and received the power of a monster, living as that power ate away at his human blood, the two halves at war within his own body.

The boy looked at the bead in his hand. The cerulean stone remained refreshingly cool, as if pacifying Masahiro’s blood.

Rikugou, who had remained silent throughout, spoke up in an even voice. “That stone will supplement the power you lost.”

Golden eyes gazed down calmly. “Seimei thought that, if the blood of the celestial fox awakened in order to make up for the power you lost, finding some other replacement would probably suffice.”

Masahiro suspected that the conversation was being deliberately diverted, but it was an important topic nonetheless.

“If I carry this stone, I will be able to *see* like before?”

Rikugou and Genbu nodded simultaneously.

Masahiro slipped the bead around his neck. The scene before him changed, and he could see things he could not see earlier. It was no different from before he had lost his *sight*.

“Ah, that’s true....”

Guren peered down at Masahiro as the boy gaped in awe. He had been considering what he could possibly do for this boy who was willing to sacrifice his own life to save his soul.

He passed a palm over his eyes. He had constantly asked himself this question, and yet surprisingly, Masahiro had so easily shown him the answer that had always eluded him.

This child was his light in the darkness, a guide that revealed his path through the endless maze he had found himself in.

Guren heaved a long sigh and transformed into a *mononoke*.

“Mokkun, what’s wrong?”

Masahiro moved to bend down, but lost his balance and fell.

“Hey!” the *mononoke* cried out worriedly.

The boy sighed and his gaze slid over to land on the capital. Before the creature could utter another word, he continued, “I need to go to the Tsuchimikado manor before going home. I have a bad feeling.”

Something in the deepest recess of his body was still crying out in alarm.

Genbu returned directly to the Abe manor in order to inform Seimei of the situation. The other four headed towards the Tsuchimikado manor.

Masahiro stubbornly plowed forward. The rest followed, knowing that no amount of wheedling or pleading could change his mind. He wrung out every ounce of will power to force his unsteady legs to move forward along with the *mononoke*. Still, it was almost dawn by the time they arrived at the manor. Kouchin and Rikugou had shielded their presence, and were not visible.

The sky to the east was lightening.

“ ... ”

As he observed the manor from beyond the gates, Masahiro furrowed his brow. There was something blocking his senses, and he could not grasp the situation inside.

“Rikugou ... please take me up to the top of the wall.”

Rikugou materialised, used a single arm to carry Masahiro, and leaped up onto the wall. The *mononoke* and Kouchin followed.

This wall ran along the western edge of the manor. Due to the estate's great expanse, they could not see anything inside the buildings from here.

“If anything happens, we can just cover ourselves with Rikugou's cloak and retreat,” the boy decided after considering the possible scenarios. He had Rikugou carry him down to the ground and then approached the main manor. The closer he got, the more aware he became of a dense, demonic aura prickling at his skin.

Masahiro tensed as his eyes swept left and right. This wasn't a magic that could arise within a day or a single night. It needed time to slowly accumulate its power.

He started and began sifting through his memory, trying to recall if anything about 'one month's time' had slipped from the monk's tongue.

Perhaps this magic had been woven back when his grandfather had fallen ill.

“There has to be a magic relic here somewhere.”

The summons had deduced Masahiro’s line of thinking and had spread out to search for the source of the demonic aura. There was no aura of any human presence in the main manor or its wings. While there was no decay of death either, it was extremely strange for there to be completely no sign of human life.

Finally, Masahiro came across a mound of dirt on the manor grounds. He dug out the soil with his bare hands, and found something like a black thread buried within.

“This is....”

Upon touching it, his body temperature seemed to drop immediately as if the heat in his body was being sucked away. A shiver ran up from his fingers and raced along his arm.

“That strand of hair...!”

It was the same hair imbued with demonic power that the monk himself had held. As he thought, that monk must have cast a spell at this manor for some nefarious purpose. The alarm that had been clamouring within him had been warning him about this.

The boy dropped the hair onto his left palm, and raised his right hand to cast a spell. He closed his eyes.

“Onkiribasrabajiri horamandamanda unhatta!”

The hair crumbled into dust and scattered into the morning air. After chanting a mantra to cleanse the demonic aura that had seeped into the ground, he stood up.

“Need to find the next one....”

The sudden motion made his dizzy, and he grasped at the balustrade of the veranda to support himself. Closing his eyes, he tried to will away the terrible pounding in his head.

“...”

He was going to faint.

Masahiro remained in that position for a while until he began to feel better. He used the hem of his shirt to wipe away the cold sweat on his brow.

“Oh no ... I have to start work today as well....”

He had not gone to work for several months already. He simply could not take another day off. He thought of Toshitsugu, whom he had met in front of the palace upon his arrival. His lips tugged up in a slight smile.

... If I take the day off, he'll definitely be cross. I have to go to work....

The boy breathed deeply several times before beginning to walk again. The air did not seem as murky as it had before.

“Masahiro, found it,” said the *mononoke* as it appeared beneath the veranda.

“Where?”

As evening fell, Shouko had suddenly found herself unable to move. She could only lie there, counting her own breaths. The handmaidens around her had somehow lost consciousness, and no amount of calling resulted in a response. She had waited for the retainers and servants to realize something was wrong and rush over, but no one appeared. It was possible that the entire manor—or even the entire capital—had been ensnared in this terrifying, unnatural stillness.

She could only hear her own pulse.

... What's happening to me...?

She had become frail and sickly. But she had also been designated a consort, and her life was an important key to her father's fortunes. If anything happened, things could go drastically wrong.

... In that case....

“...”

Shouka shook with suppressed fear. She could prepare herself, that it was alright if it were just her, but this life was entangled with the fates of her father and a step-sibling that she had never met.

... Help! Anyone, please help me....

She could no longer remember how many times she had prayed for help.

... Once morning dawns, it should be okay.... But what if morning never comes...?

Just as despair began to overwhelm her heart, her body was suddenly free to move.

Shouka's body had been rigid with fear, and now she was far too stiff to move easily. But she certainly could feel that she was free from whatever had paralysed her. Exhaling lightly, she slowly tried to rise.

The handmaidens collapsed around her bed remained motionless as if dead.

“Ahh...”

Shouka trembled as she inched closer to them and shook them lightly. There was no response. The worst case scenario popped into her mind, but her eyes widened after reaching her fingers out to the mouth of one of the handmaidens.

Even though it was faint, she was still breathing. The others were the same. They were all merely unconscious.

Just as she almost broke into tears in relief, she heard the sound of conversation.

“Who is it? Is it Kouremouri...?” As she called out the name of the manor's caretaker, her voice died in her throat. Her mouth suddenly went dry.

Was that really Kouremouri? But Kouremouri's voice wasn't like that. She was not familiar with this voice.

The girl trembled in fear. Was it the villain who had caused this strange situation? What would happen if she were caught? She could be killed.

Shouka retreated onto the bed and held her breath, her body stiff as she prayed for the stranger to go away.

“...This is all ... and ... maybe....”

Shouka strained her ears to listen and jumped in surprise. The owner of the voice seemed very young.

It seemed like there was someone else with him, but she could only hear the boy's voice.

“... Yeah, it's fine ... ehh? No ... I said I'm fine. You're such a worrywart...”

“?”

Shouka slowly crawled off the bed and covered herself with a kimono. She gripped a wooden fan tightly in her hand, thinking that even a fan was better than nothing. Even if holding it was only for her peace of mind.

Her heart raced so frantically she feared those approaching would hear. Nevertheless, she slowly slid open the door. Numerous silk screens lined the inner veranda and the shutters had been raised since the summer began. Anyone beyond the silk screens would be able to see the exterior of the room.

...It's alright, it's alright. The door is strong. If anyone sees me, I can run back into the room and they won't be able to follow...

As she peered through the silk screens, she could hear her heart pounding so hard it was ready to burst.

Cold sweat slid down his brow. Masahiro exhaled heavily as his hand automatically reached out to grasp Rikugou's spirit cloak. He swayed and almost fell, but steadied himself by gripping the cloak tightly in his fist. On the other hand, the sudden weight caused Rikugou to lose his balance, but he managed to remain upright.

Upon seeing this, Kouchin's and the *mononoke*'s faces tightened in concern immediately.

“Masahiro,” the *mononoke* cried out, but Masahiro raised a hand to stop it and fisted the final strand of hair in his other hand.

“On ... basarabajiri...”

He chanted the spell weakly, his voice fading in and out. The hair crumbled into dust. Once he was certain that the malicious aura had been completely cleansed, he finally heaved a sigh and sank to the ground.

The *mononoke*'s eyes widened angrily and it barked, “I told you not to overdo it!”

It seemed to be ready to pounce on the young boy, but was grabbed by Kouchin before it could do so.

“Kou, what are you doing? Let me go!”

“I know you’re angry. You can be as angry as you want later, I permit it.

“Hey, don’t go around giving permission for something like that!” Masahiro protested.

“You be quiet!” the *mononoke* rounded on the troublemaker before turning back to Kouchin. And for her part, Kouchin looked down at Masahiro with an expression of deep thought.

“For now, we need to return to the manor first. Rikugou, take Masahiro.”

The one being ordered had already done so. The cloth on his shoulders was wound around Masahiro’s, and the boy had been tugged upright with one arm.

“I can carry you on my back, on my shoulders, or in my arms. Which do you prefer?” the summon asked in a solicitous manner.

The boy answered in a faint voice, “On your back, please.”

At that moment, they all felt a pair of eyes on them.

... *Everyone in this manor should be unconscious....*

“Is it that monk?” the *mononoke* demanded warily.

Kouchin flicked a glance at it before sweeping her gaze around cautiously. She could feel the aura of a human being moving in the main manor. A silk screen leaned over even though there was no wind, and fell down with a sudden thud. Behind the screen was a wide-eyed girl, her expression frozen in fear.

Kouchin and Rikugou held their breaths, speechless. The *mononoke* furrowed its brow and blinked, curious at their reactions before realizing that, aside from itself, none of them had ever seen her before.

Masahiro felt as if time had stopped. He must be hallucinating.

...That's ridiculous. She shouldn't be here. She should be at the Abe manor, waiting for me to return....

No matter how he tried to get to her go to sleep, she rarely ever heeded his words and would wait until Masahiro returned.

Without intending to, a name slipped from his lips.

“Aki...ko....”

Shouka heard the boy's mumbling voice and became agitated for an entirely different reason.

She knew that name.

She opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated.

...If I misheard ... or if this is a trap....

She had to conceal the truth from everyone, and must not trust anyone who tried to get to this truth.

The girl bit her lip and retreated, her eyes not straying from the face of the youth, which was bearing a gentle smile after the moment's surprise.

His eyes were soft and kind.

“It's alright now. Trust me.”

“Wh... who are you...?” Shouka uttered, forgetting herself for a moment.

The boy craned his neck uncomfortably and responded with a stiff smile. “An *onmyouji* that has sworn to protect you.”

With that, he turned to walk away.

“Wait...!”

Shouka rushed out to the balcony, but the boy was no longer there.

Masahiro clung to Rikugou's back weakly while the *mononoke* peered at his face and scoffed, "What did you mean, *onmyouji*? Your skills are still lacking."

"I ... wasn't ... lying...." The boy's head was pounding with a ferocious headache. Even keeping his eyes open was painful. Finally, he prepared himself to take the day's leave, imagining the torment and grief that the next day would bring.

... Even though I tried. I really, really tried....

Upon reaching the manor, Tenitsu was waiting for them.

"Tenitsu ... what's the matter?" Masahiro asked curiously.

She responded with a sorrowful gaze, "Lord Seimei ... is reaching the end of his lifespan."

Chapter 12

What? It isn't a big deal.

Even though he had fallen ill, Seimei had smiled and made light of it.

Several days after the fight with the monk, Masahiro couldn't help worrying even as he went through the clerical work that had accumulated during his absence.

While he was fighting, Seimei had used his soul transfer spell again and had confronted a powerful spirit within the capital. The spirit that had called itself Ryuuju had said, 'What are your parents' names? They might have been among those I killed.'

At that time, another spirit had appeared to help Seimei and chase away Ryuuju. This one, named Shouka, possessed a treasure known as the Pearl of Heaven. He had also heard that both of these spirits were celestial foxes.

Foxes with power so immense they rivaled the gods themselves were celestial foxes just like Seimei's mother.

Masahiro sighed, his expression clouded, and he raised a hand to his chest. Beneath his robes lay Akiko's sachel and the Izumo bead, both important items that protected him.

Within Seimei's body flowed the blood of celestial foxes that he inherited from Kusunoha, his deceased mother. And among all of Seimei's descendents, only Masahiro had inherited it as well. This was why his grandfather was so powerful, and even though that blood was diluted, Masahiro also carried this nonhuman blood and possessed its monstrous power.

...Monster....

His chest throbbed painfully. The words of the monk were like a thorn stuck in his heart. He had inherited the blood of a monster, and wasn't really completely human. That monstrous power was eating away at him, and when he weakened, the memories and the power rooted within him would surface. It was a power that both eroded and protect his life.

What a crazy paradox.

“So...” Masahiro gritted his teeth and grimaced. The strange events that had occurred at Izumo must have been due to the awakening of the blood of the celestial fox.

The celestial fox named Shouka which had sealed Gourou away in the past was the same silver-haired spirit that had saved Seimei.

That Shouka had said, ‘That power ... the soul transfer spell will siphon away your life energy. If you still want to live, you can only use that spell one final time. After that, if you should use the spell again, your nonhuman blood will corrode your soul, and you will no longer be human.’

His heart clenched painfully. His grandfather ... was going to die.

“No way!” Masahiro shook his head fiercely to drive away the thought, but a chill still ran up his spine.

But ... but....

No matter how hard he tried not to think it, his mind kept going around in circles, never straying from this main worry.

He might not be human, and had been called a monster.

His grandfather was the only one he could depend on, but now he might not be able to rely on him.

The *mononoke* could only watch the distraught boy with worried eyes.

Guren, the real form of the *mononoke*, had lived for so much longer than humans that he could almost be called immortal. He was concerned and fearful about what might happen to Seimei, but the degree of emotion was likely different from Masahiro.

“ ... ”

As Masahiro hung his head and sighed gloomily, a reproachful voice sounded above his head.

“Daydreaming again, Lord Masahiro!”

The fierce voice came from Fujiwara no Toshitsugu, an *onmyou* apprentice.

“Y-yes sir! I apologise....” Masahiro hurriedly straightened his back as Toshitsugu marched forward and pointed at him.

“Listen. Lord Seimei is ill. How can you, who everyone expects to be his successor, act in such a dissolute manner!”

“Uh ... that is....”

“If you’re like this, Lord Seimei will be so anxious he’d never be able to rest properly. No matter how I look at it, you are completely unreliable.”

Masahiro lowered his head dejectedly and bit his lip. By his side, the *mononoke* glared at the older boy irritably. Nothing was more galling than having to sit by and listen to this ignorant *onmyou* apprentice scold Masahiro like this over and over again.

A normal person like Toshitsugu could not see the increasingly grumpy expression on the *mononoke*’s face. So he crossed his arms, frowned, and continued, “You’re sickly, but you always give your all. I think this is an admirable quality, but your abilities are still not up to par. You’ll need to persevere, and you have to start at the bottom by completing your clerical duties.”

“Ah ... would you mind if I asked you a question?” Masahiro suddenly decided to speak up, interrupting Toshitsugu’s preaching.

“What is it? If there’s something you disagree with, just say it.” Toshitsugu looked ready for an argument.

“No, not at all, sir!” Masahiro hurriedly protested and continued. “I... Do you see me as a human, sir?”

Toshitsugu seemed to be completely blindsided by the unexpected question, and blinked several times in confusion. The *mononoke* also started, and craned its head to look up at Masahiro.

The boy was very serious. He wanted to confirm his own status, because to him, that was the root of everything.

What was he? Without being certain of this, he could not move forward.

Toshitsugu remained dumbfounded for a long moment before he finally narrowed his eyes exasperatedly. “How are you a person?”

Masahiro’s shoulders fell.

“You’re still a fledgling chick! Stop talking nonsense and get to work!” Toshitsugu yelled in a rare fit and stormed off.

Masahiro watched as his back receded and then scratched his head awkwardly. A watery smile appeared on his face.

“Masahiro?”

“...I’m glad.”

Toshitsugu’s real and unbridled anger meant that the older boy still saw him as a ‘human being’.

He had needed to confirm this.

“You’re such an idiot.” The *mononoke* chastised with a tired sigh and then jumped onto the boy’s shoulder. “You’re human. I can guarantee it. Just think about it. Even Seimei’s always been considered human.”

“Ah ... is ... that so. Hmm ... that’s true....”

As Masahiro sighed in relief, he suddenly started and stared at the *mononoke* perched on his shoulder. Eyes red as the setting sun blinked questioningly beside him.

“What’s the matter?”

“Ah ... nothing. I should get back to work.”

Masahiro was overjoyed to feel the familiar weight on his shoulder after its long absence, and replied merrily to hide his delight.

The Fujiwara clan consort gazed out at the south gardens from the inner veranda of the Tsuchimikado manor.

“Your Imperial Highness, the wind is turning cold and it will rain soon. Please come inside.”

She nodded at her handmaiden’s advice and narrowed her eyes. “*Onmyouji...*” she mumbled.

“My lady?”

“Is there a young *onmyouji* ... around the same age as us...?”

Upon hearing the consort’s question, the handmaiden sank into thought.

“Ah ... there is, Your Imperial Highness. If I remember correctly, there is a boy named Abe no Masahiro, the youngest grandchild of Lord Seimei, who has just entered the Bureau of *Onmyou* last year.”

“Abe ... no Masahiro....” the consort mumbled thoughtfully.

Who are you?

An onmyouji ... that has sworn to protect you.